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The Return of Witchcraft –Ancient Paganism in a Modern Form

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“We really want to make sure we're using all of our time in the best interest of our students,” Puyallup School District spokeswoman Karen Hansen told ABC News. Hansen explained that Halloween parties waste classroom time and create potential embarrassment for families unable to afford elaborate costumes.

As ABC News affiliate KOMO-TV in Seattle reported, it was the district's third reason that left many Puyallup parents puzzled. As the station reported, “The district said Halloween celebrations and children dressed in Halloween costumes might be offensive to real witches.” As the district's spokeswoman explained, “Witches with pointy noses and things like that are not respectful symbols of the Wiccan religion and so we want to be respectful of that.”

Hansen also cited the district's official guidelines for holiday celebrations, which includes a statement reading: “Use of derogatory stereotypes is prohibited, such as the traditional image of a witch, which is offensive to members of the Wiccan religion.”

As the station also reported, an internal district e-mail from October 2000 warned teachers and other district personnel that “The Wiccan religion is a bona fide religion under the law, and its followers are entitled to all the protections afforded more mainstream religions. Building administrators should not tolerate such inappropriate stereotyping (images such as Witches on flying brooms, stirring cauldrons, casting spells, or with long noses and pointed hats) and instead address them as you would hurtful stereotypes of any other minority.”

Sixth-grader Grace Macon responded with disappointment. “Yeah, it does bother me because I would really like to go around and dress up,” she said. Her sentiment was supported by Tonya Reynolds, whose daughter also attends Maplewood Elementary in the district. “They're so worried about being politically correct anymore,” Reynolds complained, “that we're not allowed to do much of anything.”

While parents and children debate the relative arguments for using classroom time for holiday celebrations, others will be far more concerned about the district's interest in Wicca and paganism as deserving the same respect as “mainstream religions.”

Perhaps we should not be surprised. After all, Neo-paganism has been on the rise since the 1980s, and a recovery of pagan religion—especially the renaissance of witchcraft known as “Wicca”—has been prominent in the feminist movement for over a decade.

Bookstores, radio programs, and the Internet all feature Wicca-themed materials, and the resurgence of ancient paganisms in new forms goes hand in hand with the rise of the therapeutic culture, the New Age movement, and the radicalization of feminist ideology.

In *Witchcraft Goes Mainstream*, author Brooks Alexander takes careful note of this pagan resurgence. “The state of the Neo-pagan movement is healthy, confident, and growing more so every day,” Alexander reports. “The first generation of elders has begun passing its paganism onto the next generation of offspring. This means that what was once a band of religious oddballs has become a functioning religious community. It has become an active, self-sustaining alternative culture, a fact that has enormous implications for the future of our society—and for the place of Christianity within it. The Neo-pagans are on a roll and they know it. They sense that the Christian culture is in full retreat, and they are advancing energetically as it recedes.”

According to historian Jeffrey Burton Russell, organized witchcraft more or less died out in the early 1700s. As Russell explains, a naturalistic worldview largely eliminated the role of witches, demons, and evil spirits from the popular imagination.

How was this reversed? Though various Neo-pagan impulses can be traced back to the early years of the twentieth century—including the revival of Nordic paganism by the Nazi Party in Germany—the organized resurgence of witchcraft can be traced to the influence of Gerald Gardner.

Gardner “rediscovered” witchcraft and repackaged it as “Wicca,” focusing the movement on a return to nature worship, harvest cycles, female reproductive energy, and other themes.

Largely due to its rejection of Christianity and its focus upon feminine power, Wicca attracted interest in the emerging feminist movement. By the 1990s, thousands of radical feminists had identified themselves as Wiccans, and Neo-pagan rites and practices had been incorporated into several streams of feminist thought.

By the late 1990s, witchcraft was being repackaged for the young. In *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation* by author Silver Ravenwolf (a witchcraft name), young girls are introduced to witchcraft for adolescents. As the book promises, girls age eleven and up are invited to become “pentacle-wearing, spell-casting, completely authentic” witches. Among the spells offered to young girls is an “Un-Ground Me” spell, intended to negate parental energy.

As Brooks Alexander reports, “Rejecting Christianity has been a basic part of Neo-paganism from the beginning. It is one of the several ways the movement has traditionally expressed its rejection of the main society. But today, in a fascinating historical irony, it is also one of the ways the movement finds itself increasingly in harmony with the main society, which is in hot pursuit of its own Christ-rejecting agendas.”

The idea that Wicca and Neo-paganism represent a way for individuals to oppose the dominant society is thoroughly documented by author Sabina Magliocco, a professor of anthropology at California State University at Northridge. According to Magliocco, herself a participant in pagan rituals, “Witches and Pagans construct their identity in contrast to that of the dominant American culture. Oppositionality is part of the process of identity creation; it operates in the lives of individuals as well as in larger groups and polities. At its most basic level, it involves adopting an identity antithetical to that of some other individual or group in order to differentiate self from other.”

In particular, involvement in Neo-paganism, witchcraft, and Wicca has become a way for feminists, various New Agers, and others to register their rejection of Christianity, while involving themselves in a series of rites and rituals that mimic Christian practice and seek to revive ancient pagan forms.

Nevertheless, there is no central organizing institution for Neo-paganism. Instead, the movement is “a loose association of overlapping and interlocking networks stretching across the country and, in some cases, the globe,” Magliocco notes. As she explains, there are no recognized charismatic leaders or prophets that lead the movement, “nor is there a single Pagan authority of unifying organization.” Instead, Neo-pagans generally organize themselves into small groups often known as “covens,” “groves,” or “circles.” National organizations linking at least some Neo-pagans to others include groups such as the Pagan Spirit Alliance, and Covenant of the Goddess.

Interestingly, even as Magliocco asserts that new-style witches intend to represent an “oppositional” culture, she also

notes that participants in Neo-pagan movements tend to be “predominantly white, middle-class, well-educated urbanites who find artistic inspiration in folk and indigenous spiritual traditions.”

Even as Sedona, Arizona, and Santa Fe, New Mexico have become havens for New Age devotees, San Francisco and the Pacific Northwest have become areas particularly attractive to Wiccans. As ABC News noted in its report on the controversy in the Puyallup School District, Wiccan groups are active in the district and in the larger Northwest region.

As Brooks Alexander warns, “To cope with the challenges before us, Christians not only need to understand Neo-paganism, but also must be prepared to engage it.” This warning is particularly timely given the fact that teenagers—especially teenage girls—seem particularly attracted to Wicca and other modern forms of witchcraft. What some parents may see as “harmless” interest and play, more discerning parents will recognize as dangerous dabbling in the occult.

As the laws of physics remind us, nature abhors a vacuum—and so does the spiritual dimension of a society. As America turns more and more secular, and as Christianity recedes further and further from the experience of many citizens, Neo-pagan religions, resurgent pagan forms, and re-invigorated forms of witchcraft appear on the scene, offering the seduction of secrecy, the allure of the alien, and the interest of the exotic. Furthermore, many of these Neo-pagan forms come with an affirmation of sexual freedom and a focus upon human reproduction—especially in its female dimension—that is nothing less than pornographic and grossly distorted.

We know we have reached a strange point in our cultural transformation when children are forbidden to celebrate Halloween—not because of its association with the occult, but out of concern that the holiday will be offensive to witches. Christians should take note: Something pagan this way comes.

