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SNARES AND PITFALLS: BLACK MAGIC, SUPERSTITION, AND MAGICAL THINKING

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INTRODUCTION

To understand why magic is wrong, one needs a grasp of what it is and how it works. In order to avoid any confusion, a distinction must first be drawn between magic and legerdemain. Legerdemain, which relies solely on sleight of hand and misdirection, is not true magic. It consists of artful misdirection, the likes of which include card tricks and rabbits pulled from hats. Such tricks as fall under this description do not exhibit a preternatural quality, and so the topic does not merit further discussion here.

Magic (or magick, as it is sometimes rendered) constitutes an appeal to a force internal or external to oneself with the aim of bringing about some advantage. It is a man-made system of superstitious beliefs because the objects and rituals involved have no power in themselves to bring about the effects its practitioners desire. Furthermore, all magic is black magic. Regardless of what it may be called, there is no such thing as "white" or innocent magic. All magic is repugnant to the natural order. This paper discusses magic as expressed in mankind's appeals to external spiritual forces with particular emphasis on Wicca and the New Age.

THREE APPROACHES TO MAGIC

Generally speaking, there are three types of magic. These can be distinguished by the powers each type draws upon to work change in the natural world.

Magic of the first type is comparatively uncommon. This sort depends upon sourcing power from within oneself. For adherents of this theory, the practice of magic is like conditioning a muscle – as training advances, the practitioner's capabilities and precision improve.

Into this category go the psychics, distance readers, mentalists, spoon-benders and others who claim their powers are inherent to them. This class is where the majority of the charlatans come from, the sort of people James Randi would publicly discredit as frauds. Absent preternatural agency, no human being can read another's thoughts, move matter with his mind, or perform remote viewing.

Magic of the second variety is more prevalent. Under this system, the source consists of unnamed, impersonal energetic forces. Adherents to this theory claim that when these forces are properly harnessed, they permit someone to achieve feats beyond what nature ought to allow. Unlike magic of the first type, these forces are external to the human being. They are also thought of as neutral, in that they do not have an intrinsic moral quality but can be put to good or bad purposes as the user deems fit. To the martial artist, this is Ki; to the Jedi, this is the force.

Reiki is another example of this class. Reiki practitioners claim the healing powers of their art depend upon sending the flow of energy to affected parts of the body. They do not claim this power is from God or any deity. The natural sciences are at a loss for an explanation of how these practices are supposed to generate the effects they claim—assuming, of course, they produce these effects at all.

If natural causes are ruled out and the energy drawn upon is not from God, then that leaves only one source: the demonic. By simple process of elimination, no other source of power can be found to account for Reiki's claims. The same can be said for feng shui (the Chinese pseudoscience of using energetic forces to balance people with their environments) and prana yoga (which taps a "vital force" that permeates even inanimate objects to maintain one's well-being).

Magic of the third class involves the interaction of mankind with spirits, whether they be good, neutral, or evil. Generally speaking, this is the most prevalent overarching system of magic that exists. Nearly all theories of magic across history rely upon the operation of spiritual agency. Wicca, Solomonian occultism, Voodoo, Santería, Candomblé, Thelema and many others adhere to these principles. These systems rely upon practices to appease, beg, bribe, coerce, and command spirits into doing the magician's bidding.

WORKING WITH SO-CALLED GOOD AND EVIL SPIRITS

Depending on the system one follows and the outcome desired, a practitioner may seek to contact only good spirits. In other systems, individual good spirits and bad spirits are believed to possess particular knowledge and powers within their domain of specialization. Good spirits are called such because they tend to act charitably toward humanity. Bad spirits pursue their own interests, which sometimes are at odds with mankind. It is up to the practitioner to decide whether the benefits of consulting evil spirits outweigh the potential risks. Sometimes, too, the spirits personify concepts that are morally neutral, but their intercession may be sought for good or evil purposes.

One such example can be drawn from Haitian Voodoo, which reveres an entity known as *Bawon Sanmdi* (English: Baron Samedi; literally: Baron Saturday). Samedi ostensibly entered into the global consciousness through his high-profile adherent, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, Haiti's president-for-life from 1957 to 1971.

Among practitioners of Voodoo, Samedi is believed to wield powers over life and death. Of all the *loa* (deities) in the Voodoo pantheon, it is strictly the Baron's prerogative whether a mortal should live or die. A *houngan* (Voodoo priest) would look to Samedi for cures to bodily ailments, especially those ailments which can be life-threatening. In contrast, a *bokor* (Voodoo sorcerer) "serves the *loa* with both hands" which is to say, he practices Voodoo for good as well as for evil. A *bokor* of Samedi would be the person to turn to if someone sought the Baron to lay curses on another.

When reduced to their basest elements, such theories of practical magic amount to "cosmic vending machine" theology. It works like this. A practitioner of magic desires something. This is akin to walking by a vending machine and spotting a product of interest. That product comes with a price. If he has enough money on hand, the magician can proceed to the next step.

But simply having enough money is not enough to obtain what he wants. A ritual is also necessary. That money must be inserted in a particular manner – the coins in the slot, the bills in the receptor. A specific code must be entered which is particular to the product in question. Then, and only then, can the magician get what he desires, assuming the spirits are not fickle. We must never rule out the possibility that this vending machine is out of order. Because if it is, it will have accepted the token payment and gestures, but left the magician empty-handed, and there is next to nothing that can be done about it.

HYBRID MAGIC SYSTEMS

Hybrid systems are also known to exist. The 1970's saw the rise of chaos magick in the United Kingdom. Experimentation and subjectivity are its guiding principles. Because it is results-oriented, chaos magick emphasizes outcomes over means. As a result, strict adherence to formulaic rituals and magic words are eschewed; instead, practitioners consider themselves free to adopt anything they think will get them what they want. Everything is fair game – ancient beliefs, contemporary faiths, pop culture, even their own homespun approaches to the practice.

Advanced chaos magicians take this a step further and place stock in the power of a subjective reality. For the magician, everything is created twice: once in the mind by the subjective intent; and again by the physical expression of this desire – except that if one puts enough effort into the former, this will take most of the work out of the latter.

This is not a metaphor for careful planning or clarity of creative vision. Practitioners literally hold that if a person believes strongly enough in a thing, or if enough people believe in it, then it becomes true strictly by force of belief even if it is objectively impossible.¹

The nature of this system has led some to call it “success magic.” Viewed critically, however, it is little more than the marriage of delusion and abject selfishness. Its embrace of a mercenary ideology in the pursuit of outcomes demonstrates its core tenet: that any means will justify the ends, even means which are outright evil.

WHITE AND BLACK MAGIC: A FALSE DISTINCTION

Those who practice magic may make the distinction between white or “good” magic and black or “evil” magic. The purported aim of white magic is to heal, enlighten, protect, and bring about beneficial effects; whereas the goal of black magic is to lay curses that harm people. To classify magic as white or black is like trying to differentiate cyanide and hemlock by ingesting them – both are poisons, and both will kill just as surely. The distinction is a false one, because magic is evil even when it is employed for noble purposes. This is because all systems of magic offer three empty promises: you can do what you wish; no one has the right to command you; and you are your own god.

¹ An unrelated but similar line of thought is promoted in Rhonda Byrne's 2006 self-help best-seller, *The Secret*, which bears a resemblance to the ideas promoted by discredited nineteenth century spirit medium Helena “Madame” Blavatsky.

The first empty promise offers full and unfettered liberty. While this may seem appealing, it is just anarchy by another name. Where chaos reigns, only might makes right. This is exactly how demons act with respect to each other. Fear, pain, and infighting are the only things that maintain a demon's status in their pecking order. This manifestation of their natures informs us not only of their extremely disordered states, but also that nothing they do is capable of occasioning peace.

Peace cannot be willed. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that peace is the tranquility of order. It can only come about when the grounds for it have been laid, because it is the natural result that follows when things are in their right order. Peace tends to encourage liberty; whereas anarchy inhibits it.

Demons exist in a constant state of anarchy. It should come as no surprise, then, that demons have the least freedom out of all creation. This being the case, how could anyone expect a demon to deliver on the promise of liberty, especially when they would have us think and act like them?

The second empty promise is a release from the consequences of our actions. This would have us believe we are subject to no objective moral laws, and that we ourselves are the lawmakers. It leads us to think we are big fish in a small pond. The danger here is in forgetting there are still bigger fish out there—fish that can devour us in one gulp. Great as we may think humanity to be, our race is not the end-all, be-all. Angelic beings rank above us on the order of being. So long as we remain under the authority of God, we benefit from His protection against Satan and the forces of evil. But, if we reject God to go our own way, then we are left to fend for ourselves in a fight we cannot hope to win.

The third empty promise is of self-worship. In essence, it stands for the belief that you do not need God because you are the god of your personal reality.

When you take the place of God as having the final say in all matters, objective truth falls by the wayside. This opens up a buffet line of religious beliefs from which to cherry-pick any that appeal to you, because, in your view, all of them would be elevated to equal footing. You could line your prayer shelf with images of Ganesha, Odin, Huitzilopochtli, and Elvis. You would also be free to become an atheist, thereby repudiating your own divinity and that of every other god whose existence you do not care to acknowledge. Since you are a fickle god, you could allow yourself the liberty to change your mind if your previous selection no longer suited your tastes.

Among the more serious problems with this third empty promise is the turning away from religion. The natural law of the universe informs us that God has a certain manner of doing things, and that His rationale for why things are as they are can be determined through observation.

Religion is the system of practices that properly reverence God. It is obvious that God wanted us to know how to worship Him correctly, because religious practices have been the subject of many instances of divine revelation. In contrast, gravity is also part of the natural law, but God did not deem it so important as to reveal it to us directly.

If it is important to God that we follow the religious rules He has promulgated, then it cannot be so for His own sake. God does not need us, but He does love us. Thus, it must be important for our own well-being that we adhere to the laws of God. Proper adherence to God's religious tenets keeps us from falling prey to superstition.

MAGIC AS SUPERSTITION

Superstition is the offering of divine worship either to whom it should not be offered, or in a manner in which it should not be offered. It encompasses a threefold wrongness.

The first is adherence to the false belief that some created thing has an inherent power which it does not have. For example: tarot cards are just images printed onto card stock. In and of themselves, they do not have the capacity to tell the future. It is superstitious to believe that they can, because using them in this fashion attributes to the cards a power they do not possess.

The second is idolatry, the worship of any created thing. Most people today might dismiss the practice of idolatry as something only the ancients were guilty of; sins from those bygone times of ignorance when a statue of a golden calf could pass for a deity. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Idolatry is very much alive and well. St. John's warning to "keep yourselves from idols"² is more true today than ever.

The third wrongful aspect of superstition is vain observance. This entails invoking the devil, implicitly or explicitly, to achieve a specific end. The practitioner need not be aware of the devil's assistance, or even believe in the devil. Under this category are found the use of charms, spells, and divination, as well as the observance of behaviors considered lucky or unlucky.

Laying a curse on someone has been likened to contracting a hitman. When a person wants someone else to be hurt but does not want to do the deed himself, he enters into business deal with another who is willing to do the work for him. Demons are those hitmen. A curse is nothing more than willing something ill to befall another and having a demon serve as the means by which it gets done.

Belief in luck is the quintessential superstitious practice. A thing cannot give what it does not have. This is doubly true in this context. A four-leaf clover has no inherent power to influence its possessor's fortunes. By the same token, a person cannot place complete faith in God if he holds any belief in luck. In a sense, he has traded away some of that faith by placing his hopes on something else. Unless he first withdraws this misplaced faith, he cannot give it to God. And so, to the extent we might put our confidence in something other than God, we assert mistrust of God.

MAGIC AS A GATEWAY TO DEMONIC ACTIVITY

The superstitious and idolatrous nature of magic allows it to serve as a pathway to advanced demonic activity. The practices constitute us baiting the hook by which are caught. If we believe some physical object possesses supernatural powers, demons will try to fool us into thinking this is true. When they act in a manner that confirms our biases, they may attempt to stoke our curiosity to pursue these practices further. Once they have us "hooked" they will continue to feed our superstition to keep this deception going.

The rituals, offerings, and ingredients of magic spells are part of an elaborate hoax. The human mind is conditioned into thinking we cannot get something from nothing. Indeed, we are often more on our guard when someone offers us something for free than when we pay what we feel is a fair price for it.

² *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, 1 John 5:21.

This is where the sin of superstition comes into play. There is no power in the ingredients used in a ritual. It is by an act of the magician's will—his belief in the effectiveness of his supernaturally-inert tools and methods—that the spirits might feel inclined to act as requested, only to fuel this misplaced belief, to the detriment of the magician and others.

What an immaterial spirit would want with material sacrifices is anyone's guess. I am of the opinion that the spirits are more interested in seeing the lengths to which we will go in order to appease them than they are in the offerings themselves. A material offering is presumably of no value to an ancient, disembodied intelligence, but what we are willing to give up demonstrates the seriousness of our entreaties.

There is, however, one ingredient which appears to be universally potent, at least at a superficial level.

Blood.

Reference to Scripture sheds light upon this matter. In Leviticus are found the Israelites' rules for ritual purity. God instructed the people to eat certain animals but not others. Those land animals that could be eaten were ruminators with split hooves.³ Animals that did not meet these criteria were not to be consumed.

A pig has cloven hooves but does not ruminate; therefore, it was considered unfit to be eaten.⁴ Likewise, animals that lived in the water could be eaten only if they had fins and scales; all other forms of sea life were deemed unclean for consumption.⁵

The prohibitions in Leviticus can be explained in the context of the ancient Israelites' circumstances. Bottom-feeding marine life like shellfish can make a person deathly sick if not prepared correctly; not to mention that some people are violently allergic to shellfish and may go into shock from its ingestion. The land where they lived was arid and mountainous. Drinkable water was scarce, let alone large quantities of water needed for agriculture. Where there were grasslands, a population could settle, supported by their herds.

Since pigs are not ruminators like cows, they do not eat grass. Pigs generally can eat anything a human being might. Having to share food between people and their livestock is not the most efficient use of food stores. Raising animals that can subsist off the grass is a better use of scarce resources.

While it is not my intent to put words into God's mouth, these considerations may have factored into the prohibition on eating certain animals. But contrast this with God's prohibition on the eating of flesh with its blood still in it:

Any man whosoever of the children of Israel, and of the strangers that sojourn among you, if by hunting or fowling, he take a wild beast or a bird, which is lawful to eat, let him pour out its blood, and cover it with earth. For the life of all flesh is in the blood: therefore I said to the children of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any flesh at all, because the life of the flesh is in the blood, and whosoever eateth it, shall be cut off.⁶

³ Leviticus 11:3.

⁴ Leviticus 11:7.

⁵ Leviticus 11:12.

⁶ Leviticus 17:13-14.

In no uncertain terms, God states that the life of all material creatures is in their blood. By prohibiting the consumption of blood, and specifically telling us why, God must have intended for us to comprehend the importance of blood to life. While Christ freed mankind from the strictures of the old laws, devout Christians nonetheless grasp the weighty significance of blood through Christ's sacrifice of Himself. Christ's words at the last supper are unequivocal:

Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath everlasting life: and I will raise him up in the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed: and my blood is drink indeed.⁷

While the prohibition against the consumption of blood appears to have been lifted, blood's particular qualities nonetheless remain. Out of all of a magician's ingredients, blood is the only one which appears to hold spiritual significance, at least at first blush. At the risk of sounding alarmist, this observation would explain why so many pagan and Satanic practices employ blood sacrifices in the worst of their rituals.

And yet, for all of blood's importance, there remains an insoluble paradox. By now it should be clear that the point of a blood sacrifice is not merely to offer the blood itself, but what it signifies: the life of the victim.

Here is where the practice falls prey to superstition. Upon effectuating the sacrifice, the victim dies. There exist no human means of employing the spent life of a sacrificial victim to an efficient purpose. The act results in a wanton and purposeless killing. Misplaced belief in one's practices and tools gives rise to the superstition that a fleeing life can somehow be harnessed, either to empower a ritual or to appease a spirit. And as you might have grasped by now, superstition gives rise to danger.

Here too, Scripture provides insight: "For it is impossible that with the blood of oxen and goats sin should be taken away."⁸ The ancients knew the life of a creature was in its blood, but they also knew not to ascribe supernatural elements to it. Blood, in and of itself, could not relieve them of the guilt of their sins. It was therefore not the blood but the act of sacrifice that held propitiatory qualities. They knew that sacrifice, not blood, removed the ill effects of their sins. Thus, it was through sacrifice—fasting, sackcloth, and ashes—that the people of Nineveh were saved from the wrath of God.⁹ Magical systems, particularly those which contemplate ritual sacrifices, overlook this crucial detail and place a superstitious overemphasis on the blood itself.

What is perhaps the biggest irony when it comes to magic is that the demons do not believe in it themselves. In fact, they hold in low regard anyone foolish enough to think it is real. They know magic is a lie. They know it is impossible to work change in the material universe with a wave of the hand and a few uttered words. They also know there is no way to bend a spirit to a magician's will. A demon will pretend to be under the command of his victim, but in reality, they owe their obedience to no one but God. They play along with this ruse because it grants them rights over the magician.

⁷ John 6:53-57.

⁸ Hebrews 10:4.

⁹ Jonah 3:5; 3:8; 3:10.

When a person attempts to work magic, his observance of a ritual to succor the spirit's favor implicitly demonstrates his obedience to the spirit. This is also true of rituals purporting to grant control over a spirit. Such behavior manifests the magician's desire to foster a relationship with the demon and distance himself from God. While the intent of the magician is to harness the spirit to his will, the opposite occurs – the magician moves himself further out from under the protective authority of God. And since, God excepted, there is no force potent enough to compel a demon's obedience, the magician is left with no defense against the demon's abuses.

Consider the phenomenon of automatic writing. It is a form of divination, and therefore, it is wrong because it contravenes the First Commandment. Through automatic writing, a person serving as a medium takes a pen and paper and invites a spirit to assume control of his arms. What results is a message written on the paper that comes from a preternatural source.

What is less obvious, however, is that the grant of rights over the medium's body remains in effect even after the automatic writing session has terminated. Whether the medium knows it or not, the demon now has a foothold into his life. The demon will seek greater rights, albeit through subtle methods, such as through inclining the medium to continue the practice. Oftentimes, this feeds the medium's pride – it makes the medium feel as though he has a power no one else has, when in reality, its source is the demon standing at his shoulder.

Generally, it is not until a demon has sufficient rights over a person that it begins to overtly afflict its victim. Remember, demons are masters of the long-con – they will not sell themselves short if they think their efforts can net them a bigger payoff later. They will continue to feed us lies so long as we are receptive to them. In this sense, demons are like loan sharks.

Loan sharks make abusive loans to people they know are in financial trouble. These lenders know their debtors will never be able to pay them back, so when the time comes to call in the loan, they demand repayment in the form of things other than money. Usually, this comes in the form of favors specific to the person over whom they have leverage. If the debtor refuses, the loan shark will use threats and force to get his way.

In the case of automatic writers, there have been accounts of this manifesting as a loss of control over their arms, which begin to write unsettling messages on their own in handwriting completely different from theirs. One account holds that the medium in question, unnerved by the entity's presence, ordered it to leave. In response, the demon seized control of the medium's arms, forcing him to write repeatedly: "You're mine forever."

Before moving off the topic of divination, we must address a particularly widespread form of the practice: Ouija. Also known as a "spirit board" or an "oracle," a Ouija board is a divination device. Users believe they have the option to ask questions of any spirit that happens to be in the vicinity, or request contact with a particular spirit, such as the soul of a deceased relative. In reality, there is no way of knowing precisely what – if anything – will respond. But, given what we know about demons, in cases of authentic contact with spirits, it is far more likely that whatever answers will be demonic.

The device consists of a board onto which the letters of the alphabet and the numbers zero through nine have been printed. One or two users lightly place their fingers upon a pointer called a planchette and then ask a question aloud. The spirit responds by spelling out its answer, one letter at a time. Some boards also include the words "Yes," "No," and "Goodbye."

Many users fail to understand that the board does not operate in the manner of a telephone. When they become frightened, users have been known to grip the planchette and violently slide it to the “Goodbye” position, as if hastily hanging up a telephone receiver. This does not terminate the session or dismiss the spirit. Like everything else printed on the board, “Goodbye” is there for when the spirit wishes to express itself—in this case, to say that *it* is terminating the communication, not the other way around.

The fact that Ouija is sold by a board game company and marketed as a toy (recommended for players eight years of age and up, at that) has led many to consider it a harmless pastime.

It is not.

Before Hasbro acquired the rights to Ouija, the manufacturer of these boards was Parker Brothers. In 1967, *The Chicago Tribune* ran a story on them, entitled: “Ouija Spells Profit for Parker Bros.”¹⁰ According to the news article, Ouija was patented in the 1890’s by William Fulk. With sales of four hundred thousand units per year, Fulk’s heirs could not keep up with demand, and so they sold the rights to Parker Brothers in 1966.

In its first year of ownership, Parker Brothers sold one and a half million copies. Sales of Ouija beat perennial best-seller Monopoly, which is significant because Monopoly had been a Parker Brothers property for the preceding thirty-two years. Of the company’s anticipated eighteen million dollars in sales in 1967, Ouija was credited for the lion’s share, as much as six million dollars.

Parker Brothers vice president Randolph Barton was quoted throughout the article. He observed that the predominant “demand starts from the teeny-bopper level and runs right up to 18-year olds. Mostly, it’s girls...”

As to the character of the board itself, Barton commented: “We don’t maintain that the Ouija board has supernatural powers... but there seems to be something mysterious about it all. I can hardly wait to get my own and ask it why it is so popular.”

When pressed on the issue, the reporter noted how his answer sounded like a politician’s – that is to say, evasive. The paper asked about the accuracy of Ouija’s extrasensory perception, and Barton replied: “I can not confirm or deny. After all, our headquarters are located in Salem, Mass., a place famous for witch hunts.”

Barton’s statements on Ouija should make the reader take pause. While the extent of his actual knowledge into the preternatural aspect of Ouija is anyone’s guess, his carefully worded remarks give rise to unsavory implications. Actions speak louder than intents. Believing that Ouija is a harmless game does not change the fact that it is an occult divination tool. Using the Ouija board or similar devices, even for ostensibly innocent purposes, is sinful. Sinful actions bring about negative consequences.

¹⁰ Gavin, James M. “Ouija Spells Profit for Parker Bros.” *The Chicago Tribune*. 15 Nov. 1967, p. 86. www.newspapers.com. Accessed 6 Apr. 2020.

In sum, all magic is sinful even if it is used for a noble aim, but it is all the more so if it is employed to cause harm to others. To practice magic, therefore, is to live by the notion that the ends justify the means, which is never a righteous justification. Our best defense against magic and the powers of Satan is to lead a virtuous, sacramental life. In our thoughts and actions, we must participate in the life of God. St. Paul explains:

If God be for us, who is against us?... For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹¹

A CASE STUDY:

WICCA AND THE NEW AGE

The preceding discussion is intended to provide a general understanding of the workings of magic. What follows is a concrete example in the form of Wicca.

Wicca, or Modern Witchcraft as it is also called, is an entirely man-made religion. Despite its claims of carrying on the traditions of the druids and folk witches of ancient Europe, the religion was founded in the twentieth century. It is a modern pagan religious movement. No portion of it was inspired by or derived from any supernatural source. It is premised upon a faulty reading of history and the writings of misguided people. This aside, it is one of the fastest-growing religions today.

Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, there were some five hundred executions for the crime of witchcraft in England. The intents of contemporary lawmakers, as well as the manner in which these offenses were brought to justice, provide insight on the public sentiment toward the practice of witchcraft.

Historically, witchcraft was viewed as a secular crime in England, not a religious offense. In 1534, King Henry VIII established the Church of England. The crown was its supreme authority on earth regarding all things spiritual. Then, in 1542, the first statute forbidding witchcraft was promulgated by an act of parliament. The act made the practice of magic illegal under penalty of execution by the state. Note: the state, not any religious body, meted out punishment for the offense. This is altogether in keeping with the fact that the Anglican Church was subject to state governance.¹²

¹¹ Romans 8:31-39.

¹² While it is true that the archbishop of Canterbury is the Church of England's most senior religious official, the Church of England itself is beholden to the crown. Henry VIII established the Church of England after the Roman Catholic Church refused to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, with whom he did not produce living male heirs. His act of defiance was a formal renunciation of the Catholic Church's authority in England. Recognizing that he had formed a power vacuum, he founded the Church of England with him as its Protector and Supreme Head of the English Church and Clergy, a title that has historically passed down to subsequent English monarchs into the current day.

Then, in 1563, a new act was passed which made it unlawful to summon evil spirits. If a murder resulted from the invocation of malevolent entities, anyone found guilty faced death by hanging. Harm that fell short of murder was punished by less stringent means until 1604, when a third statute was passed. This new law permitted stricter punishments for less serious harm arising from witchcraft, and also made certain forms of fraternization with evil spirits punishable by death.

Prosecutions for illicit witchcraft were not as often brought by the state as by individuals seeking redress for another's misdeeds. Witch hunters were not state law enforcement officers but independent contractors. Some, such as Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins, served as private consultants for anyone who suspected they were targets of witchcraft.

Torture was authorized under the laws of England for certain offenses, but not for witchcraft. This had two important implications: confessions could not be beaten out of defendants; and defendants could not be coerced into implicating others. Those sentenced to death were hanged like any other felon, not burned at the stake.

It is important to note that the mere status of being a witch was not criminalized. The laws were designed not to halt the practice of witchcraft but to prevent harm arising from it. The state tolerated magic that hurt no one. This tolerance did not arise simply from the difficulty in gathering evidence to prove one's case in court. As much can be gleaned from how the English royal court tolerated John Dee, a sorcerer whose fame earned him the title of advisor to Queen Elizabeth I.

Dee was a Welsh-English polymath. Educated in mathematics, astrology, alchemy, and philosophy, Dee tapped these diverse subjects for the practice of his sorcery. He claimed he could contact angels through the use of geometric sigils and esoteric implements, such as a gazing crystal and a holy table. The crystal would set the foundation for today's practice of scrying—attempting to gain knowledge of past, future, or distant events by peering into a reflective surface. The latter tool, his holy table, is what likely provided the inspiration for today's Ouija boards. His occult theories led him to conclude that mathematics formed the basis of all knowledge, and that through the study of this discipline, a mortal could achieve divine power.

Dee was an avowed Christian, and yet he openly practiced divination. Having established himself as a distinguished sorcerer, he rose to the heights of prominence. His fame earned him personal invitations to ply his occult trade at the courts of several European monarchs. Between 1580 and 1590, Dee consulted with the likes of Rudolph II, Holy Roman Emperor, and King Stefan of Poland.

With respect to King Stefan, it says much of Dee's fame that a devout Catholic monarch would entertain a sorcerer in his own court. While the king mistrusted Dee's practices, it appears he nonetheless placed stock in the effectiveness of his methods.

As an aside, Stefan was the maternal uncle of Countess Elizabeth Báthory. If that name sounds at all familiar, it is likely because the countess is known today as the most prolific female serial killer ever to have lived. Apart from being suspected of cannibalism, the countess was accused of torturing women and bathing in their blood to preserve her youth. Such claims were premised upon the countess's purported knowledge of foul witchcraft and allegations that she consorted with the devil.

While I do not mean to insinuate any interconnectedness between Dee's visit to Stefan's court and the countess's depravity, the facts remain what they are.

Sentiment toward the practice of magic began to shift toward the end of the eighteenth century. Magic and consorting with spirits were no longer thought of as evil. To the public at large, they were curiosities. For a select few, the pursuit of occult knowledge was the common ground for like-minded social elites. Thus, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the rise of hermetic societies founded upon Dee's ideas.

At the start of the twentieth century, the public perception of witchcraft underwent a 180-degree flip, thanks to the efforts of Margaret Murray and others.

Murray was a folklorist and historian. Although Egyptology was her academic concentration, in 1921 she published *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. Her work posited that the earliest European religion consisted of a fertility cult dedicated to the worship of a mother goddess and a masculine horned god. Over time, worship of the horned god supplanted that of the female counterpart.

Murray spoke of this faith as being one of personal freedom and joyous celebrating, and that it also required its members to be bound by secret blood pacts for admission into its ranks. The offering of sacrifices was central to the method of worship. Animals were the typical victims, but on occasion, sacrifices of live human beings were called for as well, oftentimes children.

Critics of Murray's theories noted that she was out of her depth. As an Egyptologist, she had little experience in the anthropology of Western Europe. Others criticized her research, claiming she presumed too much on the basis of scant evidence.

While her book was not well-received by the academia, it ignited a firestorm of curiosity in the public. The prevailing attitude toward witches had changed since the era of the Witchfinder General. In Murray's day, witchcraft was little more than a myth from a bygone age. Witches were thought of as old crones with warty noses that gobbled up unruly children. They were the stuff of fairy tales. The notion that modern-day witches still existed fascinated the reading public.

Murray's scholarship caused such renewed interest in the subject that, in 1929, the Encyclopedia Britannica saw fit to include an entry on witchcraft in their fourteenth edition. Riding this wave of widespread enthusiasm, in 1931, Murray published *The God of the Witches*. Unlike her previous work, this new book was designed for general readership. In it, she referred to her witch-cult as Europe's "Old Religion." She left out of the book certain aspects of the faith she felt would cast it in too negative a light.

Murray began to refer to the masculine deity as the Horned God, a pan-European deity worshipped since distant antiquity. To bolster her theory, she co-opted Western European imagery of horned humanoid figures which she felt would fit her narrative. Thus, she argued, the Minotaur of Crete was an aspect of her Horned God, as was the satyr, the mythical god Pan, the Egyptian god Osiris, and even the Christian devil.

In addition, Murray pointed to Paleolithic fertility artifacts to lend further credence to her pastiche religion. Throughout Europe, archeologists had been unearthing stone carvings of female humanoid figures with exaggerated sexual features—wide hips, large breasts, and the signs of pregnancy. The *Venus of Willendorf* is a prime example of one such artifact. Not much can be said for certain as to these items' purposes, though still less was known about them in Murray's day. Murray claimed these statues were depictions of her female goddess, and that their ubiquity pointed to how widespread her ancient religion was.

Murray's theory drew the interest of one Gerald Gardner. In his youth, Gardner spent many years traveling abroad. It was during these travels that he was exposed to indigenous religious practices. He was particularly interested in the ecstatic trance states these people achieved during their ceremonies. Upon retirement, he returned to his native England and entered the New Forest Coven. He would become known as the "Father of Wicca."

Gardner was no stranger to the occult. Aside from his contacts within the Freemasons, he participated in occult circles and other groups that would lay the groundwork for the New Age movement. Among his closest acquaintances was Aleister Crowley.

Crowley was born into a wealthy British family. In his youth, he gained acceptance into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a group that featured other prominent occultists such as Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. After a falling out with his associates, Crowley opted to promote his own system of witchcraft, which he called Thelema.

In 1904, while in Cairo, Crowley claimed to have been visited by a spiritual messenger of the Egyptian god Horus. A disembodied voice dictated to him the work that would provide the central philosophy behind Crowley's religion: *The Book of the Law*.¹³

Crowley's book was prophetic in nature. It asserted that mankind was on the threshold of a new aeon, and that a profound transformation of society was yet to come. Conveniently enough, the book called for Crowley to serve as its prophet. This new era would be characterized by a monumental shift away from the repressive regimes of old.

The guiding principle of Crowley's book was: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law." It should not come as a surprise that such shocking words would be uttered by a man with no moral compass whatsoever; one who abused hard drugs, encouraged and engaged in illicit sexual acts, and who has been called "the wickedest man in the world."

Crowley and Gardner were so close that, as Crowley was reaching the end of his life, he asked Gardner to carry on promoting Thelema if he happened to die before Gardner.

This was not to be.

Crowley felt Thelema should be exclusive just as its predecessor, the Golden Dawn, was. Golden Dawn was reserved for men of gentry, and—at least in his early days—Crowley had fit the bill. In a like manner, Thelema was closed to those who, in Crowley's estimation, did not merit admission. On the other hand, Gardner believed the religion ought to be more open.

The two split on this point. Gardner carried on developing his newly-formed religion, but not before incorporating elements of Thelema into it. Cherry-picking his favorite elements of Murray's "Old Religion," Crowley's goetic magic, trance religions, druidic folklore, and nudism, Gardner called his amalgam religion "Modern Witchcraft." Its adherents became known as "Wiccans."

In 1952, Gardner began to correspond with Doreen Valiente. He accepted her into his coven, where she would eventually rise to the position of high priestess. Together, the two would go on to write several books to further codify their religion. Valiente's efforts would earn her the title of the "Mother of Modern Witchcraft."

¹³ Roberts, Susan. *The Magician of the Golden Dawn: The Story of Aleister Crowley*. Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1978.

Despite Gardner and Valiente acting as the nominal heads of Modern Witchcraft, the religion had no overarching authority to enforce orthodoxy. Each individual follower was expected to keep his or her own spell book, or "book of shadows." Subjectivity became the religion's guidepost. Followers were encouraged to experiment with whatever methods they felt worked best for them. With no effective headship to guide the development of the fledgling religion, anarchy followed.

The 1950's saw the first signs of disunity within the religion. Gardner was obsessed with promoting Modern Witchcraft by any means. Valiente was of the opinion that unbridled advertisement of the faith not only cheapened its values but also threatened its existence. She and her supporters in the coven wrote to Gardner with a proposal on how the religion ought to be properly managed.

In return, Gardner snubbed her by formulating his own governing document. His proposal was a direct retaliation against Valiente. It especially limited the powers of the high priestess, the office Valiente held. Outraged, Valiente's faction broke off from Gardner's in what would later be called Witchcraft's first great schism.

Then came the bombshell that would destroy Wicca's already shaky foundation. Margaret Murray's theories of a ubiquitous and ancient European fertility religion were soundly discredited. In 1969, Encyclopedia Britannica retracted its article on witchcraft premised upon Murray's research. In 1971, historian Keith Thomas observed that Murray's conclusions were groundless due to a selective use of the evidence to suit her hypothesis. In 1975, historian Norman Cohn criticized both her methods and her superficial grasp of European history.

Unfortunately, these measures came too late to snuff the public's raging curiosity on witchcraft. Thanks to its forty-year run in Encyclopedia Britannica, the modern concept of witchcraft had already gained a false air of authority. This was bolstered by the literary contributions of Gardner and Valiente, whose works kept the subject at the forefront of the popular consciousness. Gardner's addiction to the limelight and stature as the movement's spokesperson further impelled the religion's notoriety, such that Modern Witchcraft would eventually move beyond its native Great Britain to foreign shores. By 1986, the federal government of the United States recognized Wicca as a religion.

ANALYSIS

Because it is a religion authored by man, Wicca lacks any grounding in objective truth. Since its schism, Wicca has splintered off into myriad little religions, some so particular that they are unique to the individuals who practice them. While Wiccans may trumpet this as a victory for individualism, it only goes to show the hollowness of their religion. If within Wicca each believer claims his way is true, then they tacitly claim everyone else's beliefs must be false.

Either something is true or it is not. If the only thing Wiccans can agree upon is that they all practice Wicca, but each by different methods, how can any part of Wicca be true? It cannot be, because the truth does not compromise. The only consistency to Wicca among its adherents is its name, and even this is inconsistent with its founder's ideas.

Moreover, Wicca purports to conveniently fill man's needs in terms of the three C's: curiosity, comfort, and control. When we ask ourselves: "Where do our loved ones go when they die?" Wicca offers to slake that curiosity through hoaxes and illicit contact with spirits. When anxiety prompts us to ask: "What does tomorrow hold in store for me?" Wicca offers cold comfort through divination. And when just knowing is insufficient, Wicca extends the false promise of power.

This mindset gives rise to magical thinking. In Wicca, it is believed that with the right combination of ingredients, gestures, words, and practices, a person can impose his will upon the universe and others. This is nothing but superstition. It fosters a dangerous self-delusion and a reckless indifference toward the truth.

Through magical thinking, a person expresses: "My will be done" and thereby thinks himself to be a god. It makes the individual the center of the universe. It blinds a person to the reality that he owes duties both to society and to God. It is little wonder, therefore, that many Wiccans revere the ancient Greek goddess Hekate, whose domain is witchcraft. Whether they realize it or not, through the practice of Wicca they strive to be like her. Hekate's name, when translated, means "she who works her will." Such impudence has not been seen since the fall of the angels. It is fitting that her impertinent nature should be apparent from her name, because "all the gods of the Gentiles are devils"¹⁴ and she is no exception.

Contrast magical thinking with religious thinking, which espouses: "Thy will be done." Religious thinking presupposes that we are not gods but servants of a true, living God, whose will is paramount to ours. We are not the center of the universe; religious thinking has God at its core. In this light, Christianity is not a convenient religion, but Christ never said it would be easy: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."¹⁵

The truth is immutable. It never conforms itself for our convenience. It is always what it is regardless of our subjective viewpoints. Christianity deals in truths, not convenient delusions. Given how difficult it may be to adhere to the precepts of Christianity when contrasted to those of man-made religions, the only reason anyone would want to follow Christ is because His religion is the true one, the one that can actually deliver what it promises.

END OF REPORT

¹⁴ Psalm 95:5.

¹⁵ Matthew 16:24.