Into the Darkness: An Ethnographic Study of Witchcraft and Death

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This paper explores the religion of radical feminist witches and how it provides both the dying and the living with a meaningful framework for interpreting death. Analytical description is used to focus on significant elements of the Dianic tradition of Wicca or Witchcraft, which interprets death as an integral part of the life cycle. An analysis of a Wiccan funeral demonstrates how the religion gives meaning to life and death, links individuals to the community, helps to reestablish group solidarity, and provides a shared subjective reality for those who acknowledge only a divine female principle called “The Goddess.” The data for this paper were collected through participant observation in the coven’s rituals and selected social events over a period of one year. In-depth interviews were conducted with all coven members as well.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a larger study of a coven of radical feminist witches, a group whose religious or spiritual base derives from what is known as the Old Religion, the Craft, or Wicca and is informed by the second wave of feminism. Contemporary witches believe that the roots of their religion predate Judeo-Christian tradition, drawing from the Goddess-centered cultures believed to have been located in and around Europe, the Mediterranean, and Aegean. They freely admit, however, that they practice the Old Religion in new ways (Starhawk, 1988). They believe these new ways fit societal changes and their own perceived needs. Wicca, in both its

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radical feminist and more traditional forms, is an example of what Ellwood (1979) calls an "emergent religion" or "alternative spirituality" existing alongside mainline religions, although often suppressed. It possesses a rich system of symbols and a growing community of believers, who are brought together by participating in ritual and magic.¹

**RELIGION AND DEATH**

All viable religions allocate an important position in their constitutive symbolism to the experience and event of death, according to functional sociologists Parsons and Lidz. Death has such disorienting effects that a religion

... must provide a framework for interpreting death that is meaningful and appropriate, in relation to other elements of the culture, for defining attitudes regarding both the deaths of others and the prospect of one's own death (Parsons and Lidz, 1967:135).

Yinger (1957) also emphasizes that one of the fundamental effects of religion is to rescue individuals and communities from the destructiveness of death.

Integration theories show how religion helps to maintain a state of homeostasis in a community when certain events threaten its stability. Through death and funeral rites, religion provides a potent means of reintegration of the group's "shaken solidarity" and reestablishes its morale (Geertz, 1973; Malinowski, 1948; Vernon, 1970). Funeral behavior thus serves an important social function.

Nevertheless, Lofland (1978) suggests that old ways of dealing with death do not effectively address current experience. Dying is increasingly being prolonged, while the experience of dying occurs in a context that is more and more bureaucratized and secularized. The unique capacity of humans to create and use complex symbols allows us to conceive of our own mortality, and the possibility of immortality. Lofland argues that contemporary culture and social organization of death offer few clues as to teleological meaning.

In the face of meaninglessness, we construct for ourselves a new set of beliefs, new orientations, new ways of looking or feeling that will fill the void (Lofland, 1978:33).

In stressing the importance of religion to social solidarity, Durkheim observed that religion is ultimately collective, expressing shared meanings and social ideals that unite participants into one moral community (Durkheim, 1915). Collective representations and social rituals are essential to religion precisely because language and symbols depend upon shared