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A spiritual revolution? Wicca and religious change in the 1960s



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Introduction

Before diving into religious change in the Sixties, you will reflect on how you think about religion and spirituality in your own context. The following activity will help you to understand how complex modern religious identities are, as well as clarify your own position – and maybe some preconceptions too! Most importantly, it will show you that 'religion' does not refer to one specific thing, but can indicate a range of different things, often at the same time.

Activity 1

Allow around 30 minutes to complete this activity.

Answer the following questions. You can be honest – they are not being saved or shared with anyone else – and there are no right or wrong answers! When you have finished, take some time to reflect. Were you surprised by any of your answers? How did you feel about including all of these things within the category of 'religion'?

Do you think of yourself as a 'religious' person?

Provide your answer...

Have you ever identified as a member of a religion? One, or more?

Provide your answer...

How does your practice match what might be expected? (for example, do you go to church every week, never drink alcohol, pray five times a day, etc.) Do you do anything NOT a part of your religion (if you have one)?

Provide your answer...

Have you tried any alternative medicine or therapies? Are there any you use regularly?

Provide your answer...

Do you use yoga, tai chi, meditation or other mindfulness practices?

Provide your answer...

Do you read your horoscope regularly? How about when you have a new relationship?

Provide your answer...

Do you have ornaments or statues in your home from multiple traditions (Buddhas, crucifixes, African deities, etc.)?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The first thing to note is that nearly everyone has some position regarding religion, even if that position is 'I don't have a religion'. Almost no-one answers, 'I don't know', even if they think there is a lot they do not know. Nevertheless, the parameters of that identification vary greatly. For some, religious identification has a lot to do with family traditions and the area they live in. For some, religious identification will have a lot to do with cultural and ethnic community. Still others will regard 'faith' or 'devotion' as being at the core of their religious identity.

Many will keep the same religious identity throughout their lives, but many will have changed – sometimes *within* a larger religious tradition, moving from Anglicanism to Catholicism, for example; sometimes *from* one tradition to another; and sometimes in or out of religion altogether. A few people even find themselves with more than one identification at the same time – Buddhist Jews, for example. This course will look at some of the complex reasons why people explore different traditions.

You may also have wondered why you were asked about yoga and horoscopes. Although we don't tend to think of them as 'religion', there are clear connections – yoga developed in the Vedic culture which led to modern Hinduism and Buddhism, and horoscopes are part of a pre-modern worldview where planets are somehow also deities, and the universe is recapitulated in the individual. Maybe you prefer to think of them as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious', and others will challenge that these are necessarily religious at all. Indeed, there is no right or wrong answer here. This course will however be exploring the idea of 'spiritual but not religious', an idea which evolved out of the spiritual revolution of the 'Long 1960s'.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that whether we consider Yoga to be 'religion', 'spirituality', or neither, will depend on how we are defining religion. The modern West tends to think of religion in terms of "sincerely-held belief", for a number of historical reasons, but this doesn't really hold true everywhere in the world. We can also think of religion in terms of specific practices. For many Jews, being Jewish has more to do with what you *do* than what you *believe*, for example, and Christians will put different stress on how important going to church every week is. Again, neither of these is more 'correct' than the others, but as scholars of religion, we always need to remain aware of which understanding of religion is in play at any given time.

These are all ideas we need to keep in mind as we begin to look at religious change in the Sixties.

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course A113 *Revolutions*. It is one of four OpenLearn courses exploring the notion of the Sixties as a 'revolutionary' period. Learn more about these OpenLearn courses here.

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- consider the complexities involved in the study of religious change in the Sixties
- reflect on the possible different meanings of ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, how this might relate to cultural shifts, and the significance of a ‘spiritual revolution’ for contemporary religion
- engage with media as primary sources.

1 Religious change in the 1960s

The Sixties were a time of transformative change in the social and cultural experience for many Western people. Their religious lives were no exception. The era has often been presented as one of significant religious crisis for the dominant tradition in the West: Christianity. In the case of Britain, for example, the eminent social historian Callum Brown spoke of the beginnings of a rapid demise of Christianity in the late 1950s, and a 'free fall' from about 1963 (Brown, 2001, p. 188). Brown argues that Christianity lost its grip on common assumptions about how life should be lived, particularly amongst women, who had traditionally tended to be more 'pious' than men.

In this course you are going to explore the Sixties as a period of religious ferment. In doing so, you will engage with elements of crisis – particularly for traditional Christianity – which Brown and others have addressed. During the Sixties era, many contemporary scholars – both historians and social scientists – argued that they were observing the disappearance of religion itself, through a process of **secularisation**. However, 'crisis' is not the only perspective on religion in the Sixties. Alongside the apparent crisis of traditional Christianity, a significant *reconfiguration* of religion was occurring, both inside and outside the churches, driven in part by a cultural shift towards notions of inner **authenticity** and **subjective** experience, a turn away from tradition and authority towards the 'self'. The Canadian scholar Charles Taylor identifies a 'massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as creatures with inner depths' (Taylor, 1991, p. 26). In the Sixties, this emphasis on individuality and expression – what we call here **expressive individualism** – has been widely evident. Where religion is concerned, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) argue there has been a 'subjective turn' – even a 'spiritual revolution'.



Figure 1 Demolition of Brampton Congregational Church, Chesterfield, c.1968.



Figure 2 The Beatles and their wives at the Rishikesh in India with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, March 1968.



Figure 3 Children of God, pictured with their Jesus Bus, spreading The Gospel in Brighton, 1971.

Activity 2

Allow approximately 25 minutes

How might Figures 1, 2 and 3 display three aspects of changes in religion during the Sixties?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The first is of the demolition of a church building in Chesterfield, England, around 1968. The picture is evidence of a wider phenomenon: in England and Wales between 1951 and 1980 there was an 18 per cent reduction in places of worship (non-Anglican), with the greatest net losses between 1962 and 1972 (Field, 2017, p. 184). The Sixties are often seen as a period of decline for traditional Christianity; taking into account measurements such as the numbers of church attendance, buildings and clergy. The second picture shows global pop music icons the Beatles. In 1966, one of their songwriters, John Lennon, had famously said in an Evening Standard interview: “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I'll be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first – rock 'n' roll or Christianity.” Whether Lennon was being critical of traditional Christianity, or simply noting a generational shift away from traditional religion and toward popular culture, he and his bandmates nevertheless seemed interested in alternative forms of ‘spirituality’, visiting the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in India two years later. But was Christianity dying? The third image, the Children of God evangelising in Brighton, shows one of a number of new expressions of Christianity – with an emphasis on experience, authenticity and community – which were emerging during the Sixties. The rise of what is known as

'charismatic Christianity' suggests that traditional religion was also able to renew itself from within.

When thinking about religious change in the Sixties, what is it that's changing? What do we mean by 'religion' in this context? You should now spend about 15 minutes thinking about what criteria you might use for measuring religiosity and changing patterns of religion in society.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Very often, when we think about religion – perhaps in terms of the question 'How religious a country are we?' – we will tend to immediately turn to *attendance*, maybe attendance at a church, synagogue or mosque, as a measure. But there are a range of measures we might use. Three of the most common are:

- 'Belonging': that is, membership of religious organisations; or how people self-identify on censuses.
- 'Behaving': how people's practices, both formal and informal, are shaped by religion – for example, attendance at places of worship; participation in different rites of passage (such as baptism); watching or listening to religious programmes in the media.
- 'Believing': the extent to which religion informs various dimensions of belief – for example, belief in God or other supernatural beings, or in ideas about 'heaven' and 'hell', or in things like astrology, 'superstitions' or magic; views on moral questions, like divorce and abortion (the consensus on such matters might be reflected in the law).

The important thing is to understand that 'religion' or 'religious' can refer to different things, so there is no one measure of religious change. With that in mind, you will now read about some of the changes that were happening in different religions during the 1960s.

2 Crisis and innovation

While many scholars of religion agree that the Sixties was an era of significant upheaval as far as religion was concerned, there is some disagreement about whether it constituted a sudden ‘rupture’ in established religious norms, or whether longer-term patterns were at work.

2.1 The rapid decline of traditional Christianity

For historians such as Callum Brown, the 1950s saw ‘a period of booming religious culture’ in many parts of the West (Brown, 2012, p. 52). In this argument, the years after the Second World War saw a revival of traditional Christianity, partly as a kind of cultural defence against the ‘Godless’ communism of the Soviet bloc.



Figure 4 American evangelist Billy Graham speaking to a large audience in Trafalgar Square, London, 1954.

Revivalist preachers, such as the American Billy Graham, and the Irish-American Father Patrick Peyton, were able to fill arenas in many parts of the world in the 1950s. They visited Britain in the 1950s, bringing their blend of a traditional Protestantism and Catholicism, mass marketing and spectacle. There was widespread confidence that Christian civilisation could recover in the wake of the Second World War. In countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia, church attendance was rising until the late 1950s. In Britain, there was some decline in this period, although regular Catholic attendance remained high, with 78% of Catholics attending church at least once per month (Field, 2017, p. 56).

For Brown, the Sixties brought the beginnings of rapid change in Western Europe, North America and Australasia in three interconnected ways. First, a sudden decline in Christian adherence (though this was less evident in the United States); second, a ‘demographic revolution…in which family structure was revolutionised by plunging fertility and marriage rates’; third, a sudden shift in female identities, with ‘the search for autonomy in sexual expression, education and economic life’ (2012, p. 1). In the case of Britain, he argues ‘the period between 1956 and 1973 witnessed unprecedented rapidity in the fall of Christian religiosity amongst the British people’ (2001, p. 188). Critical to this decline was a fall in female piety (which had also undergirded the churchgoing habits of men and children), which came with a rupture of ‘traditional’ Christian ideas of femininity in relation to sex, marriage, family and work. Brown argues: ‘The discursive change was swift and dramatic. The fifties’ construction of the “respectable” woman of homely virtues, the last widespread vestige of nineteenth-century female piety, was for the bulk of young people abruptly dissolved’ (2001. p. 177-8).

2.2 Preconditions for the Sixties' Spiritual Revolution

While Brown and others emphasise a rather sudden paradigm shift in the Sixties, others such as Hugh McLeod assert the importance of 'long-term preconditions for the Sixties'.

Activity 3

Allow approximately 20 minutes

Read this extract, and jot down a few words summarising each of the four key points about religious change.

From: McLeod, Hugh (2005). 'The religious crisis of the 1960s', *Journal of Modern European History*, 3/2, 205-230, extract at 205-06.

In the religious history of the West these years may come to be seen as marking a rupture as profound as that brought about by the Reformation.

First, and most obviously, nearly every Western country saw a decline in church membership and attendance, and a drop in the number of clergy and other religious professionals. In many cases the drop was severe. For instance, while 825 secular priests had been ordained in France in 1956, by 1975 the figure was 181. The proportion of Dutch Catholics attending mass in a week fell by half in just ten years between 1965 and 1975. During this period large numbers of people lost the habit of regular religious worship, and the social significance of priests and nuns diminished because their numbers had diminished so considerably.

Second, the 'long Sixties' saw a weakening of the processes by which Christian identity and knowledge of Christianity had been passed on to the younger generation. In some countries there was a substantial fall in the proportion of infants baptised, children attending Sunday Schools or catechism classes, and adolescents confirmed. In England, for instance, the latter statistic fell by half between 1956 and 1975. Religious education in schools continued, but it seems likely that this was less effective as a means of Christian socialisation than religious teaching in the home and in institutions, such as Sunday schools, directly connected with the church.

Third, this period saw a great multiplication of the world-views accessible to those in their formative years. In the 1950s the main options had been Christianity, Socialism and Scientism – or some combination of Christianity and Socialism, or of Socialism and Scientism. Other possibilities existed of course for the intellectually enterprising, but those who sought out more esoteric alternatives were likely to be dismissed as eccentrics. By the 1970s the options had widened enormously to include not only many new forms of Christianity and Socialism, but also various non-Christian religions and many kinds of 'alternative spirituality'. Moreover, the period since the late 1960s had seen a flowering of feminism of many kinds. What had seemed eccentric in the Fifties now seemed to reflect a healthy degree of independent-mindedness. […]

Fourth, changes in the laws relating to such contentious issues as abortion and divorce, and changes in the treatment of religion by the media, reflected the assumption that what had formerly been professedly 'Christian' societies were now 'pluralist' societies, in which there was no consensus in some key areas of belief and ethics, and where the rights of a variety of groups, Christian and non-Christian, needed to be recognised.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The criticism of traditional religion – and Christianity specifically – had a tradition going back to at least the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the case of France. The changes in attitudes towards sexuality in the Sixties, though helped along by the contraceptive pill in the United States from 1960 and Europe from 1961, was, he argues, also decades in the making.

McLeod also suggests the importance of short-term preconditioning influences in the 1950s. There was rising affluence which, importantly, funded the emerging youth culture of the late 1950s. Also, in 'elite' circles there was a growing tendency to criticise traditional norms. It could be argued, therefore, that the ground was gradually being prepared for the Sixties over a longer period of time. However, despite the importance of these long and short-term preconditioning factors, McLeod nevertheless recognises the significance of the Sixties era itself.

2.3 Innovation in established religious traditions



Figure 5 Front cover of John A. T. Robinson and David L. Edwards, The Honest to God Debate, 1963, London: SCM Press.

While traditional Christianity experienced a substantial 'crisis' during the Sixties, there was also significant innovation in religion. Within Christianity itself, this was evident in the Second Vatican Council (1961-5), when the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church gathered in Rome to discuss ways in which it might be institutionally reformed and renewed. The Council, for example, opened up new possibilities for engagement with Protestants as fellow Christians, and also for a greater role for the **laity** in the life of the Church. Another example of innovation within Christianity was the development of changing currents in **liberal Protestantism**. From the mid-1950s, in particular, there was a growing demand amongst some Protestant intellectuals for a radical rethink of Christianity. One of the background influences was the Cold War, and the threat of nuclear

holocaust. Some argued for the need for religious solutions to human antagonism, and that the antidote for division and danger was a radical Christianity for a new age. A best-selling articulation of such radical Protestantism for a 'new era' was *Honest to God* (1963). The author, the Anglican Bishop of Southwark, John Robinson, proposed a break with theological and moral traditionalism – a 'new Reformation' of a more liberal Christianity. The reimagined Christianity which Robinson and others had in mind was a new 'secular' theology – an adaption of the church in response to social change which was not confined to ideas of divine revelation through Scripture and Church – and a new 'situational' morality, in which Christian views about ethics, for example sex, were flexible to the new context of rapidly changing cultural and social expectations and experiences.

2.4 Spiritual seekers

The Second Vatican Council and radical Protestantism were both 'elite' or 'top-down' efforts towards innovation. However, a further kind of innovation – which was to influence both Christian and non-Christian religious beliefs and practices – was bubbling away at a grassroots level in the 1960s, both inside and outside traditional Christianity. We can term this orientation towards innovation – which placed great emphasis on '**authentic**', subjective spirituality – as **seekership**.

The phenomenon of seekership goes back further than the 1960s: a further reminder that ostensibly 'revolutionary' change in this decade may have a longer back-story. The spiritual 'guru' figure – someone who had travelled to the East to bring spiritual and mystical teachings back to the West – was familiar even before the First World War. One prominent example was Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society in the United States in 1875. **Theosophy** mixed **Eastern religion**, **occultism** and **spiritualism**, and was massively popular, reaching a peak in the 1920s of around 45,000 members (Poller, 2018, p. 86). In German-speaking countries, Rudolf Steiner's **Anthroposophy** attracted a large following, and some of the ideas he promoted, like **biodynamic gardening**, homeopathic medicine and 'Steiner Schools', are still popular today. In 1935, journalist Rom Landau's bestselling *God is My Adventure*, a kind of tour guide of these emerging experiential religiosities, included pieces on various of these 'guru' figures. Amongst these also were figures associated with more experiential – yet essentially still traditional – forms of Christianity. An example was the American Frank Buchman, who founded the 'Oxford Group', an **evangelical** Christian organisation which spread worldwide, based on the practice of intimate small groups of Christians listening to 'God's spirit'. A number of kinds of 'seekership' communities had also emerged before the Second World War; the Oxford Group was one example, and alternative communities in places like Glastonbury and Findhorn also appeared. Yet, despite these longer trends, it was in the Sixties that seekership became so significant a phenomenon that some would see the period as the beginnings of a spiritual revolution. Wade Clark Roof argues that seekership was the defining feature of the religious behaviour of the '**baby boomers**', the generation born in the time of increased birth rate after the Second World War, who were in general better educated and wealthier than their parents or grandparents had been, and expected greater 'consumer' choice.

The spiritual 'seekers' sought individual spiritual experience, new forms of community, sometimes turning to an imagined religious 'past' in search of religious ideas and practices. Some of these seekers were traditional Christians seeking to renew their religion 'from within'. This involved a greater emphasis on the 'Spirit', the **mystical** and supernatural. Others rejected traditional religious institutions and embarked on an alternative spiritual quest. According to the sociologist Colin Campbell, the seeker could move from one allegiance to another, employ ideas and techniques from multiple traditions simultaneously, and their journey might or might not reach an end point. Some,

as you will see in examining Wicca, eventually committed to a single tradition, while others (particularly those in the New Age milieu) came to understand seeking as the objective in itself (Campbell, 1972 [2002], p. 15).



Figure 6 A Children of God congregation in Los Angeles in 1971.

3 Wicca and Paganism

We are probably all very familiar today with the image of witches – sometimes dubbed 'white witches' – from popular movies like *The Craft*, TV shows like *Sabrina* and the *Harry Potter* novels. It's hard to believe that the Witchcraft Act, which made it illegal to practice witchcraft, was only repealed in 1951, when it was replaced by the Fraudulent Mediums Act. Since then, Wicca and other modern forms of witchcraft have become popular worldwide, and the historian of Paganism, Ronald Hutton, has famously described Wicca as 'the only religion which England has ever given to the world' (1999, p. vii).



Figure 7 Witches dancing in circles around a fire performing a ritual, 1964.

In this section, you are going to follow Wicca from its emergence (or re-emergence), through its growth and formalisation through the 1960s, and later developments including the connection with feminism and the growth of an international Neopagan movement. Importantly, you'll see that despite deliberately challenging Christian tropes, Wicca embodies similar patterns of seekership, authenticity, renewal and expressive individualism as the Charismatic Christian groups discussed in the introduction.

3.1 Gardner's coven

In 1954, three years after the Witchcraft Act was repealed, Gerald Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, an account of his earlier initiation by Dorothy Clutterbuck into a **coven** of witches – part of a Goddess-worshipping religion which had survived in secret since before the Romans brought Christianity to the British Isles. They had decided that it was now time to come out of the shadows, and had chosen Gardner to be their mouthpiece. This was presented in a readable, first-person account as a piece of academic research, and included a foreword by a respected anthropologist, Margaret Murray. Murray was well known for the now-discredited theory presented in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) that before the arrival of the Romans, Europe's religion was focused on a fertility Goddess, which men and women worshipped together in magical rituals.

Witchcraft Today was a success, and Gardner soon began to receive letters from prospective new initiates, mostly, though not exclusively, female. His own Bricket Wood coven began to grow, and it wasn't long before new covens began to appear. Gardner also attracted a good deal of press interest, which he seems to have encouraged.

By the time of Gardner's death in 1964, Wicca was growing slowly but steadily, with new covens being established. Doreen Valiente, who had been High Priestess of Gardner's coven, had broken with him to found her own coven in 1957. She developed Gardner's rituals considerably, most notably adding poetic material including the popular *Charge of the Goddess*, which encapsulates many of the central beliefs of the Wiccan worldview – and of 1960s seekers more broadly.

Activity 4

Allow approximately 20 minutes

Read the poem, *The Charge of the Goddess,* by Doreen Valiente. How does it reflect the spiritual concerns of the baby boomers? Jot down a few thoughts as you read.

> Listen to the words of the Great Mother, who was of old also called Artemis; Astarte; Diana; Melusine; Aphrodite; Cerridwen; Dana; Arianrhod; Isis; Bride; and by many other names.
>
> Whenever ye have need of anything, once in a month, and better it be when the Moon be full, then ye shall assemble in some secret place and adore the spirit of me, who am Queen of all Witcheries.
>
> There shall ye assemble, ye who are fain to learn all sorcery, yet have not yet won its deepest secrets: to these will I teach things that are yet unknown.
>
> And ye shall be free from slavery; and as a sign that ye are really free, ye shall be naked in your rites; and ye shall dance, sing, feast, make music and love, all in my praise.
>
> For mine is the ecstasy of the spirit and mine also is joy on earth; for my Law is Love unto all Beings.
>
> Keep pure your highest ideal; strive ever toward it; let naught stop you or turn you aside.
>
> For mine is the secret door which opens upon the Land of Youth; and mine is the Cup of the Wine of Life, and the Cauldron of Cerridwen, which is the Holy Grail of Immortality.
>
> I am the Gracious Goddess, who gives the gift of joy unto the heart. Upon earth, I give the knowledge of the spirit eternal; and beyond death, I give peace, and freedom, and reunion with those who have gone before. Nor do I demand sacrifice, for behold I am the Mother of All Living, and my love is poured out upon the earth.
>
> Hear ye the words of the Star Goddess, she in the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven; whose body encircleth the Universe; I, who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white Moon among the stars, and the mystery of the waters, and the heart's desire, call unto thy soul. Arise and come unto me.
>
> For I am the Soul of Nature, who giveth life to the universe; from me all things proceed, and unto me must all things return; and before my face, beloved of gods and mortals, thine inmost divine self shall be unfolded in the rapture of infinite joy.
>
> Let my worship be within the heart that rejoiceth, for behold: all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals. And therefore let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honour and humility, mirth and reverence within you.

> And thou who thinkest to seek for me, know thy seeking and yearning shall avail thee not, unless thou know this mystery: that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee, thou wilt never find it without thee.
>
> For behold, I have been with thee from the beginning; and I am that which is attained at the end of desire.



Figure 8 Doreen Valiente, 1962.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

At first glance, this poem may seem more concerned with invoking the ancient world than with appealing to modern spiritual sentiments. It is written in a deliberately formal style, and makes frequent use of archaic and perhaps even Biblical language, including ‘thine’, ‘thou’, and ‘seekest’. The substance, however, is certainly largely in line with the expressive individualism and subjective seekership of the baby boomers.

First, there is a clear emphasis on gender equality, something which many women in the 1960s sought, though did not always achieve; the Sacred feminine is invoked throughout in the figure of the Goddess, also identified as the Great Mother, “Queen of all Witcheries” and the names of mother goddesses from a range of ancient mythologies and religions. Her connection to the moon, another well-established symbol of feminine mystery, is also repeatedly made. Through this theology, and the prominence of figures like Valiente, Wicca perhaps came closer to gender equality than most religions in the 1960s.

The Goddess is also ‘the beauty of the green earth’, and the ‘Soul of Nature’, and the sacrality of nature is something that is central to Paganism, and widespread in

the New Age milieu. Indeed, the modern environmental movement has some historical connections with the New Age movement.

Finally, the poem invokes a joyful freedom which is implicitly contrasted with the moral strictures of the church: the admonition to ‘dance, sing, feast, make music and love, all in my praise’. The individualistic nature of the baby boomer seeker can be seen in the line ‘thine inmost divine self shall be unfolded’; in other words, the purpose of the devotion is not simply to honour the Goddess, but to do so in order to honour and understand yourself. It even talks explicitly about seeking, and finding what you seek within you.

3.2 Wiccan life

As suggested in *The Charge of the Goddess,* group practice was then a major part of Wiccan life, particularly the (lunar) monthly **Sabbat** which would be the regular gathering of the coven (and sometimes other covens). Less formal weekly meetings are called **Esbats**, and Wiccans also hold ceremonies to mark the eight holidays of the wheel of the year – the two **equinoxes**, in autumn (Mabon) and spring (Easter, or Ostara), the two **solstices** in summer (Litha, or Midsummer) and winter (Yule), and the four ‘quarter days’ (Imbolc, Beltane, Lugnasadh, and Samhain). There are several places where this matches up with the Christian calendar (at least as we know it today), and it is frequently claimed that this Pagan calendar was appropriated by Christianity. This is certainly true of some of these dates, with Candlemas being adopted from Imbolc, for example, but the situation is much more complicated than this in other cases. In fact, this Pagan calendar was only formalised in the nineteenth century.

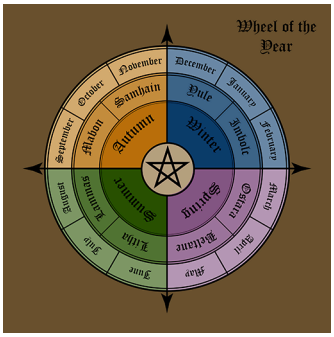


Figure 9 The Wheel of the Year.

3.3 The Wiccan altar

Solo practice has nevertheless always been a central part of Wicca. Many Wiccans keep an altar in their home, and for some who are not members of a coven, this is where the Wheel of the Year and lunar ceremonies would be marked, either ritually or through seasonal decoration. It is also where the special tools used in ceremonies are kept and ritually consecrated. But the altar is also where magical work is carried out. Not all Wiccans use magic, but it has always been a central aspect of the tradition, both in the form of herbalism and other folk healing techniques, and more elaborate forms derived from Renaissance ritual magic. Many witches differentiate their ‘white magic’ from forms which aim to benefit the practitioner at the expense of others, however.



Figure 10 High Priestess Mrs. Ray Bone consecrating water and salt at the beginning of a witchcraft ritual, 1964.

3.4 The growth of Wicca

Wicca began to spread more quickly in the 1960s. Alex Sanders, calling himself the 'King of the Witches', led a coven in Manchester in the early 1960s which attracted a lot of attention – and younger initiates – due to Sanders' knack for courting controversy and publicity. The first coven in the US was started by Raymond Buckland in 1963, and Wicca was firmly established in the US by 1970. Besides a number of different strains of Wicca, many other forms of Paganism began to appear, often drawing from local pre-Christian traditions, notably Heathenism (or Ásatrú) which uses Norse mythology and Druidism based on the Celts. Rather than ancient sources, The Church of All Worlds drew upon Robert Heinlein's 1961 science fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, for their strongly ecological version of Paganism. The Pagan Front (later renamed the Pagan Federation) was founded by Wiccans in 1971 to advocate for all these forms of Paganism under a single umbrella.

3.5 Feminist aspects of Wiccan theology

The Goddess focus of Wiccan theology was attractive to the radical feminist movement, particularly the idea that the early modern witch trials had been an act of '**gynecide**', and books like *Witches, Nurses and Midwives* (Ehrenreich and English, 1973) and the influential Pagan writer Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (1979) leaned into this idea. The work of Starhawk and others also presented an interpretation of Wicca that was more closely aligned with emerging New Age ideas, and the seekership of the baby boomers more broadly. These books helped lead to the boom of the 'teen witch' in the 1990s, and their fictionalised counterparts in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003, rebooted in 2018), *Charmed* (1998-2006, rebooted in 2018) and *The Craft* (1998, and a sequel in 2020).



Figure 11 A demonstrator holding up banner saying "We Are the Granddaughters of the Witches you could Not Burn" during the second annual Women's March in Manhattan, New York, 2018.

3.6 Wicca: a new religious practice

Gardner's account of Wicca as a survival of pre-Roman paganism was convincingly disproven by Ronald Hutton's *Triumph of the Moon* in 1999. The upshot for contemporary Pagans was that Wicca had to be understood not as a revival of an old religion, but as a new religion, created from modern ideas about old religion to fit the changing needs of modern religious seekers. Despite the challenges to its 'survival' origin story, *Triumph of the Moon* has led to Wicca being taken more seriously by scholars and arguably the legal system since its publication.

For practitioners too, Wicca had reached a stable position as it entered the twenty-first century. The broader (Neo)Pagan movement it had instigated has a strong presence in the US and Northern Europe; Wicca gained legal protection as a religion in the US in 1986, and continues to campaign for legal recognition in the UK. Estimates put the number of Wiccans in the US to be upwards of 300,000, and in the 2011 UK census, 56,620 people identified as Pagan in England and Wales, making Paganism the seventh-largest religion in UK today (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Thus in terms of both numbers and social acceptance, the case can certainly be made that Wicca has been the most successful new religion of the Sixties.

Conclusion

This course began by raising the question of how to understand religious change in the Sixties. You have looked at ways in which the period could be seen as one of religious crisis, but have also explored the ways in which religious innovations were an important feature of the period. One of the underlying aspects of Wicca (which is a commonality amongst other religious practice in the sixties) involved a sense of 'seekership' for authenticity and, in different ways, subjective experience and **expressive individualism**. The Sixties were a period of religious decline *and* renewal – not 'either/or', but 'both/and'. The idea of a 'spiritual revolution' begins to appear persuasive, not only when looking at the long Sixties, but also its legacies. More subjective forms of spirituality, both within and outside Christianity, are increasingly the new normal. As Roof notes, seekers have increasingly come to control mainstream religious institutions, and the language of 'journeys', 'spirituality' and 'inner self' is equally likely to be found in Christian congregations, yoga classes, and the speeches of politicians (1999). The innovations of the Sixties – the 'spiritual revolution', if we wish to call it that – have profoundly influenced religion today.

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course A113 *Revolutions*. It is one of four OpenLearn courses exploring the notion of the Sixties as a 'revolutionary' period. Learn more about these OpenLearn courses here.

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Glossary

Anthroposophy

An offshoot of Theosophy founded by Rudolf Steiner, which was particularly popular in German-speaking countries. It has a somewhat more Christian theology, and more of an interest in practical applications of the ideas.

Authenticity

The emphasis on turning inward to find truth, which will simultaneously enable a deeper interaction with social surroundings.

Authentic

The emphasis on turning inward to find truth, which will simultaneously enable a deeper interaction with social surroundings.

Baby boomers

The generation born in the so-called ‘baby boom’ after the end of the Second World War, usually taken as being between 1946 and 1964.

Baptism in the Spirit

An intense spiritual encounter between an individual and the Spirit of God.

Biodynamic gardening

A form of organic gardening that incorporates spiritual and esoteric ideas. Based in the work of Anthroposophy founder, Rudolf Steiner.

Charismatic

A Christian who places emphasis on the power and presence of God’s Spirit and on supernatural giftings, such as prophecy.

Coven

A group of witches. In Wicca, a coven is led by a High Priest and Priestess, and traditionally has thirteen members.

Dianic Wicca

Feminist versions of Wicca in which only the Goddess is honoured.

Eastern religion

Religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Daoism which historically shaped the culture of Asia but were little known or understood in the West until the nineteenth century.

Equinoxes

One of the two days per year when the night and day are of equal length. They occur in spring and autumn.

Esbat

Weekly meetings of a Wiccan coven. These are less formal than Sabbats.

Evangelical

A variety of Christianity which emphasises personal conversion and the authority of the Bible.

Expressive individualism

A cultural phenomenon whereby emphasis is placed on the authentic inner self and the expression of personality and feeling.

Gynecide

The systematic killing of women.

Laity

The class of Christian not ordained for specific ministry in the Church.

Liberal Protestantism

The variety of Christianity which integrates religion with ‘modern’ critical and scientific approaches.

Mystical

Relating to occult or religious knowledge accessible only to initiates.

New Testament

The second part of the Christian canon of scripture.

Occultism

Meaning ‘hidden’, this refers to practices aimed at communicating with or controlling supernatural agencies, and usually indicates pre-scientific ideas like alchemy and astrology.

Reformation

The sixteenth century period associated with the origins and development of Protestantism in Europe.

Sabbat

The principal regular meeting of a Wiccan coven. They take place each lunar month, that is, thirteen times per year.

Secularisation

The process by which religion (or religious institutions) decline in importance to the state and/or the individual.

Seekership

A form of religious practice in which religious identity is seen as a journey, and the emphasis is on elements seen as being of practical benefit to the individual, such as spiritual experience, healing and well-being. Derived from the work of the sociologist Colin Campbell.

Solstices

One of the two days per year when the day is longest and the night is shortest, or vice versa. They occur in the summer and the winter.

Spiritualism

A tradition of communicating with the spirits of the dead through various forms of communication. It began in the US in the 1840s, but séances became popular in the UK during the Victorian period. Today the Spiritualist Church is considered a Christian body.

Subjective

An individual’s personal understanding and experience of their surroundings.

Theosophy

The ideas of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and the other leaders of the Theosophical Society, which mixed ideas from Hinduism and Buddhism with occultism and spiritualism. The Theosophical Society was formed in 1875 and still exists today, although its peak was in the 1920s.