The Meaning of Witchcraft

GERALD GARDNER

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My Directorship of the Museum of Magic and Witchcraft at Castletown, Isle of Man, brings me a great deal of correspondence from all parts of the world; some interesting, some abusive (a very little, just enough to enliven matters), some fantastic, and some funny in all senses of the word.

However, my more serious correspondents want to know the origin of witchcraft. Where, they ask, did it come from? What is behind this thing that obsessed the minds of men for centuries? Is it an underground cult of devil-worship? A dark thread running through history? An irruption of the supernatural into normal life? Or is it an enormous delusion? What is the meaning of it all?

This is a matter which of late years has exercised the ingenuity of a number of writers. These may be roughly divided into three schools. Firstly, those who take the severely rationalist view that witchcraft was a kind of mass hysteria, arising from psychological causes. Secondly, those who maintain that witchcraft is real, and that it is the worship and service of Satan, in whom its devotees appear to be great believers. This is the attitude taken by that very prolific writer, the late Montague Summers, and his many imitators. Thirdly, that school, headed by anthropologists like Dr. Margaret Murray, which has tried to look at the subject without either superstitious terrors and theological argument on the one hand, or materialistic incredulity on the other. This school of thought maintains that witchcraft is simply the remains of the old pagan religion of Western Europe, dating back to the Stone Age, and that the reason for the Church’s persecution of it was that it was a dangerous rival. I personally belong to this third school, because its findings accord with my own experience, and because it is the only theory, which seems to me to make sense when viewed in the light of the facts of history.

Perhaps I had better state briefly what that experience is. I am at present the Director of the only museum in the world, so far as I know, which is exclusively concerned with magic and witchcraft. I was a Civil Servant in the Far East (Malaya) until my retirement, and I made a large collection of magical instruments, charms, etc., which formed the nucleus of the present collection here. I am also an archaeologist and an anthropologist, and through these studies I became interested in the part played in the life of mankind by magical beliefs, and by what people did as a result of these beliefs.

When I was out East, before I had any contact with witchcraft in Britain, I investigated much native magic without finding anything, which could not be explained by telepathy, hypnotism, suggestion or coincidence, and frankly I considered magic as an instance of the curious things that people will believe. In those days I was very much interested in Dr. Margaret Murray’s theory that witchcraft was the remains of an ancient religion; but as all authorities seemed agreed that while there was evidence that some people may have been witches, there was not the slightest evidence that witches had ever been organized into covens; and as Charles Godfrey Leland, who had known many witches in Italy and elsewhere, and wrote a lot about them, never mentioned any coven or any organization, I dismissed witchcraft as something which had possibly happened once, but even if it had existed it had been burnt out three hundred years ago.

The earlier books I read on the subject all seemed to agree to a certain extent. They said that witches existed everywhere, and were both male and female. They were intensely wicked people. They worshipped the Devil, often in the form of a heathen god (but then, all heathen gods were the Devil). They had a big organization, regular religious ceremonies on fixed dates, a priesthood with priests, priestesses and officers, and an organized form of religion; though their deity might be called a god and the Devil almost in the same sentence. This was explained by saying that all non-Christian gods were really the Devil in disguise.

However, in the late 17th and the 18th centuries public opinion seemed to change. In spite of the strong views of John Wesley and other clergymen, people did not believe in witches any more, to the extent that when two clergymen induced a jury to convict Jane Wenham of talking to the Devil in the form of a cat, and she was sentenced to death for this in 1712, the judges protested and she was released. In 1736 the penal laws against witchcraft were repealed; and I did not think that anyone, with the exception of the Rev. Montague Summers, dared hint that there might be anything in witchcraft today without being laughed at. Charles Godfrey Leland had been regarded as a romancer who had written up a few Italian fortunetellers, and while Dr. Margaret Murray was known as a good anthropologist, it was thought that she was writing about things that happened three or four hundred years ago, when people were superstitious, and believed silly things.

However, after Dr. Murray’s books appeared, some other people were bold enough to admit that there were some witches left, but said that they were only village fortune-tellers, impostors who knew nothing about the subject, and there never had been any organization, and anyone who thought otherwise was just being imaginative. I was of these opinions in 1939, when, here in Britain, I met some people who compelled me to alter them. They were interested in curious things, reincarnation for one, and they were also interested in the fact that an ancestress of mine, Grizel Gairdner, had been burned as a witch. They kept saying that they had met me before. We went through everywhere we had been, and I could not ever have met them before in this life; but they claimed to have known me in previous lives. Although I believe in reincarnation, as many people do who have lived in the East, I do not remember my past lives clearly; I only wish I did. However, these people told me enough to make me think. Then some of these new (or old) friends said, You belonged to us in the past. You are of the blood. Come back to where you belong.

I realized   that I had stumbled on something interesting; but I was half initiated before the word Wicca that they used hit me like a thunderbolt, and I knew where I was, and that the Old Religion still existed. And so I found myself in the Circle, and there took the usual oath of secrecy, which bound me not to reveal certain things.

In this way I made the discovery that the witch cult, that people thought to have been persecuted out of existence, still lived. I found, too, what it was that made so many of our ancestors dare imprisonment, torture and death rather than give up the worship of the Old Gods and the love of the old ways. I discovered the inner meaning of that saying in one of Fiona MacLeod’s books: *The Old Gods are not dead. They think we are.*

I am a member of the Society for Psychical Research, and on the Committee of the Folklore Society; so I wanted to tell of my discovery. But I was met with a determined refusal. The Age of Persecution is not over, they told me; give anyone half a chance and the fires will blaze up again. When I said to one of them, Why do you keep all these things so secret still? There’s no persecution nowadays! I was told, Oh, isn’t there? If people knew what I was, every time a child in the village was ill, or somebody’s chickens died, I should get the blame for it. Witchcraft doesn’t pay for broken windows.

I can remember as a boy reading in the papers of a woman being burned alive in Southern Ireland as a witch; but I could not believe that there could be any persecution nowadays in England. So, against their better judgment, they agreed to let me write a little about the cult in the form of fiction, a historical novel where a witch says a little of what they believe and of how they were persecuted. This was published in 1949 under the title of *High Magic’s Aid*.

In 1951 a very important event occurred. The Government of the day passed the Fraudulent Mediums Act, which repealed and replaced the last remaining Witchcraft Act, under which spiritualists used to be prosecuted in modern times. This Act is, I believe, unique in legally recognizing the existence of genuine mediumship and psychic powers.

I thought that at last commonsense and religious freedom had prevailed; but even so, the passage of this Act was highly obnoxious to certain religious bodies which had been preaching against Spiritualism for years and trying to outlaw it as the work of Satan, together with any other societies to which they objected, including Freemasonry and, of course, witchcraft.

About a year previously, this Museum had been opened, and I had flattered myself that showing what witchcraft really is, an ancient religion, would arouse no hostility in any quarter. I was to find out in due course how wrong I was!

Any attempt to show witchcraft in anything even remotely resembling a favorable light, or to challenge the old representation of it as something uniformly evil and devilish, or even to present it as a legitimate object of study, can still arouse the most surprising reactions. The virtues of humanism, which Charles Saltman defined as sensitivity, intelligence and erudition, together with integrity, curiosity and tolerance, have still quite a long way to go in their struggle against the mentality, which produced the *Malleus Malejicarum*.

In 1952 Pennethorne Hughes wrote a book, *Witchcraft*, which gave a very good historical account of witchcraft, but stated that while in mediaeval times witches had a fully worked-out ritual of their own which they performed, modern witches were simply perverts who celebrated Black Masses, which he described as being blasphemous imitations of the Christian Mass. This made some of my friends very angry, and I managed to persuade them that it might do good to write a factual book about witchcraft, and so I wrote *Witchcraft Today*. In writing this latter book, I soon found myself between Scylla and Charybdis. If I said too much, I ran the risk of offending people whom I had come to regard highly as friends. If I said too little, the publishers would not be interested. In this situation I did the best I could. In particular, I denied that witches celebrated the Black Mass, or that they killed animals or even un-baptised babies as blood sacrifices.

One of the first questions I had asked witches as soon as I had got inside was, What about the Black Mass? They all said, We don’t know how to perform it, and if we did, what would be the point of doing so? They also said, You know what happens at our meetings. There is the little religious ceremony, the greeting of the Old Gods; then any business, which has to be talked over, or perhaps someone wants to do a rite for some purpose; next there is a little feast and a dance; then you have to hurry for the last bus home! There is no time or place for any nonsense of Black Masses, and anyhow why should we want to do one?

I think this is just common sense. To a Roman Catholic who believes in Transubstantiation, that is, that the bread and wine of the Mass are literally changed into the flesh and blood of Christ, a ceremonial insult to the Host would be the most awful blasphemy; but witches do not believe this, so it would simply be absurd to them to try to insult a piece of bread.

I am not the first to have pointed this out; Eliphas Levi, the celebrated French occultist, who was also a devote Catholic, stated in his book, *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*, that the first condition of success in the practice of black magic was to be prepared to profane the cultus in which we *believed*.

Some may hold that anyone who does not believe in Transubstantiation is lacking in the True Faith and doomed to Hell. I am told that certain Nonconformist ministers preaching against Transubstantiation obtained consecrated Hosts and held them up to mockery in the pulpit; *but I have never heard that this made them witches*.

What about the Christian people who carry such consecrated Hosts about in lockets as personal charms? Are they being reverent or not? And are they witches? We have some of these charms in this Museum.) I know very well that some people would be shocked at this practice, but this does not alter the fact that it is done.

The point which those writers who persistently link the witch cult with the Black Mass fail to appreciate is that they can *either* maintain that witches are pagans, *or* that they celebrate Black Masses; but that in the name of logic and common sense they cannot have it both ways.

Unlike a number of sensational writers, I do not wish to convey the impression that there are witches at work in every corner of the land. On the contrary, there are very few real witches left, and those keep themselves very much to themselves. They are generally the descendants of witch families, and have inherited a tradition, which has been preserved for generations. This is, indeed, the traditional way in which witchcraft was spread and preserved; the children of witch families were taught by their parents, and initiated at an early age. In fact, this is very probably the origin of all those frightful stories of the witches bringing babies to the Sabbat to eat them; what really happened was that witch parents dared not omit to have their babies baptized, for fear of instantly arousing suspicion, so they used to bring the babies to the Sabbat first, and present them in dedication to the Old Gods. Then, they felt, it wouldn’t matter if a ceremony of Christian baptism was later gone through for show. (When I bow my head in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon Thy servant in this thing.) However, as the persecution of the Old Religion grew more fiercer, it became dangerous to admit children. Innocent children prattled among themselves about where their parents went and what they did, and one unlucky word overheard by the wrong person might have meant death to the whole family. There are terrible records of children being hanged or burned with their parents, merely because they were of the witch blood. Margaret Ine Quane, for instance, who was burned as a witch here in Castletown in 1617, had her young son burned with her, simply because he was her son. Hence the custom of initiating the children was less and less observed, and this, coupled with the wholesale extermination policy carried on at the Church’s instigation, soon greatly reduced the numbers of the cult.

However, there is one factor in the continuity of the tradition which the opponents of the cult had not reckoned with. The witches are firm believers in reincarnation, and they say that Once a witch, always a witch. They believe that people who have been initiated into the cult, and have really accepted the Old Religion and the Old Gods in their hearts, will return to it or have an urge towards it in life after life, even though they may have no conscious knowledge of their previous associations with it. There may be something in this; because I know personally of three people in one coven who discovered that, subsequent to their coming into the cult in this life, their ancestors had had links with it, and I have already mentioned the witches who recommended me.

Of course, witch rites today are somewhat different from what they used to be many centuries ago. Then the great meetings, called Sabbats, used to be attended by large numbers of the population, who arrived provided with the wherewithal to cook a meal for themselves (hence the hellish Sabbat fires we have heard so much about), and prepared to spend a night on the heath in merrymaking, once the more serious rites were over. In fact, most traditional country merrymakings have some connection with the Old Religion; the Puritan Stubbes, in his *Anatomie of Abuses*, fiercely denounces the people who stayed out all night in the woods Maying on the old Sabbat date of May Eve; and Christina Hole, in her *English Folklore*, notes how the Northamptonshire guisers folk-dancers dressed in fantastic costumes are called witch-men to this day. Such instances might be greatly multiplied.

The English climate, of course, did not always permit these gatherings to be held on the heath; and I think that in this event they probably took place in someone’s barn, or in the hall of a great house whose owner was friendly to the cult. In the Basque country of Pays de Labourd in 1609 the official investigator from the Parlement of Bordeaux, Pierre de Lancre, was horrified to find that the Sabbat was sometimes held in the local church, apparently with the priest’s consent. He was particularly scandalized to find how many Basque priests sympathized with the Old Religion.

We are often told horrid tales of witch meetings in churchyards, and of witches who, in the words of Robert Burns, in kirkyards renew their leagues owre howkit dead. But in the old times the churchyard was the regular place for village merrymakings. In those days a churchyard was not, as it is today, a place of gravestones, but simply a green sward. From M. C. Anderson’s Looking for History in British Churches we may see that dancing in the churchyard was quite feasible in the old days as the author says that it was not the practice to erect gravestones to those who were buried there. The great folks were buried beneath sculptured tombs within the church. . . . The little people remained anonymous in death before the 17th century.

Eileen Power, in her book, Mediaeval People says, speaking of the peasants:

They used to spend their holidays in dancing and singing and buffoonery, as country folk have always done until our own more gloomier, more self -conscious age. They were very merry and not at all refined, and the place they always chose for their dances was the churchyard; and unluckily the songs they sang as they danced in a ring were old pagan songs of their forefathers, left over from old Mayday festivities, which they could not forget, or ribald love songs which the Church disliked. Over and over again we find the Church councils complaining that the peasants (and sometimes the priests, too) were singing wicked songs with a chorus of dancing women, or holding ballads and dancing and evil and wanton songs and such-like lures of the devil; over and over again the bishops forbade these songs and dances; but in vain. In every country in Europe, right through the Middle Ages to the time of the Reformation, and after it, country folk continued to sing and dance in the churchyard.

She continues:

Another later story still is told about a priest in Worcestershire, who was kept awake all night by the people dancing in his churchyard, and singing a song with the refrain Sweetheart have pity, so that he could not get it out of his head, and the next morning at Mass, instead of saying Dominus vobiscum, he said, Sweetheart have pity, and there was a dreadful scandal which got into a chronicle.

However, I have never heard of a present-day witch meeting being held in a churchyard; I think those sensation-mongers who have described present-day witches as forgathering in graveyards are guessing, and their guess is a few centuries out.

Actually, witch meetings today may take place anywhere that is convenient, and only people who have been initiated into the cult are allowed to be present. The actual proceedings would probably greatly disappoint those who have been nurtured on tales of blood sacrifices, drunken orgies, obscene rites, etc., etc. Witches do not use blood sacrifices; and only the type of mind which considers all recognition of the Elder Gods and their symbols to be diabolical would call their rites obscene. There are, on the other hand, people who consider many of the Church’s beliefs and practices to be an insult to Divinity; a woman once told me, for instance, that she thought the Church of England’s Marriage Service so disgusting that she could never bring herself to submit to it. Much depends upon one’s point of view in these matters.

The taking of wine during the rites is part of the ceremony; it consists usually of two glasses at the most, and is not intended to be a mockery of anything, still less a Black Mass. In fact, witches say that their rite of the Cakes and Wine (a ritual meal in which cakes and wine are consecrated and partaken of) is much older than the Christian ceremony, and that in fact it is the Christians who have copied the rites of older religions. In view of the fact that such ritual meals are known to have been part of the Mysteries of the goddess Cybele in ancient times, and that a similar ritual meal is partaken of, according to Arthur Avalon in *Shakti and Shakta*, by the Tantriks of India, who are also worshippers of a great Mother-Goddess, there seem to be some grounds for this statement.

In the old days, they tell me, ale or mead might be used instead of wine, any drink in fact that had a kick in it, because this represented life. I wonder if this is why Shakespeare used the expression cakes and ale as a synonym for fun which was frowned on by the pious?

It is a tradition that fire in some form, generally a candle, must be present on the altar, which is placed in the middle of the circle, and candles are also placed about the circle itself. This circle is drawn with the idea of containing the power which is raised within it, of bringing it to a focus, so to speak, so that some end may be accomplished by raising it. This focusing of force is called The Cone of Power.

Incense is also used, and I have read in Spiritualist literature that power is thought by some mediums to be given off by naked flames, by a bowl of water, and by incense. All these are present on the witches’ altar. I once took a photograph of a witches’ meeting-place while a rite was being performed there; this included none of the people present, deliberately, but merely the altar, etc., and part of the circle. When the photograph was developed it showed extras in the form of ribbon-like formations, some of which appeared to proceed from the candles. I assured myself that there was nothing in the composition of the candles, which could account for this phenomenon, nor was there anything wrong with my camera. A copy of this photograph is on display in the Museum.

The great reservoir of power, according to the witches, is the human body. Spiritualists generally share this belief. Upon the practical means used to raise and direct this power I do not propose to touch; but that it is not a mere flight of fancy to believe in its existence is proved by some of the researches of modern science. The radiesthesia journal, *The Pendulum*, for March, 1956, carried an article called Living Tissue Rays, by Thomas Colson, from the *Electronic Medical Digest*. This told how Professor Otto Rahn of Cornell University had described to a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, at Syracuse, New York, how yeast cells can be killed by a person looking intently at them for a few minutes. The yeast cells were placed on a glass plate and held close to the person’s eyes. The Professor explained this by saying that certain rays were emitted from the human eye, which were capable of producing this result. For several years, he said, scientists had been reporting discoveries that living things produce ultraviolet rays. In the human body they had been found coming from working muscles, and in the blood.

The fingertip rays of several persons at Cornell killed yeast readily. The tip of the nose was discovered to be a fine ultra-violet tube. Then came the eye. Human rays are not always harmful. From some persons they are beneficial to tiny plants. There seems to be no difference in the kind, but the volume differs. When large, it is lethal to yeast. The same person emits it at different rates. He may be killing at one time and benign at another. The right hand appears to radiate more than the left, even in left-handers. . . .

These body rays seem to be given off most strongly by the parts of the body which are replaced most rapidly, such as the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. . . . The tops of the fingers are very strong emitters of this energy. . . . The back gives off the least energy and the abdomen and chest slightly more. The sex organs in both sexes and breasts in women emit these rays quite strongly.

The first scientific proof that there is a personal electric field, a sort of electrical aura, within and in the air around a living body, was announced to the Third International Cancer Congress. The report was made by Dr. Harold S. Burr, of Yale University. . . . Human eyes are powerful electric batteries. This discovery, showing that each eyeball is an independent battery, was announced to the National Academy of Sciences in 1938 by Dr.Walter H. Miles, Yale University pathologist. . . . The fact that eyes produce electricity has been known to science since 1860, when it was discovered in frogs, but the source of this electric power, its variations and especially its high power in human beings, is little known.

The above extract gives the reason for the witches’ traditional ritual nudity. To their Christian opponents this was mere shamelessness; but students of comparative religion know that, apart from the practical magical reason given above, nudity in religious ceremonies is a very old and worldwide practice. This is, in fact, yet another indication of the witch cult’s derivation from remotest antiquity.

It may seem strange that the beliefs of the witch and the discoveries of the man of science should ever find a realm in which they could meet and touch; yet this is not the first time such a thing has happened. The doctor who introduced the use of digitalis into medical practice bought the secret from a Shropshire witch, after taking an interest in her herbal cures.

The witches’ belief that the power resides within themselves, and that their rites serve to bring it out, is the great difference between them and the practitioners of ceremonial magic, black or white. The latter proceed by the invocation or evocation of spirits, sometimes of demons, whom they seek to compel to serve them. This is not the witches’ way, though they believe that helpful spirits, human or otherwise, come of their own accord to assist in their rites, and that those present who have developed the Sight (i.e. clairvoyance) may see such spirits.

A popular belief about witchcraft, which is nevertheless erroneous, is the idea that a witches’ coven must consist of thirteen people. Actually, it may consist of more or less than thirteen people; but thirteen is considered to be the ideal number. This may be because it is the best number of people to work in the witches’ traditional nine-foot circle; six couples and a leader. Or it may be because witchcraft is a moon cult, and there are thirteen moons in a year and thirteen weeks in every quarter, each quarter of the year having its Sabbat. The four great Sabbats are Candlemass, May Eve, Lammas, and Halloween; the equinoxes and solstices are celebrated also, thus making the Eight Ritual Occasions, as the witches call them. On the great Sabbats all the covens that could forgather together would do so; but apart from these great Sabbats, minor meetings called Esbats are held. The word â€œEsbatâ€ may come from the old French esbattre, meaning to frolic, to enjoy oneself. Traditionally, the Esbat is the meeting of the local coven for local matters, or simply for fun, and it is, or should be, held at or near the full moon.

As might be expected from a moon cult, the leading part in the ceremonies is played by the High Priestess, or Maiden. She has the position of authority, and may choose any man of sufficient rank in the cult to be her High Priest. In France the Maiden was sometimes called *La Reine du Sabbat*; in Scotland she seems to have been called the Queen of Elphame (i.e. Faery), and one old witch-trial has it that she makes any man King whom she pleases.

Apart from the theory that the fairies were actually the primitive People of the Heaths, the smaller, darker aboriginal folk displaced by the Early Iron Age invaders, which I treated of in *Witchcraft Today*, there is another connection between them and the witches. In the popular mind, after the advent of Christianity the old Celtic Paradise to which the souls of pagans went when they died became the Realm of Faerie, and the God and Goddess who were the rulers of the After-World became the deities of the witches, who held to the Old Religion, and also were considered as the King and Queen of Faery. Hence the High Priestess of a witch coven, who is considered as the Goddess’s living representative, would naturally be called the Queen of Elphame.

The original Fairyland was the pagan paradise, and the fairies of early romances, are very different from the dainty miniature creatures of later tales and children’s stories, made up when their original significance had been forgotten. This is made abundantly clear by the descriptions given in the anonymous old English poem, Sir Orfeo, of which the earliest MS. we have dates from the early fourteenth century. It is reminiscent of the Greek story of Orpheus and Eurydice, but with a happy ending instead of a tragic one, and contains a fine description of The proude courte of Paradis, which was entered apparently through a hollow hill or rocky cave, and of its rulers, The king fairy with his rout, and his queen, the White Goddess; As white as milke were her weeks and so brightly shining that Orfeo could scarcely behold them.

A. E.Waite, in his introduction to *Elfin Music, an Anthology of English Fairy Poetry*6 says: The Elizabethan age commonly identified the fairies of Gothic superstition with the classic nymphs who attended Diana, while the elfin queen was Diana herself, and was called by one of the names of that goddess, that is, Titania, which is found in the Metamorphoses of Ovid as a title of the uranian queen. He states further that . . . the original fairy of Frankish poetry and fiction was simply a female initiated into the mysteries and marvels of magic.â€

A third ingredient in the tales of fairies is, of course, actual non-human nature spirits which some people claim to be able to see, and it is fascinating for the student of folklore to disentangle these different strands that weave through old stories and beliefs.

The High Priest of a witch coven is, as we have seen, chosen by the Priestess. He is the person whom the Inquisitors and witch-hunters of old times used to call the Devil, as being either an actual supernatural devil or else his human representative. Witches are constantly being accused of worshipping the Devil. Now, when we use that word Devil, what picture automatically forms itself in most people’s minds?  Is it not that of a strange looking being who seems to be partly human and partly animal, having great horns on his head, and a body covered with hair, although his face is human? Have you ever stopped to wonder why this picture should automatically come into your mind in this way? *There is not one single text in the Bible which describes the Devil or Satan in this manner.* The only place in which you will find such a personage described is, curiously enough, among the gods of the ancient peoples. Here you will find quite a number of Horned Gods, and sometimes Horned Goddesses too, who were not, however, beings of evil, but deities beneficent to man. The reason why people picture the Devil in this way is because from the very earliest times the Church has taught that the Old God who possessed these attributes was the enemy of the Christian God, and hence must be Satan; and people have got so used to this concept that they have never stopped to question it.

It is evident from early pictures and descriptions (the earliest being the famous cave paintings found at Ariege in the Caverne des Trois Freres, done by men of the Stone Age), that the High Priest who was the god’s representative sometimes wore a ritual disguise, consisting of a head-dress bearing the horns of a stag or a bull, and a kind of robe of animal skins; sometimes, too, a mask which concealed his features. This custom seems to have been more particularly followed at the big Sabbats, when many people gathered outside the circle who were not actual initiates of the witches’ mysteries, but came for luck (i.e. for the blessing of the Old Gods) or simply to enjoy themselves. It made the proceedings more impressive, and at the same time safer, if the god’s representative was masked and disguised, so that he could not be recognized. The horned figure, seen dimly by moonlight or by the light of torches, would have seemed to the outsiders to be a supernatural being, and the initiates would not have undeceived them. When only initiates were present, there was less need for the ritual disguise, so the custom of wearing it has tended to fade out.

It will be seen that witchcraft is a system involving both magic and religion. This in itself is an indication of great age, because in primitive times magic and religion were closely interrelated. The priest was also the magician, and the magician had perforce to be a priest. Indeed, when one comes to consider it, many religious rites today are directed towards ends, which might be called magical. What is the essential difference, for instance, between prayers for rain, or for a good harvest, and the old fertility rites, which were directed to the same end? And why must a King or a Queen undergo the ritual of Coronation? With regard to the Church’s prayers and a fertility rite, the difference would seem to lie in the latter working on the principle that God helps those who help themselves, whereas the former is content with petition. The question of the necessity of Coronation ritual raises the whole idea of the Divine King or Queen which has engaged the attention of anthropologists for many years. The idea that there is any connection between religion and magic may be indignantly repudiated by some orthodox believers; nevertheless, both spring from the same root.

As I explained in my previous book, there are certain secrets of the witch cult that I cannot by reason of my pledged word reveal; but many people write to me saying, You said in your book, *Witchcraft Today* that all the ancient Mysteries were basically the same; so as we all know what these ancient Mysteries were, we know exactly what the witches’ secrets are. So why don’t you write another book telling everything?

Now, while the ancient authors who were initiated into a number of the Mysteries agree that they were all the same basically, and there is a certain amount of agreement among modern authors about what their secrets were, I doubt very much if any of them realizes the reason behind them, what made them work, in fact; and what makes things work is the witches’ secret. I think that this was probably the practical secret of the ancient Mysteries also.

However, I am not going to be drawn in this way to break my word; a statement, which will, I hope, result in a saving of notepaper and stamps on the part of some of my more aggressive correspondents. Certain of the present-day enquiries of psychical research, archaeology, anthropology, and psychology are beginning to converge in a manner that is gradually revealing facts about ancient beliefs and their effect upon human evolution which have not been realized before. It is my hope that this book will be a useful contribution to these lines of enquiry, and perhaps assist in their convergence.

Upon the 1st March, 1956, Major Lloyd-George, then Home Secretary, as a result of a question asked in the House of Commons, said that black magic was an offence in common law. When pressed by M.P.s to define black magic, he said, It is the opposite to white magic (at which there was laughter and ironical cheers) which is performed without the aid of the devil, so I assume the other is done with his aid.

If this were accepted as a definition, then authentic witchcraft is certainly not black magic, because witches do not even believe in the devil, let alone invoke him. The Old Horned God of the witches is not the Satan of Christianity, and no amount of theological argument will make him so. He is, in fact, the oldest deity known to man, and is depicted in the oldest representation of a divinity which has yet been found, namely the Stone Age painting in the innermost recess of the Caverne des Trois Freres at Ariege. He is the old phallic god of fertility who has come forth from the morning of the world, and who was already of immeasurable antiquity before Egypt and Babylon, let alone before the Christian era. Nor did he perish at the cry that Great Pan was dead. Secretly through the centuries, hidden deeper and deeper as time went on, his worship and that of the naked Moon Goddess, his bride, the Lady of Mystery and Magic and the forbidden joys, continued sometimes among the great ones of the land, sometimes in humble cottages, or on lonely heaths and in the depths of darkling woods, on summer nights when the moon rode high. It does so still.

From time to time the public have been treated to various highly-colored and highly unconvincing revelations in the popular Press and elsewhere upon the subject of Black Magic, Satanism, and similar matters, and occasionally these have been linked with witchcraft. Let me state right away that I personally maintain an attitude of thorough-going skepticism towards these things, and that even if they do exist I do not consider them to have any relation to the survival of the witch cult. Alleged confessions, especially where witchcraft is mentioned, bear ample internal evidence of their own meretriciousness, in that they are obviously modeled upon sensational thrillers and reveal no knowledge whatever of genuine witch practices.

The real thing is deeper hidden than this. People, especially country people, are reluctant to talk about it; but no one, I think, can study folklore in this country for long without becoming convinced of the amazing vitality and tenacity of old beliefs.

Where the town-dweller usually goes astray in his conclusions about the witch cult is that he has been fed mentally upon the alleged revelations mentioned above, or upon works that associate witchcraft with some fantastic belief vaguely known as Satanism, with the implication that it is, or was, a cult of evil and nothing else. I submit that this is an unreasonable view, and has been promulgated by persons who possess no qualifications beyond a bent for sensationalism or an outlook blinded by religious bigotry. The countryman and countrywoman preserve a belief through the centuries because they think it is some use to them, or because they derive some satisfaction from it. Of course, the benefit they derive from the belief may not always seem to us to be highly ethical. Nevertheless, no one but a maniac would deliberately cultivate evil for its own sake.

The foundation of magical beliefs, of which witchcraft is a form, is that unseen Powers exist, and that by performing the right sort of ritual these Powers can be contacted and either forced or persuaded to assist one in some way. People believed this in the Stone Age, and they believe it, consciously or not, today. It is now well known that most superstition is in fact broken-down ritual.

The unseen Powers that have interested man most in his early history have been the powers of fertility and of contact with the spirit world; of Life and Death. These are the elementary powers that became the divinities of the witches, and their worship is as old as civilization itself. The meaning of witchcraft is to be found, not in strange religious theories about God and Satan, but in the deepest levels of the human mind, the collective unconscious, and in the earliest developments of human society. It is the deepness of the roots that has preserved the tree.