

An explanation and understanding of Wiccan ritual: Approaching a deviant religious discourse in the modern West

Samuel Wagar

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An Explanation and Understanding of Wiccan Ritual: Approaching a Deviant Religious Discourse in the Modern West

Samuel Wagar, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This article applies Foucault's idea of heterotopia and Verter's extension of Bourdieu's cultural capital / religious capital to the foundation rituals of the Wiccan religion. Wicca as a feminist, body-positive, and sexuality positive religion supports challenging alternatives to the cultural status quo and accumulates religious and cultural capital for its members. It can legitimately be seen as a contra-hegemonic religious movement in gender and sexuality.

In this discussion the deviant religion is viewed as a healthy creative project inspired by the spirit. All religions begin at some time and place as new religions, or deviant religious movements, and thus act as vehicles for social critique and, if they are successful, social change. It follows that the study of deviant religious movements, particularly new ones, involves issues central to all religions.¹

Deviant religions can act as heterotopian sanctuaries for the exploration of new discourses.² They can accumulate spiritual capital for their members through fruitfully expressing an aspect of the tensions of the larger society, capital that is dependent on both internal forces of the religions and the larger society's response to the discourses developed and spread from these deviant groups. This spiritual capital can then be mobilized for other purposes as for instance where a number of feminist women involved in Wicca have mobilized capital accumulated through the religion into political activism.³

Wicca is a deviant religion in the modern West. In contrast to the dominant religious tradition, Christianity, it is polytheistic or duotheistic, feminist with matriarchal tendencies (with priestesses taking slight precedence over priests, the Goddess over Her Consort), panentheistic⁴, ecstatic, hedonistic and nature-centred. It is a small religious movement that is growing very rapidly; between 1981 and 1991 the number of Pagans counted in the Canadian census grew from 2295 to 5530 and by 2001 to 21,085.⁵ Because of its intersection with the feminist political movement and the reinterpretation of female spirituality, Wicca can legitimately be described as a contra-hegemonic movement based on gender issues. The original rituals of the religion will be shown to express this contra-hegemonic sensibility.

A religion is not just a set of beliefs or symbols, not simply a category of facts, but a way of being in the world, a way of knowing, and a way of making knowledge. It engages in various types of exploration, experiment and explication around this knowledge-making (perhaps more accurately, *meaning-making*) process. In addition, religion rests upon a tension between that which is (Be-ing) and that which is potential (Becoming) and much religious practice assumes the primacy of the future.

By positioning religious knowing as just one, non-privileged type of knowing and by redefining religion as plural, the secularization of the West both opened up religious knowing and denied its exclusive truth claims. By becoming able to comparatively study contradictory truth claims, the absolute truth of a given religion's claims is denied. Wicca, a magical religion, is centred on the creation

¹ Aidan Kelly, *Crafting the Art of Magic Book 1: A History of Modern Witchcraft, 1939-1964* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1991), 3.

² Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowicz. *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring, 1986), 22-27.

A heterotopia is a "place outside of all places... different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about" and heterotopias are counter-cultural sites for the expression and exploration of denied facts of social reality, which invert some norms in order to explore them and then feed back into the dominant culture, either as a means of exposing and contesting ordinary reality or as a perfection of the confusion of ordinary relationships.

³ Bradford Verter, "Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu Against Bourdieu," *Sociological Theory*,

21.2 (June 2003), 150-174. Verter defines spiritual capital as "religious knowledge, competencies, and preferences as positional goods within a competitive symbolic economy" whose valuation is the "object of continuous struggle and is subject to considerable temporal and subcultural variation" 150.

⁴ John Bowker, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) defines panentheism on page 730 as the view that "the world exists in God ... but God is not exhausted by the world; the divine is both transcendent and immanent."

⁵ Statistics Canada, Ottawa, 1981, 1991, 2001 Census of Canada. The overwhelming majority of Pagans are Wiccan, so these numbers are likely to reflect the proportionate growth in the Wiccan population.

of experiences and states of mind, on truth games⁶ rather than on truth claims, aside from the claim about the general value of these experiences or states. In this it resembles a mystical path or *bhakti* yoga practice of worship through devotion rather than the legalistic Abrahamic religions' emphasis on structures and is less directly in conflict with the secular.

The social particulars of religious expression are necessary aspects of its existence, but these details do not exhaust religion. Social constructionist theories may be better at explaining why people will choose mainstream non-deviant religions and how they are conditioned and disciplined by these religions. The order of their society is shaped by them; the fundamental institutions from the family through the educational system to the governmental structures are all steeped in the religious and moral values of the dominant religious traditions. The conversion experience still exists for mainstream religions, and religious meaning is still extracted from their rituals and theological discourses. The person involved in the mainstream religion is able to be as devout as one involved in a deviant religion, yet the cost of involvement in a mainstream religion is less than in a deviant one, and the reinforcement of its values is constant and partly external to the individual and the religious institutions. For a deviant religion to continue and to grow, it must be more effective in producing rewards for its members and must mobilize spiritual capital more effectively.

Stark and Bainbridge argued in *The Future of Religion* that religions are a means to produce and distribute non-material goods, spiritual compensators in the form of blessings of character, happiness, community, and assurance of life after death, which are more valuable if the amount of work gone into producing them is greater, as in a deviant religious movement in some degree of tension with society. These compensators are valuable regardless of access to material rewards.⁷ Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of

⁶ Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). Luhrmann's chapter 22 on "Serious Play: The Fantasy of Truth," 324-326, is a very effective exploration of the element of play and "truth games" in Wiccan contemporary practice. Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), deals very effectively with the magical imagination in chapter five, "Occult Reality and the Fictionalizing Mind," 148-185.

⁷ Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation Illumine*, Vol. 4, No. 1

cultural capital as a medium of social relations has been developed by Bradford Verter into an alternative economic model for the use and exchange of spiritual goods that is better able to account for the particular goods produced and exchanged in deviant religions than Stark's model, because Bourdieu's ideas include the relations of power and their negotiation within the religious movements.⁸

Dipesh Chakrabarty states that, "gods are as real as ideology is—that is to say, they are embedded in practices. More often than not, their presence is collectively invoked by rituals rather than by conscious belief."⁹ This points to a key difficulty in historical recovery of religious experience—the need to go beyond the texts to recover the beliefs and experiences imbedded in practice. Practices and rituals, particularly of popular religion, are less well documented than the elite theological exegeses.

Those theories that reduce religion to one or the other social factor, which assert the universality of an economic class, race, gender, or ideological factor above the reality of the divine assumed by the practitioner, do violence to the autonomy of the subject and disregard the agency of the religious person. These factors do enter in, and must be included to fit the religious projects in with other social forces. But the religious person is not required to accept the primacy of the secular or to understand her actions through that lens. With a Wiccan panentheistic sensibility, which sees deity through its manifestation in society and in the world, the social utility of religion is an aspect of its divinity and the Goddess as an advocate for the equality of women and men is not reduced from the divine but is rather expressed as the divine active in the world through people. The influence of Wicca in the feminist movement is due in part to this religious understanding, just as was the occultist spiritual influence in first wave feminism.¹⁰

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Compensators are defined on page 6 as "the belief that a reward will be obtained in the distant future or in some other context which cannot be immediately verified."

⁸ Verter, "Spiritual Capital ..."

⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 78.

¹⁰ A complete bibliography of Wicca's intersection with feminism is beyond the scope of this paper, or the capacity of the author. Significant texts include: Robin Morgan, *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1978); Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); Starhawk *The Spiral*

Issues specific to deviant religions point to the boundaries of some theories of religion. The use of religion as a social control mechanism for enforcing discipline and control over the subaltern classes is challenged by the conversion of people away from the normal religion of their society. The boundaries of the society itself are challenged by these conversions to the extent that the society is defined as having a particular religious values centre.¹¹ Wicca, a small religion rapidly growing through conversion, is producing spiritual capital and challenging this social cohesion.

The different religious compensators exchanged in the deviant religious movements challenge the universality of exchange theories. These are exchanges of goods less valued in the dominant tradition and thus demonstrate different markets for non-material compensators. Establishing religious authority, the authority of particular texts and practices and of particular individuals and

Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess (San Francisco: Harper and Rowe, 1979); and Zsuzsanna Budapest, *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* (Oakland: Susan B. Anthony Coven, 1979). Scholarly work of note includes Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); more extensively in Susan Greenwood, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), Helen A. Berger, Evan A. Leach, and Leigh S. Schaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), and Janet Dahr, *Wild Women Witches of Greater Vancouver: Gyn/Ecology*, an unpublished M.A. thesis in the Department of Woman Studies, Simon Fraser University, 1995. Insight into the role of the occult in first wave feminism can be found in Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3. "A feminist spirituality was a crucial component of much feminist politics..." and Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

¹¹ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Viswanathan deals with several conversion narratives in this way. Particularly telling are her chapters four, "Silencing Heresy," 118-152, which deals with the hybrid experience of Pandita Rambai and the ways that her experience revealed the polyphony inside the Western and Christian identities, and seven, "Conversion to Equality," 211-239, dealing with the mass conversion of Indian *dalits* (untouchables) to Buddhism led by Ambedkar.

theological positions, is more difficult in a deviant religion, particularly a new religious movement.

As well as the issues involved in the study of all religions, and of deviant religions in general, there are issues involved in the explanation and understanding of Wiccan ritual particular to the situation of the Wiccan religion and to its assumptions and approaches. These include the centrality of the ritual in Wicca, the expectation of religious creativity and fluidity, and the small group norm, coupled with ecstatic practices.

If mythology emerges to explain ritual and theology arises in order to explain mythology, then, where possible, a study of religion must go back to ritual.¹² The intellect makes sense from an experience or artwork, but it does not make meaning. As religion is primarily in the business of making meaning, not so much of making knowledge or sense, the structuring done on the level of ritual performance is the primary experience, and the codification of it is secondary.

The historian seeks to understand change over time. The Wiccan religious perspective is that the divine expression is always conditioned and contingent, a particular expression through specific individuals at a particular time and place. It is thus compatible with historicization. As "every man and every woman is a Star"¹³ (an expression of the divine), rituals that reinforce and express this belief such as *Drawing Down the Moon and Sun* and *The Great Rite*, are central. The divine remains eternal and immortal through the fact of its dialectical engagement with the temporal, an insight expressed through the *Charge of the Goddess*, one of the nearly universal pieces of Wiccan liturgical poetry.

The standard form of Wiccan ritual began with the composition of the first rituals by Gerald Gardner

¹² This formulation is developed from Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, First Series, *The Fundamental Institutions*. Burnett Lectures. 2nd Edition London, page 19 as cited in Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, trans. Barbara Harshaw (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 75. "So far as myths consist of explanations of ritual their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper." This is consistent with Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions*, op cit, chapter 22, 324-326, in particular.

¹³ Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice* (privately printed 1929, reprint New York: Dover, 1976), xiv.

and associates in 1947. These rituals circulated in manuscript form and were modified by successive associates of Gardner, notably Doreen Valiente, prior to being described and published in part in Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959). The history of the successive versions of these rituals has been established by Aidan Kelly in *Crafting the Art of Magic Book 1: A History of Modern Witchcraft, 1939-1964*. The streams of British occultist and counter-cultural thought that influenced Gardner and associates have been examined in detail by Ronald Hutton in *The Triumph of the Moon: a History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*.¹⁴ This study will rely substantially on the chronology established by these two scholars.

The Wiccan origin myth, which is still literally adhered to by a minority of practitioners, but which remains symbolically important to many others, has Wicca as a direct lineal descendant of pre-Christian European fertility religions, both Celtic and British or from the aboriginal Stone Age cultures immediately after the last Ice Age. During the period that Gardner and his associates were starting the religion, Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* was published (1954) and he there put forward several variations of this origin myth, speaking of "the witch who is a descendant of a line of priests and priestesses of an old and probably Stone Age religion."¹⁵ He also indirectly credits many of his sources in the book: Aleister Crowley, Rudyard Kipling, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,¹⁶ Hargrave Jennings, Francis Barrett, and Margaret Murray (who provided the preface to the book).¹⁷ He also mentions by indirection the origin of the spiral dance ritual and meeting dance: "it may simply be an old children's game which the witches have taken over or vice versa."¹⁸

¹⁴ Aidan Kelly, *Crafting the Art of Magic, Book 1: A History of Modern Witchcraft, 1939-1964* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1991); Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: a History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (London; Robert Hale, 1954, reprint New York: Magickal Child, 1982).

¹⁶ The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was a ceremonial magical order that grew out of the esoteric Masonry of the *Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia* in 1888. It was by far the most significant English occult order, and drew prominent intellectuals and talented ritualists to it. It collapsed in internal wrangling in 1900. Ellic Howe, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order 1887-1923* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), is an excellent history of the Order.

¹⁷ Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 47-8.

¹⁸ Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 141.

The following briefly situates Gerald Gardner through the years leading up to 1954, when the basic rituals of the Wiccan religion were being written: he was a heterosexual, married, middle-aged man who had lived overseas in the south Asian part of the British Empire (Sri Lanka, North Borneo and Malaysia) for much of his life as a plantation manager and then an inspector in the Malayan customs service. He retired to England in 1936, at the age of 52, a knowledgeable occultist and "joiner," who belonged to a range of associations involved with folklore and the occult. After becoming involved in several aspects of the British occult scene, he embarked upon the development of Wicca in 1947. He was in many ways well prepared to provide an expression of various cultural forces that had been accumulating in British culture over the previous two hundred years and thereby to create a new religion.¹⁹

Gardner was a high-ranking member of the Ordo Templi Orientis, the Ceremonial Magical Order headed by Aleister Crowley. He was involved in the Rosicrucian Theatre in Christchurch in southern England, which was an offshoot of the Theosophical Co-Masonry movement, and many of his associates in his first covens were drawn from this group. He was a nudist, member of a naturist club near St. Albans, Hertfordshire, and built a "witch's cottage" on land adjacent to it for his coven meetings. He was a member of the Folk-Lore Society and author of a well-received book on Malay ritual knives entitled *Keris and Other Malay Weapons* (1936).²⁰ The range of occult and folkloric influences that he was able to bring to bear on the creation of the Wiccan religion is dealt with fully in Hutton and need not be elaborated upon here.²¹

However, new religions are founded every day. The Wiccan religion has been modestly successful in its growth, despite a strong bias against proselytizing and a training period before new members are able to participate in rituals, and it has been highly influential in raising issues that are being addressed in other religious fora. Aside from the intrinsic interest of the new and creative religious expression, attention must be paid to details of the content of the rituals and the religion.

A Priestess, usually assisted by a Priest whom she chooses, leads the rituals. The Priestess, as the embodiment of the Goddess, is explicitly primary,

¹⁹ Hutton, 239.

²⁰ Gerald Gardner, *Keris and Other Malay Weapons*, B. Lumsden Milne ed. (Singapore: Progressive Publishing Company, 1936).

²¹ Hutton, 205-240.

although the male principle is included in ritual as well. Rituals are performed in the nude and include a small group of celebrants of both sexes, known as a coven. There are explicitly sexual aspects to the foundation ritual, and the “Great Rite,” which is not performed at each coven meeting, is a *hieros gamos*, (sacred marriage rite). These aspects are transgressive of gender norms today and were more so in the immediate post-World War Two period from which the first authenticated Wiccan ritual manuscripts date.²²

A careful reading of the earliest version of the Wiccan *Drawing Down the Moon* ritual from 1949²³, established by Aidan Kelly, reveals its textual influences and origins. It also establishes the ritual space as a heterotopia, conforming very well to Foucault’s discussion of the term, in that it has a formal opening and closing of the boundaries of the ritual space, which is typically only open to initiated members of a small worship group (in Wicca, a coven), the suspension of ordinary time, and the aspect of critical reflection outside of time, space and culture.²⁴ The transgressive element is marked first by the requirement for ritual nudity of all participants, save for jewellery and marks of rank in the religion. Numerous details of the ritual are Masonic or derive from classic works of the Western Ceremonial Magic traditions.

The set-up of the ritual circle is adapted slightly from the medieval grimoire, *The Key of Solomon the King*²⁵, a popular text among occultists in England. A circle is marked out, nine feet in diameter with two outer circles around it, separated from the first by six inches and one foot. Names of deities are written in the two rings surrounding the inner circle. The perimeters of the circles are traced by the ritual leader with her *athame* (knife used in ritual). There is then a blessing of water and of salt, which are mixed together and with which the circle is asperged. Eliphas Levi seems to have inspired the details of the salt and water purification and blessing in his *Transcendental Magic*²⁶, although aspurging with

salt water is also a Roman Catholic and Anglican tradition. Candles are lit at each of the cardinal directions with a blessing.

The *Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram*, a ritual derived from the Order of the Golden Dawn, is then performed. The ritual leader makes the gesture of the Cabbalistic Cross by touching, in turn, her forehead, chest, right shoulder and left shoulder and then clasping her hands in front of her while intoning “Ateh (thou art), Malkuth (the Kingdom), Ve-Geburah (and the power), ve-Gedulah (and the Glory), le-Olam (for ever), Amen.” She then turns to each of the cardinal directions in turn, beginning with the east and going clockwise, draws a pentagram (a five pointed star with one point upward) in the air with her *athame* and calls out the deity name associated with that direction: Yod He Vau He, Adonai, Eheieh, and Agla. Then, standing with arms outstretching in the form of a cross in the centre of the circle she says; “Before me Raphael, behind me Gabriel, at my right hand Michael, at my left hand Auriel. Before me flames the Pentagram, behind me shines the six-rayed star.” She again makes the Cabbalistic Cross as before.²⁷ This part of the ritual is explicitly Christian ceremonial magic, with Cabbalistic trappings – calling upon Christian names of God and angels, the ritual leader crossing herself, and the Cabbalistic translation of part of *The Lord’s Prayer*.²⁸

Finally the ritual leader will walk three times around the circle clockwise, turn and address each direction in turn, and call for the spirits of those directions to come and participate in the ritual. This originally Christian Ceremonial Magical ritual has been simplified, and partly de-Christianized, in order for non-Christian folk magic to be worked. The substantial use of the Cabbala, derived originally from Jewish mysticism, has been a mark of the British occult community since its introduction in the 1740s, although the magical Cabbala is very different from the mystical one.²⁹

Following the casting of the ritual circle, *Drawing Down the Moon* follows. *Drawing Down the Moon* is a ritual of ecstatic possession trance. Its

²² Hutton, 238.

²³ *Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical*, manuscript in the Wiccan Church of Canada collection, Toronto. Kelly gives a detailed breakdown and analysis of this material from pages 47-75.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, op cit.

²⁵ *The Key of Solomon the King*, S. Liddell MacGregor Mathers, trans. and editor (London: George Redway, 1888; reprint New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), 17-8.

²⁶ Eliphas Levi, *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*, trans. and introduction by Arthur Edward Waite

(London: Rider and Co, 1896; reprint York Beach Maine: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1970), 228-236.

²⁷ Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, 6th Edition (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1989), 53.

²⁸ Matthew 6.13 (KJV).

²⁹ Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). Godwin’s excellent history of the Anglo-American occult traces the development of Christian occult Cabbalism in far more detail than possible here, beginning on page 94.

purpose is to assist the Priestess to embody the spirit of the Goddess of the Wiccan religion, one of Whose most prominent symbols is the Moon. The symbol of the pentagram is drawn on her body by the Priest, through touching her with a phallic-headed wand while reciting an invocation. Although the specific points touched are not specified in the document, current practice is at neck, left hip, right breast, left breast, right hip and neck again.³⁰ His invocation incorporates a quotation from Crowley's *Gnostic Mass*; "By seed and root and stem and bud and leaf and flower and fruit we do invoke Thee."³¹ He then kisses her feet, knees, lower belly, breasts, and lips while reciting a blessing; "Blessed are your feet, which have brought you in these ways, ... your knees, that shall kneel at Her sacred altars, ... your womb, without which we would not be, ... your breasts, formed in beauty and in strength, ... lips, which shall speak the sacred Names."³²

These invocatory gestures and statements explicitly establish the sacredness of the female body, and specifically the body of the individual Priestess receiving the blessings and being asked to embody the Goddess. The blessing of the genitals and breasts, the ritual nudity, as well as the use of the phallic wand in the blessing, emphasize the overt sexuality and carnality of this embodiment, as do the ritual kisses. The body is sacred here, *because* it is a body, not *despite* its carnality. The identification of the woman's body with nature does not involve the association of nature with lesser spirituality as conventionally assigned, but is an identification of the type of divine power being called—the immanent divinity of the forces of nature, the force of fertility, sexuality and the body.

The Priestess, then seen as embodying the Goddess, recites the *Charge of the Goddess*, a central theological statement of Wicca. It begins with a syncretic list of Goddesses from various times and places, all identified as aspects of the Great Mother: Artemis, Astarte, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Bride, and others. Then she recites a lengthy section adapted from *Aradia: Gospel of the Witches* by Geoffrey Leland in which the Goddess asks Wiccans to assemble once a month, preferably on Full Moon,³³ to "be free from slavery, and as a sign that ye be

really free, ye shall be naked in your rites, both men and women,"³⁴ to dance, sing, feast, make music and love³⁵ in Her praise. Then follows a quotation from *Book of the Law* which includes the phrase "nor do I demand aught in sacrifice"³⁶ and other material adapted from *Magick in Theory and Practice* by Aleister Crowley, and particularly from the *Gnostic Mass* (Liber XV).³⁷ There is some original material in the Charge, including the significant phrase "all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals,"³⁸ but slightly more than half of it is reworked from Aleister Crowley.

We may briefly contrast the sentiments in this central theological statement with those expressed in Christian tradition. This is particularly telling when we consider that the period immediately after the Second World War, the period of the birth of Wicca, saw a dramatic revitalization of British Christianity, of domestic ideology and the rebirth of the "Angel in the House".³⁹ The Wiccan "acts of love and pleasure" sharply contrasted with the ideal of the sexually unassertive woman whose "desire shall be for your husband, and he will rule over you."⁴⁰ Wiccan ritual nudity may be contrasted with the general Christian attitude, but echoes the theme of Genesis 3, that unashamed nudity symbolized innocence. The leadership by women in Wicca contrasted with the Christian norm, after the deuteropauline epistles, that "I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet."⁴¹

The other Wiccan material that was written at this time includes the originals for the three initiation rituals. Although the current practice is that the three rituals are separated by periods of time, typically a minimum of a year of practice and training, the original rituals were set up to be performed one after another on the same occasion.

³⁰ Janet Farrar and Stewart Farrar, *The Witches' Way: Principles, Rituals and Beliefs of Modern Witchcraft* (London: Robert Hale, 1984), 69.

³¹ Crowley, *Magick*, 350.

³² Kelly, 52.

³³ Charles G. Leland, *Aradia or The Gospel of the Witches* (1890; reprint Custer WA: Phoenix Books, 1990), 6, cited in Kelly, 53.

³⁴ Leland 6-7, cited in Kelly, 53.

³⁵ Leland, 14, cited in Kelly, 53.

³⁶ Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law*, (London: BCM Ankh, 1904, reprint York Beach ME: Samuel Weiser, 1976), 26 cited in Kelly, 53.

³⁷ Crowley, *Magick*, 345-61.

³⁸ Kelly, 53.

³⁹ A popular Victorian trope drawn from Coventry Patmore's poem of the same name celebrating love and marriage, 1854-6. An excellent gender religious history of Britain from 1800-2000, which inspired this analysis is Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2001). Brown deals with the return to piety from 1945-1958 in chapter eight, 170-192.

⁴⁰ Genesis 3.16 (NASV).

⁴¹ 1 Timothy 2.12 (NASV).

For the *First Degree* the Postulant is brought into the ritual circle blindfolded, hands bound together and the ends of the rope brought around the neck in the Masonic manner with the cable-tow being used to lead him around the circle to be presented to the spirits of the four directions. He is blessed, put through a short ordeal (bound and ritually scourged) and then administered an oath before being untied, having his blindfold removed and being presented with the ritual tools of Wicca. For the *Second Degree* he is blindfolded, blessed, put through a short ordeal as before, administered an oath, and then told to use the ritual tools, prompted where necessary. He then is required to scourge the Priestess as instructed, as a demonstration of his new power and responsibility. For the *Third Degree* the Priestess is scourged, then scourges the Postulant, as a ritual of purification. Then the ritual of *The Great Rite*, which is a ritual of sexual intercourse as worship, *hieros gamos*, is performed.

There are numerous borrowings from Masonic ritual in the *First Degree*, including the use of the cable-tow and hoodwink (blindfold) and many phrases in the obligation oath are directly copied from its *Entered Apprentice* ritual. The presentation of the ritual tools is also a detail taken from Masonic sources.⁴² A number of details are also patterned on the Order of the Golden Dawn's *Neophyte Ritual*, although enormously shortened and with the language and ritual equipment substantially simplified.⁴³

Kelly argues that Gardner emphasized scourging and a highly scripted form of sexual ritual in order to satisfy his personal sexual needs and that otherwise there is "no reason to include scourging in the ritual."⁴⁴ Hutton was able to examine Gardner's papers, including his modest collection of pornography, and found that "none of the pictorial or literary items in the books is concerned with binding or flagellation,"⁴⁵ which leads him to conclude that Gardner was not introducing this element for that reason. The extensive ritual use of scourging as a form of purification in ritual is not found in any of the Masonic sources, but the use of *hieros gamos* in initiation and in ritual is found in the *Ordo Templi Orientis*, the ceremonial magical order to which both Gardner and one of his literary sources, Aleister Crowley, belonged. The O.T.O. had ceased to

function in Britain by the late 1940s, although Crowley's books were popular among occultists.

This sacralization of sexuality and of sexual intercourse is highly transgressive in the context of late 1940s England. Although there is a great deal of variation among modern Wiccans, the basic form of ritual established in 1949 continues. The use of the scourge and of *hieros gamos* has been greatly reduced, with the majority of Wiccans accepting these things as legitimate aspects of Wiccan practice but not personally engaging in them. However, ritual nudity, the use of kisses on the body during *Drawing Down*, the ritual of *Drawing Down the Moon*, the general form of the Initiation rituals and many other ritual ideas from Gardner's first covens are prominent features in contemporary coven practices, de-emphasized or absent in public rituals. The Wiccan religion has changed from a religion of small groups, all of whom were Initiated Priesthood, to a variety of traditions all drawing elements from the same roots but not practicing in the same way. This polyvocality was established as a norm by Gardner and continues as a prominent feature of Wicca.

The discursive construction of femininity in the immediate post-war period with its return to domesticity, the "traditional values of family, home and piety"⁴⁶ and the revitalisation of the evangelical Christian discourse runs directly counter to the Wiccan religion in these key aspects. However, it would not be correct to see Wicca as an overtly bohemian or counter cultural reaction like the Beats. The adherents to the first covens were conventional and conservative people in many regards, although there are transgressive and challenging ideas in these first rituals. An examination of how the religion was first practiced poses several questions and offers inter-textuality for the religion that has evolved; what did Wiccan rituals tell the participants about themselves and their religion, what do they bring to them, and how did their interaction with the material reshape the ritual?

Ritual nudity told them that they are bodies. The erotic is made clearly a sacred force through many details of the ritual. *Drawing Down* is explicitly about immanence and trance and the possibility of prophecy. Bringing to the ritual the assumptions about the body and sexuality from the broader society led to a challenging and redefinition of those things. The awkwardness of the initial involvement with this ritual style, the discomfort with nudity, the weak and ineffective experience of trance the first few times it's practiced, gave way through

⁴² Kelly, 63-4.

⁴³ Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, 117-133.

⁴⁴ Kelly, 65.

⁴⁵ Hutton, *Triumph*, 235.

⁴⁶ Callum G. Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 172.

habituation and the construction of a stronger and more defined magical personality⁴⁷ to a more effective and graceful performance. The small group norm makes this learning less difficult because of immediate feedback and lesser performance anxiety. As Luhrmann points out, “people often argue for a belief as a means to legitimize, and even to understand ... the practice in which they have become involved.”⁴⁸ The practice of the ritual produced resultant experiences that were then made sense of and made into beliefs.

Some provocative research undertaken in Canada by Shelley Rabinovitch found that virtually all of the active participants in the Wiccan religion had been emotionally, physically, or sexually abused as children or adults, in most cases in more than one way.⁴⁹ This study indicates that the transgressive aspects of Wiccan practice acted as means to bring forward the feelings of participants in a psychodrama and heal them from their abuse. It is possible that these data can be projected backward, carefully, to the origins of Wicca as well. The high rates of abusive families hidden behind the ideological façade of perfect domesticity have only recently been brought forward. The patriarchal monotheisms have been inadequate in religiously dealing with or even in acknowledging the extent of familial dysfunctionality. In the discursive climate of the origin of Wicca, with the reified family and Freud both influential, this factor may well have been important.

The non-material compensators produced through Wiccan ritual, to return to Stark and Bainbridge, include the re-valuing of the body, the re-emphasis of personal sexual power and efficacy, and the identification of the individual with the divine. The specific form of social capital that has been produced through the Wiccan religion has been the capital which feminist women, in particular, are able to draw upon—the emphasis on the special sacredness of women’s experience, of the female

body and of the Goddess, and rituals and art celebrating these things. Although only a minority of feminists are Wiccan, there is less reinterpretation of the beliefs and symbolism necessary for Wiccan social capital to be mobilized by them than for those feminists in some other religious traditions. With the second wave of feminism beginning in the late 1960s, this capital became valuable in the larger society. In addition, the original heterosexual exclusivity of Wicca has shifted with the rise of gay and lesbian movements to an emphasis on generally sex-positive spirituality, mobilizing another type of compensator and spiritual capital.

The initiation by Gardner of Doreen Valiente at Midsummer 1953 was a significant turning point in the development of Wicca. Valiente was an intelligent and gifted writer who became Gardner’s High Priestess and substantially revised the rituals, elaborating on fragments and reworking the awkward wording of the earliest versions, as well as removing some of the more obvious Crowleyana.⁵⁰ Even at the earliest date, another aspect of Wicca, which distinguishes it to the present, emerged—Gardner’s “insist[ence] that all Wiccan initiates should not merely copy the existing rituals and statements of belief but alter and add to them according to their own tastes and abilities.”⁵¹ This insistence on polyphony, coupled with Gardner’s disavowal of his personal authorship of the foundation rituals and his theoretically subordinate position working under his High Priestesses, produced a religion with spokespeople but no prophets. The norm of small group work, coupled with the splits and splinters beginning in 1957 when Valiente and her faction split to form a coven of their own and which continued to operate until her death in 1999⁵², further increased the amount of variations on a theme in the liturgy of the Wiccan religion.

This liturgical variety means that unearthing the earliest drafts of the Wiccan rituals is not like the recovery of sacred scriptures, but instead is the examination of early expressions of the ideas about the divine that animate the Wiccan religion. The rituals and stories are all works in progress and express a view of the Goddess and Her Consort centred on continuous revelation and adaptation, rather than finality. And, by including “leaping laughter” in the *Charge of the Goddess*, as a

⁴⁷ Luhrmann, *Persuasions*. Her chapter 21 on “Interpretive drift”, 307-323, is an excellent description of the process of application of magical ideas which leads to a comfort with them, an ease in the use of the symbolism and ideas of the Wiccan and magical worldview.

⁴⁸ Luhrmann, 310.

⁴⁹ Shelley Tsivia Rabinovitch, *An Ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will: Neo-Pagans and Witches in Canada* (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Department of Religion, Carleton University, Ottawa 1992), 98-114. Rabinovitch found that 39 of the 40 women and 20 of the 27 men whom she interviewed in taped interviews reported experiences of abuse.

⁵⁰ Hutton, 247.

⁵¹ Hutton, 248.

⁵² This coven was studied by Luhrmann as part of her Ph.D. research, published as *Persuasions* op cit.

desirable aspect of devotion, a playful and experimental quality was included from the start.⁵³

Wicca developed, in the modern context, as a religion of well-educated urban Britons and North Americans. Recent survey results indicate that Wiccans are substantially more educated than the general American population, with 64.5% possessing a BA or better while 51% of the American population has a high school education or less.⁵⁴ Its practitioners have an ironic and modern or post-modern approach to ritual and belief, drawing on the modern magical traditions of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Ordo Templi Orientis. The depth of challenge to the version of scientific rationality that was developing with the advent of modernity represented by the magical thinking of these orders continues in the rational mystical experimentation of Wiccan ritual. Alex Owen explores the issue of magical subjectivity in her *The Place of Enchantment* and Joy Dixon in *Divine Feminine*, issues of the intersection of the occult with feminism.⁵⁵ The influence of both on this paper has been profound.

Wiccans are acting “as if” they believe, to see what the results are, in search of experiences which are valuable to them, rather than in search of confirmation of absolute belief statements. They are not performing an intellectual dodge to make their religion non-falsifiable, but understanding the playful possibility of ritual and magical exploration and the positive results in aesthetic and psychological happiness that result from a rational subjectivity in the exploration of the spiritual. By developing on the bases of the original practices of the religion, Wicca’s challenge to the hegemony of Christian values has continued. The new aspects of its religious discourse about sexuality, which the gay and lesbian, polyamorous and “lifestyle” community members now involved have added, indicates that it continues as a heterotopia and continues to generate

new religious compensators and spiritual capital for its members.

⁵³ Kelly, 53.

⁵⁴ Helen A. Berger, Evan A. Leach and Leigh S. Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and neo-Pagans in the United States* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 31-2, particularly table 6.

⁵⁵ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).