**Definition:** Wicca from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

The religious cult of modern witchcraft. It was founded in Britain in the mid-20th century and claims to originate from pre-Christian pagan religions. The word is Old English for ‘witch’, meaning originally a man (not a woman) who practises witchcraft.

**Summary Article:** Wicca

From *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*

A modern nature-based religion with strong links to mainly European mythologies.

Although Wicca lays claim to some continuity of beliefs and practices with pagans of the past (see paganism), it is actually a new religion, a major part of the neopagan and counter-cultural movement of the late 20th century (see neopaganism). The word ‘wicca’ is usually traced back to a Saxon root meaning ‘to bend’, though some link it to a word meaning ‘wit’ (as in knowledge or understanding); interestingly, the Saxon word would have been pronounced ‘witcha’ rather than ‘wikka’.

Wicca was founded by former colonial customs official Gerald Gardner, who published his influential books *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959) in the wake of the abolition of British legislation against witchcraft in 1951. Gardner claimed that he discovered a group of hereditary witches in the New Forest in 1939, and was initiated into their coven. Debate continues as to whether this actually happened or not, mainly because there is no evidence of any sort of continuing witch tradition, hereditary or not. That idea had been put forward in *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) by anthropologist Dr Margaret Murray; although her books were taken as a scholarly underpinning of history for the fledgling movement in the 1960s, they are now considered to be of very dubious scholarship.

Gardner was interested in the occult, and he was also a naturist, a sadomasochist and apparently a voyeur. For his new religion he borrowed large elements of ritual from Aleister Crowley’s *Ordo Templi Orientis* (which itself had borrowed from, among others, the hermetic order of the golden dawn and freemasonry); he mixed these in with nudity, ritualized sexual intercourse and flagellation. Perhaps fortunately for the future of the movement, an early initiate, Doreen Valiente (1922–99), rewrote much of the ritual, dropping much of Crowley’s input and downplaying the sexual elements. The workings of the coven became the *Book of Shadows*, which each initiated witch has to copy by hand.

By the time of his death in 1964 Gardner’s initiates had set up a number of covens around Britain, and modern witchcraft was taken to the USA by Raymond and Rosemary Buckland. Gardnerian groups continued, but there was a major schism in the movement with the development of Alexandrian witchcraft, led by Alex and Maxine Sanders. This was more flamboyant; Alex Sanders was a great self-publicist, and brought modern witchcraft to the attention of the popular press, much to the disapproval of traditional Gardnerians.

Although there are still both Gardnerian and Alexandrian covens today, many Wiccans have developed...
the rituals to suit their own needs and preferences. Some Wiccans still perform some of their rituals naked (skyclad), but it is more usual for them to wear robes. The Great Rite, or ritual sexual intercourse between the High Priest and High Priestess of a coven, today is almost always replaced by the symbolic act of the plunging of a knife (athame), representing the male principle, into a chalice, representing the female.

Today the term 'Wicca' is generally seen as applying to coven-based witchcraft. Both male and female Wiccans refer to themselves as witches. Many witches prefer to work as ‘solitaries’, sometimes called ‘hedge-witches’. Many also prefer the term ‘the Craft’, and some avoid the word ‘witch’ because of its historical negative connotations.

Wicca, or modern witchcraft, is a nature-based religion. Its ritual life centres on the eight-fold wheel of the year: the solstices (summer solstice; winter solstice), the equinoxes (autumnal equinox; vernal equinox) and the four festivals of beltane (spring), lughnasadh (summer), samhain (autumn) and imbolc (winter). Wiccans honour the divine in all things, including both nature and themselves. The divine is both immanent and transcendent. The divine can be perceived in many ways: as the Goddess and the God; as the triple Goddess (Maid, Mother and Crone); as any number of deities from any number of mythologies. Modern witchcraft is eclectic and syncretic; if a witch wishes to conceptualize the Goddess as Ishtar or Inanna rather than Diana or Brighde, he or she is free to do so. One of the most powerful rituals in the religion is called drawing down the moon in which the spirit of the Goddess (by whatever name) is invoked into the body of the High Priestess of a coven.

Magic is a fundamental part of witchcraft: not black magic (see magic, black), but the magic of healing and making whole. Because of Wicca’s historical roots in Crowley’s Ordo Templi Orientis, correspondences of spirits, the planets, colours, scents, precious stones, etc are used in working magic; and so, in a genuine link to the ‘wise women’ of the past, are herbs and natural oils. ‘Witches’ potions’ are likely to include lavender for its calming effects, witch-hazel for the skin, or fennel for stomach problems.

There is no connection between Wicca (or any other neopagan movement) and satanism or Devil worship. Pagan religions are nature-based, and although they may have numerous gods and goddesses, satan is not one of them. See also church and school of wicca; church of all worlds.

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