

The Truth About Witchcraft

by Priestess Maya White Sparks

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Witchcraft has its roots in the old nature religions that were part of pre-Christian cultures all over the world. Ancient peoples experienced Nature as sacred and celebrated the seasonal cycles as a way of connecting with Divinity. There were those who fulfilled the roles of healer, prophet, midwife, ceremonial guide and/or spiritual advisor. Modern day witches blend the folkways of pre-Christian societies with the ways of shamans, healers, medicine people, alchemists, and sages—those who were adept at communicating with spiritual realms; who knew the healing powers of nature and the laws of spiritual science (i.e. magick).

Archaeology indicates that many of these ancient religions revolved around images of female divinity, The Great Mother. Elaborate temple-cities grew up in the Middle East around Her sites of worship. In Eastern Europe, the remains of Neolithic towns contain Goddess images in every home, as well as in communal places of worship. During this too brief, peaceful period of human history, towns were without fortifications and women and men were equals in their society. Women held positions of spiritual leadership as Priestesses. Priests and Priestesses devoted to the service of the Goddess practiced the arts of divination, the healing arts, kept the "measures" (i.e. the cycles of the seasons, astrological cycles, holy days etc.), and guided ceremonies.

Eventually, there was a shift from Goddess-oriented to God-oriented religions as patriarchal systems came into power. Despite this change, some women remained well known for their spiritual powers and were consulted as midwives, oracles and healers. Even this residual honor eventually went underground, however, and wise women and sages had to be consulted in secret. In the Middle East, oppression became extreme as women were confined to the veil and the domestic compound, and the old, temple dances were forbidden.

In Europe, the shift from the Old Religion to Catholicism became increasingly violent. The Church consolidated its power by influencing governments, persecuting "heretics" and forcibly "converting heathens" from their nature-oriented "pagan" ways. Eventually, the majority of heretics prosecuted were prosecuted as witches.

The persecution of witches, although not limited to women, was primarily directed at women. *The Hammer of the Witches*, written by two Catholic clerics, was a diatribe against women, calling them "lustful," "weak," and easily seduced by the devil. A handbook for the identification, torture and execution of witches, this book was written just as the printing press was invented. It soon became a bestseller on the European continent. As the plague ravaged Europe and infant mortality became commonplace, "witches in league with the devil" were blamed for the crisis. Many say that the killing of thousands of cats as "witches' familiars" contributed to the spreading of the plague because it caused a rise in the rodent population whose fleas carried the disease.

Between the 14th and 17th centuries A. D. it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of witches (some say millions) were executed in Europe. In Wurzburg, Germany, all but one person were condemned to death. In several other towns, entire populations of women were wiped out. This is because the victims of prosecution were tortured until they gave the names of other "witches." At first, women with money and/or power were the targets of persecution. At the peak of the Great Witch Hunt it seemed a crime to simply be a woman.

Similarly, as the "New World" was conquered, practitioners of indigenous nature religions were murdered as "savages" and "witch doctors".

The toll of this mass torture and execution on the human psyche has yet to be understood. As with the effects of the Holocaust in Germany in this century, we need to heal ourselves from the legacy of the Witch Craze/Burning Times and colonial genocide. It is easy to see that women must free themselves from a legacy of fear and that both men and women need to reclaim the witch or shaman within. Spiritual connection through Mother Nature and freedom of religion is every human's birthright.

Modern "Wicca" is one manifestation of the old, nature based religions and many indigenous teachers are breaking silence to share the Old Ways. It is amazing that, despite centuries of mass persecution, non-Christian, nature-oriented religious practices have survived. Now we are seeing an actual renaissance of the Old Religion, as reported in *Hour of the Witch*, a book designed to warn us against its dangers (Wohlberg, 2005, p. 14): "In 1998, the *Chicago Tribune* reported: 'Neo-paganism is the fastest-growing religion in North America . . .' In 2001, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), conducted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, indicated seventeen-fold growth in the Wiccan community between 1990 and 2001 – the highest of any faith group monitored. 'This would indicate a doubling in numbers of adherents about every 2.5 years'."

We thank the many, anonymous, brave souls who kept traditions alive through centuries of oppression, and the many courageous teachers and writers who have broken silence to speak the truth about witchcraft.

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The Witches' Law

Bide the Wiccan Law ye must,

In perfect love, in perfect trust.

Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill:

An ye harm none, do as ye will.

And ever mind the Rule of Three:

What ye send out, comes back to thee.

Follow this with mind and heart,

And merry ye meet, and merry ye part.