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BREWING UP TROUBLE: WICCA AND THE U.S. MILITARY

by

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Wicca received official recognition as a religion in 1996 from the Department of Defense. Today, there are at least five officially recognized military Wiccan congregations.¹ The Pentagon should withdraw recognition of Wicca for readiness reasons.

Objections to the military's recognition of Wiccans fall in two categories: One, any fringe religion will now have to be granted special benefits by DOD; two, Wicca will undermine readiness factors such as military values, adherence to norms, willingness to kill, and recruitment and retention among the majority who hold a generally theistic worldview and regard witchcraft as an abomination.

The presence of minority religious views is not at issue in this controversy. Christians have served in the military in good faith with Muslims and Jews. These religions share a monotheistic and creationist consensus about the "law of nature and nature's God," as understood by the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Because Wicca represents a direct challenge to this widely shared theism, it would work against military discipline, order, and readiness.

Wicca represents a direct affront to Christian and Jewish teaching. The Bible condemns all forms of witchcraft and sorcery throughout the Old and New Testaments (Leviticus 19:26, 31 and 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:10-12; 2 Kings 17:10-17; 21:1-6; and 23:4-7, 24-25; 2 Chronicles 33:6; Acts 13:6-12 and 16:16-18; Galatians 5:19-21; and Revelation 9:20-21).

U.S. Representative Bob Barr, a Georgia Republican, has asked the services to stop sanctioning the practice of witchcraft on military bases. Barr argues that allowing such celebrations sets "a dangerous precedent" that could lead to "all sorts of bizarre practices being supported by the military under the rubric of religion."² Already, DOD has granted special benefits to other unconventional religious groups. Military members of the Native American church, for example, can legally use the illegal hallucinogenic drug peyote in their on-base religious ceremonies.³

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MILITARY SUPPORT OF RELIGION AND WICCA

The U.S. military has always supported religion. On July 29, 1775, George Washington “established the [chaplain] corps behind the idea that chaplains brought with them morality and ethics, and that was important in dealing with the forces.”⁴ Today, the chaplain corps seeks to meet the needs of a very diverse uniformed population.

In 1998, the Defense Manpower Data Center found that most servicemembers identify with the Christian faith: 330,703 Roman Catholic; 252,855 Baptist (not including Southern Baptist); 43,056 Lutheran; 40,053 Methodist; 25,833 Southern Baptist Convention; 62,063 Protestant but with no denominational preference; and 96,259 labeling themselves Christians with no denominational preference. Twenty percent (283,836) have “no religious preference.” Other religious preferences include Judaism (3,913), Muslim (4,080) and Buddhism (2,228). No Wiccans were identified.⁵

Military regulations provide a process for religious groups without chaplains to gain access to base facilities for the purpose of conducting services. The qualification process requires that the group must be a recognized religion, military members must request the service and there must be evidence that assigned chaplains cannot meet the “specific theological/denominational requirements of [the] group.”⁶

The U.S. government has recognized Wicca and has given it tax-exempt status as a religious organization. In fact, according to one website, “Wiccan priests and priestesses have been given access to penitentiaries.”⁷

In August 1997, Wicca “high priest” David Oringderff, with the Sacred Well Congregation of San Antonio, helped set up the military’s first Wicca Open Circle at Fort Hood near Austin, Texas. The Wicca Open Circle at Fort Hood has perhaps 300 members, about 100 of whom attend regularly.⁸ Oringderff has helped set up congregations at four other bases as well.⁹

The Army defends its decision to support Wicca. *U.S. News and World Report* explains,

For today’s heterogeneous U.S. Army, the practice is basically business as usual. ‘As far as we are concerned, they are a religious organization providing for the spiritual needs of our soldiers,’ says Lt. Col. Benjamin Santos, Fort Hood spokesman, explaining the Army’s decision to sanction the practice on bases.¹⁰

Navy Captain Russell Gunter, executive director of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board at the Pentagon, also supports Wiccans at Fort Hood. The military is obligated, said Gunter, to respect the religious needs of its members without passing judgment.¹¹

BACKGROUND OF WICCA

Witchcraft, also known as Wicca, the craft, or the craft of the wise, is a religion with roots in the ancient pagan religions of northern Europe. Modern witchcraft is a reconstruction of the older

versions, based on writings by anthropologist Margaret Murray (1863-1963) – *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of the Witches* (1933) – and by British civil servant and world traveler Gerald Gardner (1884-1964) – *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959).¹²

Llewellyn's 1999 Magickal Almanac explains,

Wicca, as you practice the religion today, is a new religion, barely fifty years old. The techniques you use at present are not entirely what your elders practiced even thirty years ago. Of course, threads of 'what was' weave through the tapestry of 'what is now.' ... [I]n no way can we replicate to perfection the precise circumstances of environment, society, culture, religion and magick a hundred years ago, or a thousand. Why would we want to? The idea is to go forward with the knowledge of the past, tempered by the tools of our own age.¹³

"Contemporary witchcraft is so diverse and eclectic ... that it is extremely difficult to accurately identify and define. In fact, it is almost impossible to state that all witches believe 'this or that,'" writes Craig Hawkins in the *Christian Research Journal*.¹⁴

WICCAN BELIEFS

RADICAL FEMINISM Danya Rutenburg wrote in the April 1998 *Sojourner* (a feminist magazine),

[M]any feminists have certainly been attracted to paganism – the theological framework behind energy-channeling called magic or witchcraft. Women who practice paganism often describe it as a potent means of aligning their spiritual practice with their political beliefs.

Though the modern practice has deep roots in a number of ancient traditions, the neo-pagan movement was initiated in England in the 1950. It took hold in America in two separate, parallel movements – both as part of the non-Western spirituality explosion of the late 1960s, and with the concurrent development of goddess consciousness, in radical separatist feminism.¹⁵

Russ Wise, with the Dallas-based Probe Ministries, adds,

In the world of witchcraft the goddess is the giver of life. Witchcraft holds a pantheistic view of God. God is nature. Therefore, God is in all things and all things are a part of God. However, this God is in actuality a goddess and predates the male God. The goddess is the giver of all life and is found in all of

creation. This reshaping is nothing less than viewing man and his understanding of reality from a female-centered perspective which focuses on the Divine as being female. ... The rise of the goddess is a direct assault on the patriarchal foundation of Christianity. This new feminist spirituality affirms bisexuality, lesbianism, homosexuality, and androgyny (through the expression of transvestitism).¹⁶

“The Goddess religion is a conscious attempt to reshape culture,” says Starhawk, a witch who works with a Catholic priest at the Institute of Creation Spirituality.¹⁷

PACIFIST TENDENCIES. A June 1999 edition of the *Washington Post* identifies Wiccans as pacifists. Despite the “many varieties of Wicca,” Wiccans in general accept a basic rule: “An ye harm none, do what ye will.”¹⁸

The Armed Forces Chaplains Board explains that many Wiccans “regard all living things as sacred” and consequently hold that the destruction of human and animal life is wrong. Others believe that “as Nature’s way includes self-defense, they should participate in wars that they conscientiously consider to be just.”¹⁹

Nonviolence, however, is the first principle of Wicca, according to a Wicca website:

The harm which is to be regarded as unethical is gratuitous harm; *war, in general, is gratuitous harm* [emphasis added], although it is ethical to defend oneself and one’s liberty when threatened by real and present danger, such as defense against invasion.²⁰

An article titled “Pagans in the Military” by John Machate, published by the Military Pagan Network, elaborates,

In an article by Isaac Bonewits, Archdruid of ADF (Ar Draiocht Fein), he stated:

‘A “soldier”, [sic] on the other hand, I perceive as a hired killer, whose primary task is not the defense of his/her community, although that claim is usually made, but rather the defense of that community’s political, social, religious, and economic rulers.’

This statement reflects the attitude of a lot of civilian organizations. One organization doesn’t even want to allow military members to belong to their organization. We as members of the armed forces have to work, not only to convince the military

that we are not 'baby killers', [sic] but the civilian pagans too. Again I quote Isaac Bonewits 'He [sic] or she will kill any man, woman, or child that he/she is ordered to kill, simply because he/she was told to do so. ...'²¹

(Note: A witch holds pagan beliefs, but not all pagans are witches.²²)

ETHICAL RELATIVISM The Covenant of the Goddess, one of the largest and oldest Wiccan religious organizations in North America, states that evil is subjective: "[W]hat is good for one may be evil for another and vice versa."²³

Other examples of this relativistic view abound. Additional Wiccan websites, for instance, make the following claims:

- "Wiccans rely on their own judgement [sic] to create their own morals, and ideals. ... We interact with our gods on a regular basis, and we take their power into ourselves during our rituals. We know and feel our Gods, so we don't believe, we know."²⁴
- "Witches consider no act immoral unless it is harmful."²⁵
- "Witches have no specific taboos against speaking any particular words, consensual sexual acts among individuals capable of rational consent, or breaking laws they know to be unjust."²⁶

Excerpt from a pagan pledge: "May I always be mindful that I create my own reality and that I have the power within me to create positivity in my life."²⁷

WICCAN PRACTICES AND MORE

- Magic is part of the witches' religion: "astrology, astral projection (out-of-body experiences), incantations, mediumship (channeling), necromancy, raising psychic power, (for many) sex magic, spell casting, and trance states."²⁸ Magic, they claim, allows them to "change our lives by spiritual ... means. ... We back up our actions with magical intent. It is a potent combination."²⁹
- According to one witch, witches worship

the Mother Goddess and also the Horned God. ... Worship is often done in pairs, masculine and feminine, and the power, which is produced by magical ritual, is directed by the High Priestess for its desired purpose. ... Covens vary in size from approximately 8 to 14 members. The High Priestess heads the coven. The High Priestess who trained her is recognized as a Queen to whom she can turn for counsel and advice.³⁰

- Casting spells is “part of being a Witch,” according to the Covenant of the Goddess (COG). However, COG advises that one cast spells on others “only in very limited circumstances” when “that person’s ... consent” has not been obtained – acknowledging the power which spells contain.³¹
- Sex magic, which is practiced by some witches, is the “use of sex (e.g., intercourse – actual or symbolic) within a ritual or spell-casting session to facilitate or augment the efficacy of a given magical rite. That is, sexual activities are used to accomplish the desired goal of the occultist.”³²
- The COG website indicates that witches practice necromancy, communication with the dead. Some witches “believe that the dead join the Blessed Ancestors, who watch over, protect and *advise* [emphasis added] their descendants.”³³
- Wiccan “tools” include swords, cauldrons, wands, boleens (knives used for carving and cutting magical symbols), staffs, and thuribles (incense burners).³⁴
- The basic Wiccan dedication ritual states:

I will protect and guard the Old Ways from those who would desire to destroy them. I will defend the God and Goddess. I will work in harmony with the energies of the Earth, and the Kingdoms of Plant, Animal, Spirit, and Man, striving always for unity and balance. I will work in harmony with the elements, to understand them. I pledge myself as protector of this Earth and Keeper of the Sacred Mother. I will honor and respect my brothers and sisters in the Craft even when our paths do not join. I will respect and keep the Old Ways and the Wiccan Rede. So mote it be.³⁵

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY READINESS

- Cohesive units are made of soldiers who subscribe to similar values. For the military, there are clear rights and wrongs, not maybes. Wiccans, on the other hand, are noted for their ethical relativism.
- Wiccans subscribe to a radical feminist worldview that supports sexually deviant behavior such as bisexuality and homosexuality, both of which are illegal in the military.
- A “Wiccan warrior” is an oxymoron. Wiccans tend to be pacifists, which may be all right for medics but not for infantrymen.
- The military has already allowed peyote smoking to accommodate Native Americans, and there are a growing number of cases of Muslim soldiers appealing decisions about headgear, dietary requirements and special holidays. Exceptions for every group will drain limited resources and distract from the military’s primary mission of preparing to fight. The military should embrace corporate rather than individual interests.

- Today's military is overwhelmingly Christian. The Bible labels witchcraft as an abomination. Accommodating witches who engage in behaviors that are antithetical to the "law of nature and nature's God" will cause unit friction, undermine morale, and impair recruitment and retention.

Unfortunately, the modern military has embraced tolerance for virtually every bizarre practice. It's past time for Congress to exercise its constitutional obligation to stop the Pentagon's willingness to sacrifice national defense in order to accommodate political correctness. The armed forces should focus on readiness.

Colonel Maginnis directs Family Research Council's Military Readiness Project.

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ENDNOTES

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² "No Witching Hour for Barr," News Briefs, *Army Times*, June 7, 1999.

³ "Military OKs Using Peyote, Indians Say," Associated Press, *Dallas Morning News*, June 21, 1999. (In the April 28, 1997, edition of *Navy Times*, Karen Jowers reports, "In 1994, Congress passed a law allowing authorized American Indians to use the drug [peyote] in religious ceremonies. Since last summer, defense officials have been writing regulations that would set out guidelines for the military.")

⁴ Marcia Jackson, "Chaplain Corps celebrates 221st birthday," *ArmyLINK News*, July 18, 1996, <http://www.dtic.mil/armylink/news/Jul1996/a19960718chap.html>.

⁵ Jack Weible, "A Smorgasbord of Religions," *Army Times*, July 13, 1998.

⁶ "Distinctive Faith Group Leaders, Certification Process," U.S. Army Training Command, Fort Monroe, Virginia, <http://www-tradoc.monroe.army.mil/chaplain/dsl.htm>, accessed June 22, 1999.

⁷ "Witchcraft and Wicca," <http://www.religioustolerance.org/witchcra.htm>, accessed June 22, 1999.

⁸ Perkes, *op cit*.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Joe Holley, "A genuine witch hunt," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 14, 1999, p. 27.

¹¹ Perkes, *op cit*.

¹² Craig S. Hawkins, "The Modern World of Witchcraft," *Christian Research Journal*, Winter/Spring 1990, p. 8.

¹³ Silver RavenWolf, cited in *Llewellyn's 1999 Magical Almanac*, Llewellyn Publications, 1998, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/witchcra.htm>, accessed June 22, 1999.

¹⁴ Hawkins, *op. cit*.

¹⁵ Danya Ruttenburg, "Witchy Woman-Paganism, Politics, and Spiritual Healing," *Sojourner*, April 1998, p. 25.

¹⁶ Russ Wise, "The Goddess and the Church," Probe Ministries, 1997, <http://www.probe.org/docs/godd-chu.html>.

¹⁷ Quoted by Wise, *ibid*.

¹⁸ Hanna Rosin, "An Army Controversy: Should the Witches Be Welcome?" *The Washington Post*, June 8, 1999.

¹⁹ The Armed Forces Chaplains Board, "Wiccan Religious Background Paper," submitted to the Chief Chaplains of the Armed Services in May 1998, http://www.milpagan.org/files/AFCB_Wicca_paper.htm.

²⁰ "Wiccan Ethics – Basic Principles of the Craft," <http://home1.gte.net/buckmstr/wiccanethics.htm>, accessed June 22, 1999.

²¹ John Machate, "Pagans in the Military," <http://milpagan.org/articles/pagmilt.htm>, accessed June 22, 1999.

²² "The Grove: What is a Pagan? What is a Witch?" <http://www.apocalypse.org/pub/u/hilda/ddtmqã.html>, accessed June 22, 1999.

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- ²³ "Witchcraft: Commonly-Asked Questions, Straightforward Answers," Covenant of the Goddess, <http://www.cog.org/wicca/faq.html>, accessed June 22, 1999.
- ²⁴ "Calhoun's Wiccan FAQ," <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Lofts/3156/wicca.html>, accessed June 22, 1999.
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- ²⁷ "Circle Sanctuary – A Pledge to Pagan Spirituality," <http://www.circlesanctuary.org/contact/PSApledge.html>, accessed June 22 1999.
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- ³² Hawkins, *op. cit.*
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