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What You Wanted to Know about Witches *

* (but were afraid to ask)

Q. Do you worship the Devil (Satan)?

A. No, for three reasons.

First, we don't venerate evil in any form: our chosen religion is a celebration and affirmation of life and living things, as opposed to their destruction or harm. As we believe that good or evil done will return upon the doer, this does not encourage doing evil.

Second, Satan is a figure in Judeo-Christian beliefs -- originally not even an opponent of Yahweh, but more like his prosecuting attorney (as in the Book of Job). Those who do worship Satan actually accept the later Christian theology, with Satan as Yahweh's opponent, but choose to support Satan's side of the battle. We are not Christians or Satanists, and do not accept their theology or worldview, so we would no more worship Satan than, for instance, Christians would worship the Aztec God Quetzalcoatl; he simply has no place in our beliefs. (We prefer the figure of Pan, who does have horns but is a much nicer fellow.)

Third, we think history shows that, if you invest belief and emotion in any idea or thought-form, you give it strength and power in your own life -- it becomes more real TO YOU. We have no wish to invite hostile entities into our lives and give them such power over us, which is why we don't venerate any form we consider evil. That's also why we're shocked to see how much energy some Christians invest in Satan.

Q. Then why do I hear those things about you?

A. "Devil-worship", baby-killing, cannibalism and all that? These are typical accusations made by one religion against another. The Syrians accused the Jews of ritual murders long before Christ; then the Romans accused the Christians (who at least claimed to be eating someone's body and blood every week); then the Christians accused the Jews and Muslims and every other religion; today different Christian denominations even accuse each other. Making wild accusations not only sells newspapers, and books, and movies; it helps drum up support for the Religion Of Your Choice. This is a cynical use of hate, fear, and ignorance, but as long as it works,

it will be used. (And there will always be psychotics willing to live up to the image -- then claim "the Devil made me do it.")

Q. If not Christian theology, what do you believe in?

A. Life. We see the entire Universe, all matter and energy, as bursting with life, loving its own living parts -- including us -- and gathered in one eternal dance. We try to catch the tune and dance to the beat.

Sometimes we call the leading dancers Light and Dark, or Sun and Moon, or the Lord and the Lady, Cernunnos and Ceridwen, Pan and Diana, or by other names. These represent the duality in all things -- male and female, yang and yin -- neither side of which can be denied or ignored, even within ourselves.

(We hope this helps us avoid the error that some worshippers of a single deity have made, such as thinking that "since God is all good and God is male, therefore anything female or feminine is evil.")

Our feeling about the Gods is that they are teachers, family members, and fellow dancers: not some untouchable abstraction infinitely distant, but an intimate part of our own lives. Our feeling about other religions is that they, too, are part of the universal dance: not enemies, but fellow strugglers seeking as we do, to live and learn to keep time with the music.

Q. What is this ceremony you're doing?

A. It depends on the moment. You may be watching a circle dance, or a Maypole dance, or a feast of "cakes and ale", or just a group hug. (We like to have fun.) Possibly, since you were handed this, you're watching us "cast a circle". That's one of our basic religious ceremonies.

When we "cast a circle", we mark off a space as dedicated and protected for our use, rather like Christians consecrating a church. (The difference is, we don't need a building, and we let the space go back to normal after we've used it.) Within this circle, we ask for the protection of guardians -- call them the four elements of Air, Earth, Fire, and Water, or the four archangels Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Uriel -- again, the names may vary. Then we invite the Lord and the Lady to be with us for a time. We have a nice visit, a little snack of cookies and wine (or fruit juice), and then everyone goes home. It's very friendly.

Along the way, sometimes we ask for help with our problems, such as healing an injury or illness; if you believe in the power of prayer, it's the same sort of thing -- but we try to put our own energies into the task, rather than asking someone else to do all the work.

Q. How will what you are doing affect me?

A. If you're not participating, then probably no more than any other religious service you watch from outside. If you're shocked by other religions, you might choose to be shocked by ours. (Ours is just out where you can see it, instead of hidden by walls.) Or you might choose to accept our part of the universal dance as valid if different from your own. You might even choose to participate -- and people of good will are generally welcome among us.

Even if you do participate, there's no reason to take any effect from our services that you don't choose to accept. Since -- for our own sakes -- we ask for nice things to happen, the biggest possible results involve no danger. If we ask for more harmony in the world, and your life becomes more harmonious, then you benefit from the same general effect as if a church's prayer for world peace had worked. (After that, if you don't like harmony, you could always work to make your own life more discordant; whatever suits you.)

Q. Do all Witches practice the same way you do?

A. There are about as many "denominations" of Witches as there are of Christians, and since no-one is forced to keep One True Orthodox Way, even a single group may do things differently from time to time. The two mottoes that apply here are "If it works, use it" -- and "AN IT HARM NONE, do as you will."

Q. How can I find out more about you?

A. Ask one of us. We're easy to talk with. Or read some books. Good books include Vivianne Crowley's WICCA: the Old Religion in the New Age, Margot Adler's Drawing Down the Moon, Starhawk's The Spiral Dance, and Raymond Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft.

There's also a lot of shocking nonsense and pulp fiction out there -- notably in movies, paperback thrillers, and the sort of newspapers sold at supermarket cash registers; we can only ask you to take anything you find there with a skeptical pinch of salt.