

From Christianity to Witchcraft: A Spiritual Journey

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I WAS RAISED in a liberal Christian home. We did not always go to church, and when we did, it was not always the same one, as my mother was constantly trying on different hats to see which one fit. She encouraged me to find my own way, and she never made me feel that hers was the right path for me. I ended up following the same road she did, however, going to various Christian churches, looking for the one that satisfied me. I have attended Baptist, Wesleyan, Methodist, and non-denominational churches, all the while searching for something that made sense.

My last experience with the church was one that was fundamentalist Christian. I originally began attending because my best friend did, and I was quickly sucked in by the non-traditional ways we prayed, the contemporary Christian songs we sang, and even by the fact that the church was in a warehouse. The fundamentalists thought that we are sinners and nothing we do will ever be good enough for the purity of God preyed upon my low self-esteem. As much as I became a “Bible-beating Christian,” however, I have always been an independent thinker, thanks in great part to my wonderful mother. Although it took me awhile, I eventually realized that something wasn’t right. The clincher was

watching a television program on cults and finding that my church qualified. I left and never looked back.

That experience soured me on religion for a long time, and when I was ready to begin my spiritual journey anew, I started fresh. I opened myself to everything, not just different denominations of Christianity. In reading, I stumbled upon something called Wicca, an Earth-based nature religion that proclaims itself to be the practice of modern day witchcraft.

Wicca is the fastest growing religion today. Followers of Wicca worship a God as well as a Goddess. Its practitioners revere the Earth as an extension of the Goddess herself and aspire to live in harmony with nature. Wiccans believe in reincarnation, but not as the Hindus believe. Wiccans believe that humans come back as humans.

Wiccans believe in magic. Chanting and meditation are used to achieve an alternate state of consciousness to better commune with the Goddess and the God. Spells are used in much the same way a prayer is, with one great difference: whereas a prayer is most often a linguistic appeal to a higher power to grant a request, in a spell the practitioner uses visualization to direct unseen energy to achieve the desired effect.

There are eight holidays that make up what is called the Wheel of the Year, and many customs from such holidays as Halloween, Christmas and Easter actually come from the pagan holidays of Samhain, Yule and Ostara. These holidays are often based on ancient harvest or fertility festivals celebrated in Britain, when the people lived close to the land. Apart from the Wheel of the Year are esbats, which are rituals that celebrate the different phases of the moon.

It was in learning about this Earth-based nature religion that I realized what had been missing to me: anything feminine and positive. As a woman, I felt left out of male-dominated Christianity, although I didn't realize it at the time. I simply didn't feel completely satisfied, never understanding why.

As much as this religion seemed to answer my questions, however, I was afraid to let go of Christianity. There was so much guilt and fear, as the idea of going to hell had been firmly ingrained in my mind through the years of attending church, even sporadically. There was also the very real fear of practicing a religion that most people—in the South, at least—equate with worshipping Satan. So I stopped looking into Wicca and instead dug deeper into the origins

of Christianity. I focused my search on finding the “real” Jesus and the “real” Christianity. I was certain that the truth could be found in there somewhere, and that it was nowhere near what is practiced in churches today.

I tried to bend and twist Christianity around to suit my own needs, so that I could still worship as I wanted to and feel safe within the net of Christianity. I found some interesting viewpoints, even coming across something called Christian Wicca. I also found that if you look hard enough, you’ll find someone who has an idea about Jesus that is close to what you are looking for him to be, whether that is the Son of God or an Egyptian priest or a Jewish mystic or even the first hippie!

The opinion I found myself most agreeing with, however, was that of the Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Sprong, who claims to see Jesus not as the literal Son of God but as a man who attained such a high level of spiritual transcendence that he became one with God. I also came to believe that the oral tradition corrupted the real story of Jesus before it was ever written down, and therefore the Bible cannot be taken as the literal truth. I sadly concluded that we will never know what “real” Christianity is or who the “real” Jesus was. Too many years have removed us from it and him.

Once I formed those conclusions and added them to my views on God (whom I by then saw as an entity both male and female) and reincarnation (as opposed to going straight to heaven or hell) and Satan (as a metaphor for the evil within man rather than an actual being), I found I could no longer call myself a Christian. I went back to Wicca, afraid but determined.

I had originally thought that Wicca was based on the ancient pagan practices of pre-Christian Europe, but as I dug deeper into the religion, I realized this was only half true. Wicca is also influenced heavily by the ceremonial magic practiced in occultist secret societies such as The Golden Dawn. I learned about Wicca’s founding father, Gerald Gardner, whose claim that he was initiated into a coven by a group of witches practicing the Old Ways, was dubious at best. In my reading, I discovered that Gardner’s true influence came from many sources, including mythology, Freemasonry, and secret ceremonial magic orders. He read books about folklore and magic and based his rituals on these sources. Basically, he took a little of this, a little of that, and called it Wicca.

Today the most widely practiced tradition of Wicca is called solitary Eclectic

tic Wicca and draws from many sources, including the more ceremonial Gardnerian tradition of Wicca, ancient Celtic beliefs and practices, Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, Taoist philosophy, and Native American shamanism. Solitary Eclectic Wicca is most popular in the United States and reflects the eclectic ancestry of its population. I practiced this form of Wicca for some time, all the while still reading, still learning. It was during this time that I began to realize that there was a difference between Wicca and witchcraft. I had heard the saying, “All Wiccans are witches, but not all witches are Wiccans.” However, I didn’t really understand what it meant.

I found that there is another type of witchcraft. It has many names: hereditary witchcraft, natural witchcraft, hedge witchcraft, green witchcraft, or kitchen witchcraft. Whatever name it goes by, it differs somewhat from Wicca in that it is actually closer to what pagans practiced long ago. It is not as structured or organized, there are fewer rituals and tools used, and it relies more on nature than ceremony. Whereas many Wiccans have indoor altars, the temples of natural witchcraft are sandy beaches, grassy meadows, flower-dotted pastures, and tree-filled forests.

I learned from reading more scholarly histories of paganism as opposed to books written by practitioners of Wicca that there has been no evidence found of unbroken lineages of witchcraft dating back to pre-Christian Europe. Wicca is simply based in part on these practices. However, this is not to say that all claims of hereditary witchcraft are fraudulent. It is a fact that even after the spread of Christianity throughout Europe, there were “village wise women” who used herbs and plants for medicinal purposes. Many of these home remedies have been passed down through the ages and are experiencing a resurgence today in the wake of rising health care costs and pharmaceutical drugs that seem to be losing their effectiveness. But most family traditions cannot trace their customs back farther than the 1700s, if that far.

This family tradition is what is usually called hereditary witchcraft, and although it is not actually inherited genetically, the practice has been passed down through generations. An example of this is the folk magic practiced in the hills of the Appalachian Mountains. The majority of the people who settled in this area came from Ireland and Scotland and brought these customs and superstitions with them. Yes, what we consider hillbillies are actually practitioners of

witchcraft, although they would never call it that, as over time it has been blended with Christianity.

Although family members have not passed down this natural witchcraft to me, it is what I now practice. Some will express doubt over what it is that drew me towards this type of witchcraft, but I will share it anyway. Simply put, I had a vision. I was meditating one evening, and I saw myself as a peasant girl in Ireland, learning the old ways of herbal medicine and folk magic from a family member. As my family is Irish in its roots, I took it as a sign. I cannot explain it, but I feel that at one time, these ways were practiced in my family but lost through the generations rather than passed down.

So that is the road I am now following, and because life is not traveled in straight lines, I am certain that detours will be taken along my journey. Until then, I continue to study and learn, for our true destination cannot be known until we are on the other side. However, after all the complex reasoning used in researching Wicca and witchcraft, I find it ironic that my true path was discovered and I found peace in my soul only when I trusted my heart and my intuition.