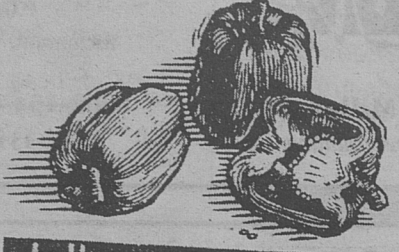


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We're Here, We're Pagan, Get Used to It!

BY ANDREW J. CAMPBELL

As some of you are painting eggs for Easter, others are getting the eggs ready for something else. No, they're not cooking up an omelet or plotting to egg your house. They're preparing for the holiday of Ostara, the beginning of Spring.

Ostara, which falls this year on March 20, is the Vernal Equinox, the midpoint between the Winter and Summer Solstices. The day and night are of equal length at this point, and according to many, all other natural forces are in balance.

So who are these folks who celebrate Ostara anyway? They practice an ancient Earth-oriented religion, worshipping a Goddess, or Earth Mother. The majority would identify themselves as Pagans. However, a large sum of them practice the religion, science and art of Witchcraft. These Pagans are those we call Witches.

Forget everything you thought you knew about Witches. They don't taunt children or fly on broomsticks (for when was the last time you saw someone ride through the sky on a broom anyway?) There are real, living Witches in all walks of life. They are the "Wise Ones" — the healers, the ecologists. In fact, the very origin of the word provides proof to this. Etymologists have discovered that the modern word "Witch" is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon term "wit", meaning "to know". The entire title, "Witchcraft" includes roots in the Anglo-Saxon "craeft": a skill, art, profession or strength. Today, Witchcraft is known as the "Craft of the Wise".

However, Witchcraft is more than just an art — it is a religion — known to its modern-day followers as the "Old Religion". Its heritage is found in pre-Christian Western Europe, as long as 25,000 years ago. Because of its pre-Christian roots, it is foolish that many believe Witchcraft involves devil worship. Witches have never worshipped Satan. Rather, they find religious faith in the duotheism of a Goddess and a God.

When asked about Witchcraft, many GLBT people utter "huh?" Even with such a liberal community, some get inflamed by the idea that Witches exist. These attitudes are spurred by the fear engendered by early Christianity. As an attempt to exterminate Pagan beliefs and practices, the Church conjured up the misconceptions that prevail American culture today.

Today, if a famous actor was caught in bed with someone, the 6:00 news would report sexual conduct between the actor and the other person, even if nothing sexual occurred. This

is the kind of situation Witches were put in. Their practices were perverted into a false image. As always, behind the hogwash, there is reality.

Broomsticks are a symbol of fertility in Witchcraft. A common fertility ritual involved participants holding broomsticks between their legs, dancing in a circle while leaping high to show the crops how tall to grow. This ritual, a form of sympathetic magic, shape-changed into the image of Witches flying on broomsticks.

Large cities were the first to be Christianized in early times. Therefore, most of the Pagans, including Witches, lived in the country. Everything, including religions, took a long time to move from the cities to the rural areas. So when the tall conical hat was the latest fashion in the cities (it actually was), it took time to reach the country people. By the time Pagans were wearing them, it was out of fashion in urban society. Christians pointed at Pagans, saying they were "out of fashion". Still today, the Witch is pictured wearing this outrageous hat.

During the 15th through 17th centuries, the period known as the Burning Times, Witches were hunted and tortured for their practices, and over 300,000 innocent people were recorded killed from this religious war. Some scholars estimate the true number to be near 9 million. This forced many Pagans into hiding — what many like to call the "broom closet". In order to practice their rituals, Witches hid in a dark forest in the late hours of the night. They have always worn ritual robes, similar to practitioners of other religions, and in that time they were black to camouflage themselves in the night sky. This is why Witches are always pictured in black.

The image of a Witch with a broomstick, a conical hat and a black robe is only the common stereotype. Still other misconceptions prevail contemporary culture. The God of Nature, who is pictured with horns similar to the animals, is often mistaken for the devil by people outside of the religion.

Today, Witches have made many advancements. In 1986, a Witch from Virginia fought a legal battle in the Federal Appeals Court that has made Witchcraft recognized as a legitimate religion by the U.S. government. Many groups of Witches are now recognized by the I.R.S. as a legal church. All I can say is, "we've come a long way, baby."

In their own struggle for human rights, Witches have always supported gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. The marriage of Witches, known as a Handfasting, has historically been open to same-

voices from the mountains

sex joining. GLBT people play an important role in the religion of Witchcraft. We teach that "all are equal in the eyes of the Goddess."

So this year, when you're painting Easter eggs, stop to think for a minute. Did you realize that Witches have done the same thing for ages? The egg is a symbol of new life. Each year on Ostara, Pagans paint eggs and bury them, representing new life coming from the Earth. If you take nothing else from this article, take the words of Chris Moes: "Hey, we're not ALL Christian!"

Andrew J. Campbell is a founding member of Vermont Open Circle of Wicca & Wicce, a public neo-Pagan church and non-profit organization based in Addison County.

For more information about Witchcraft, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope for a free copy of the pamphlet "Frequently Asked Questions About Witches & Witchcraft" to: Vermont Open Circle of Wicca & Wicce, P.O. Box 68, Vergennes, VT 05491-0068

letters continued

macho stuff... his equivalent of Marilyn Monroe, and The Russian Missile Crisis. The Bay of Pigs is not far behind.

Whoever JFK was, he was not an abusive, manipulative gunslinger. And Mr. Clinton, despite the 20,000 to 200,000 post-Gulf War dead in Iraq (depending on with whom you're talking), fails to understand the deep bitterness and loss of the Iraqi people. His subsequent demands for endless sanctions and his taking over the "show" for the U.N. have set new lows for our ship" in this event. Far too many people have already died as a result.

We, the good residents of the United States, must insist that this country walk the higher moral ground. Above all, we must set a good example. Firmness of resolve is fine, but compassion and generosity toward the fallen are virtues we cannot afford to discard.

Michael Billingsley