

Wicca, the Apocalypse, and the Future of the Natural World

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Abstract

The nature-oriented religion Wicca is not normally associated with beliefs about the immanent destruction of the world; however, this ideology is important for many adherents of this tradition. This essay explores the manner by which apocalyptic millenarian beliefs are developed and propagated among Wiccans—as a predominantly oral tradition directly related to their worldview and its inherent focus on the sacredness of the Earth. Additionally, I investigate Wiccan perspectives on the future of the natural world, and their various solutions to perceived environmental problems, in a way that reflects upon the relevance of this study for better understanding both the Wiccan religion and apocalyptic millenarian beliefs. Furthermore, in comparison to trends in other millenarian studies, I discuss the unique reactions that are elicited when proposed apocalyptic changes are delayed and Wiccan environmentalist ideals do not come to fruition.

Introduction

The life-affirming, nature-oriented, contemporary Pagan religious tradition known as Wicca typically has not been associated with apocalyptic beliefs about an imminent catastrophe that will destroy life on Earth or millenarian ideologies that foresee the emergence of a post-apocalyptic utopian society; however, many Wiccans have envisioned, and in some cases have idealized, such a future. The present analysis first explores the manner by which apocalyptic millenarian beliefs have been developed and propagated among contemporary Wiccans in the southeast United States—as an oral tradition directly related to, yet not an integral part of, their belief structures' inherent focus on the sacredness of the Earth. Second, it investigates a range of Wiccan perspectives on the cataclysmic danger posed by contemporary environmental problems, while addressing academic understandings of the Wiccan religion and apocalyptic millenarian beliefs more generally. Third, in comparison to trends in other millenarian studies, it discusses the unique reactions that are elicited when proposed apocalyptic changes are delayed and Wiccan environmentalist ideals do not come to fruition.

During participant-observation research with Wiccans (who form a significant subset of the contemporary Pagan movement) across the southeastern United States (Tennessee, North and South Carolina, and Georgia) and in Pennsylvania from 1996 to 2000, I attended large public religious festivals and small private gatherings, visited the homes of community leaders for structured interviews, witnessed coven instructional meetings and rituals, participated in a variety of Earth-healing rituals, and had in-depth discussions with dozens of adult male and female practitioners about their religious lives and beliefs. My original research focused on understanding the most widely held, basic Wiccan beliefs, and although my interlocutors espoused a wide range of beliefs, they also held a great deal in common. During that period, I regularly

encountered eschatological and apocalyptic sentiments that were formulated from similar sources (e.g. through conversation, shared training materials, and commonly read books). Here I focus on the ideas that my interlocutors expressed and explain these perspectives using readily available evidence from Wiccan and Pagan texts, many of which my contacts considered reputable, authoritative sources that informed their religious beliefs.¹

Although my interlocutors' sources were often oriented toward the greater Pagan community, and the general Pagan population seems to espouse environmental ethics similar to those described here, I have little evidence that non-Wiccan, Pagan groups have interpreted and used these sources and ideas in the ways discovered in my research. The contemporary Pagan movement consists of many diverse religious groups and people with radically different belief systems, but I consider the phenomenon discussed herein as particularly Wiccan, and I will comment only on the perspectives proffered by those self-identified Wiccans with whom I interacted.

Wiccan Apocalyptic Millenarianism

The term 'apocalyptic millenarianism' describes a belief in an immanent cataclysmic destruction of society, history, and life—either from supernatural agency, natural means, and/or due to human ignorance—which does not merely lead to total annihilation, but functions as the catalyst by which a new, utopian social order may arise.² This term presented a dilemma for my research because most Wiccans associate the idea with violence, which is inimical to their beliefs and practices. Applying this definition to the claims of my interlocutors, however, it became clear that many Wiccan beliefs were informed by, and also expressed, apocalyptic millenarian sentiments and fears.

Throughout my participant-observer research, I met dozens of Wiccans who professed their apocalyptic millenarian beliefs to anyone who expressed interest, yet many others only quietly agreed with them without any further elaboration. In most of the relevant interactions of which I was a part, my interlocutors approached their apocalyptic millenarian beliefs as obvious assumptions, and they interacted with others as if there was no question about everyone holding, or at least being aware of, these beliefs. For example, the following exchange may be taken as typical of a brief encounter between Wiccans: 'Hey Stan, did you hear about all of those earthquakes they are having in the Pacific Islands?' 'Yeah! Something's about to happen; that's for sure!

¹ This was due in part to the relevant authors being prolific, experienced, and vested with authority by the Wiccan community. In an age of transience in the publishing industry (i.e. books come and go very quickly), these authors have had 'staying power' and their books have remained in print, on bookstore shelves, and on numerous 'recommended reading' lists for practitioners.

² See Barkun 2000: vii; Bromley 1997: 34–35; Kaplan 1997: xiv; O'Leary 1994; Robbins and Palmer 1997: 9; Wessinger 1997: 48.

Mama Gaia is waking up, and boy is She pissed [at the way humans are destroying Her]!³

During my research, many ecologically conscious Wiccans agreed that ‘something’ was on the verge of changing but were not certain of any details, especially the ‘whats’ and ‘whens’. Typical discourses that I encountered on this topic—in personal conversations, on the Internet, and in Wiccan books—often included an interpretation of environmental degradation, severe weather problems, and the proliferation of natural disasters reported in the news as warning signs that the fragile balance of life on Earth was in immanent danger of destruction. However, the lack of a strong focus on particular events and predictions tended to mitigate Wiccan reactions to their own apocalyptic millenarian ideas.

In the interviews that I conducted, people often shared and discussed their apocalyptic ideas after relevant news items surfaced. An example of this tendency was the proliferation of on-line discussions of theodicy regarding the role of the Earth Goddess in the massive Indonesian tsunami of December 2004. Immediately following the disaster, many Wiccan leaders and scholars attempted to recognize, reassess, and reinterpret perceived weak areas in Wiccan belief structures, while simultaneously trying to illuminate perspectives that could provide some semblance of comfort and explanation of the disaster. Some Wiccans explained that this tsunami was an example of the Earth’s active attempts to restructure Herself by counteracting humanity’s disruption of natural equilibriums.⁴

Thoughts of Gaia

Difficult as it may be to make any statement about Wicca that applies equally to all people associated with the religion, a unifying element of Wicca is its ecologically oriented message, which follows from the central teachings that the ‘Earth is a deity’ and ‘All life is sacred’. Janet and Stewart Farrar, prominent British Wiccans, espoused a concern for ecological disruption that is reflected in and on numerous Wiccan books and websites: ‘As Pagans, to ignore the ecology issues now presenting themselves to us is to deny our own belief in the God and Goddess. We all have a part to play in the future of our world’ (Farrar, Farrar, and Bone 1995: 102). It should be noted that not all Wiccans have adopted such a mindset; however, popular texts often present ecologically friendly beliefs as integral to Wiccan belief and practice structures, and

³ When referring to my interlocutors’ arguments throughout this essay, I follow their convention of capitalizing ‘Earth’, ‘She’, and ‘Her’ in order to emphasize their respectful perspectives towards the deified Earth in their relevant thoughts, claims, and actions.

⁴ Good examples of this—in the form of news stories, personal reflections and interpretations, healing ritual suggestions, and other attempts to meditate on and to learn from the situation—can be found in the archives of The Witches’ Voice (www.witchvox.com) from the few months following the tsunami disaster. See also Bowditch’s (2005) ocean-healing ritual.

there has been much discussion among scholars about the relationship of Wicca to nature-oriented ideas.⁵

Many Wiccans believe that the Earth is a living entity, personified as the Goddess Gaia, for as influential British Wiccan author Vivianne Crowley explained:

[T]he Earth is not only an ecosystem that sustains the physical life of humankind, She is also a living entity—Gaia—the Great Mother. The Divine is all around us—within us and in the world around us. It permeates, impregnates, and makes sacred and holy the Earth and all living beings upon it (2001: 16).

In other words, the Earth, Gaia, is conceptualized as a conscious, cognizant entity that exercises agency and some form of sovereignty over life on Earth, while also representing a divine life-force with which living things are imbued.

The idea of the Earth as a Goddess has been an integral part of Wicca since at least the 1970s, when members of the religion began to integrate Gaian-oriented sentiments from a variety of religious and scientific sources. During this decade, Pagan author Otter G'Zell (also known as Tim Zell and Oberon Zell) published his ideas about the Earth as a living, organic, self-sustaining biosphere that needed attention because human actions were upsetting its delicate ecological balance (G'Zell 1971). In 1975, James E. Lovelock introduced his 'Gaia Hypothesis', which had an orientation similar to G'Zell's ideas. Lovelock's scientific explanation attempted to prove that the Earth is a self-sufficient, living entity that is adversely affected by pollution and environmental degradation. Doreen Valiente, an instrumental figure in the development of modern Wicca in Britain, similarly argued that due to human greed, pollution, and war, the Earth was 'like a spaceship with its life-support systems breaking down and its crew fighting among themselves. Spaceship earth is in deep trouble; when this happens, we need to get in touch with our base' (1978: 46). The 'Gaia Hypothesis' has remained an important facet of Wiccan ideology, and Gaian beliefs were expressed by dozens of my interlocutors, especially during the many Earth-healing rituals that I attended, in which participants sent healing thoughts and energies to the imperiled Earth Goddess.

Similarly, many Wiccans I interviewed claimed to have developed an awareness that the Earth Goddess was upset with human disrespect for Her, and She was preparing to retaliate by disrupting human society. During this process, according to my interlocutors, those who worshiped, venerated, and respected Her would ideally be spared the worst of Her wrath because they would be seen as benign rather than malignant. A cogent example of this belief, which was characterized as a 'wake-up call' by many of those with whom I spoke, was written by Laurie Cabot, the 'Official Witch of Salem' and author of a trilogy of popular witchcraft books published in the early 1990s:

⁵ See, for example, Clifton 1996; Davy 2000, 2002; Greenwood 1998; Harvey 1997; Pearson 2000; Pearson, Roberts, and Samuel 1998; Pike 2000: 45.

The earth is undergoing major changes... [and] must adjust herself to the problems that human life has created for her. The great Titans of the earth are waking up to take part in this cleansing: fires, earthquakes, volcanoes, storms, droughts, floods. Humans tend to see these as ‘disasters’ when we view them in terms of our own petty interests. But even the end of the earth may not be a disaster when viewed from the perspective of the All. We just don’t know. At best we must heed these events as messages from the earth to reform our ways and live in harmony and balance with the earth and her many communities (1989: 291–93).

In other words, the Earth Goddess was thought to be taking umbrage at the rampant destruction that was continually being caused by humanity; a view which coheres with Crowley’s argument that ‘if She is not respected, in the end, She will rise up and overwhelm us’ (1994: 34; see also p. 37; Clifton 1990: 129).

This clearly indicates a vision of an anthropomorphic, deified world which embodies human perceptions and feelings. I contend that these concepts of Gaian problems reflect a strong social critique by Wiccan adherents about what they see as the most problematic aspects of human communities—greed, waste, destruction, and lack of an environmental ethic (see Isaac Bonewits as quoted in Vale and Wallace 2001: 77).

It Will Be the End of the World as we Know It

The most fundamental aspect of Wiccan apocalypticism, as it was explained to me in structured interviews and informal discussions, was the widespread belief that the Earth’s life-supporting capabilities are in a critical condition due to human mistreatment of the Earth and its ecosystems. This mistreatment was attributed to human overuse of natural resources, ozone depletion, unchecked deforestation, rapid overdevelopment and over-population, excessive hazardous waste disposal, and wanton pollution, as well as a general lack of concern for the environment from governments and large businesses.⁶ According to Otter G’Zell’s articles in the influential journal *Green Egg*, humans are committing ‘Terracide’; they are killing the planet with unrestrained egos and unchecked desires (see Adler 1986: 403; G’Zell 1971). Gaia likely would not be destroyed, but the world’s techno-industrial, consumer-oriented cultures were expected to change dramatically or to cease existing.⁷ This perspective was echoed by many of my interlocutors’ favorite authors (including Cabot 1989:289–90; 1994: 4;

⁶ These views are similar to the fundamental concerns of radical environmentalists, according to Bron Taylor (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001; 2002: 49); however, none of my contacts professed to be members of both groups.

⁷ I encountered different perspectives on what will be destroyed and/or changed: some of my interlocutors felt that all life across the globe was in jeopardy; whereas others claimed that the many self-sustaining, land-based communities of the world, such as those in rural China and India, would not be affected as they are not dependent upon the trappings of modern society for their livelihoods.

and Crowley 1994:33–34, 37; 2001 : 15), though little academic research on this topic has been published (for exceptions, see Robbins and Palmer 1997b: 13; Taylor 2002).

What these authors suggested was that in the last century or so, technological advances have disrupted the fragile equilibrium that has been maintained naturally for millennia. Building on G'Zell's ideas of 'Terracide', Janet and Stewart Farrar, along with Gavin Bone, wrote that due to rapid industrial and technological development and its resulting pollutants, humans 'are creating problems which will become catastrophic if they are not urgently and drastically dealt with. Human activity is straining the safe limits which Gaia has maintained for countless millennia' (1995: 93; see also Penczak 2001: 295–96). My interlocutors regularly proffered this perspective, and many also explained that fear of the outcome of human foibles functioned as the foundation upon which their apocalyptic beliefs were constructed.

This apocalyptic millenarian belief structure has developed into a coherent tripartite theory: destruction, technological failure, and admonishments for the adoption of environmental principles to survive. I was once asked, for example, if I had noticed the increase in extreme weather conditions across the country. In response to my request for elaboration, the person said that she perceived an increase in natural disasters, such as harsh winter weather in the Northeast, hurricanes hitting the Southeast, flooding and tornados in the Midwest, and wildfires and mudslides in the West. She then attributed this change to 'Mother Earth', who 'is retaliating against Her aggressors'.⁸ Reaffirming this position, my Wiccan contacts shared a common perspective of the Earth Goddess Gaia causing natural disasters as an intervention on behalf of 'life itself' in order to save those living things—including environmentally concerned Wiccans—which intuitively reflect 'natural balances and tendencies'.

Second, my contacts claimed that problems due to dramatic climactic and environmental changes will hasten the failure and collapse of modern technological and industrial infrastructures. For evidence of these disasters, my contacts often referred to the many television shows on the Discovery Channel that discussed the probability of such events as well as their likely negative repercussions.⁹

A common version of this theory, shared with me in the summer of 2000, argues that disrupting our delicate ecosphere will cause the polarity of the Earth's magnetic sphere to reverse itself, causing 'magnetic north' to migrate to the south pole, thus effectively disrupting and disabling the major electrical and computer systems of the world. As supporting evidence, my contacts mentioned a variety of scientific articles similar to the National Geographic story that affirmed the magnetic north pole was 'rapidly' shifting toward Russia—at a rate of 25 miles per year (Vastag 2005). Although

⁸ The personification of extreme weather conditions across the United States is not limited to Wiccans or environmentalists. A May 2007 story on Anaerica Online news reported that North America was being plagued by forest fires, floods, etc., and blamed this on 'Mother Nature's rampaging' (Pettersen 2007).

⁹ Additionally, some Wiccans argue that modern technology will eventually become too cumbersome and will precipitate a collapse due to the many environmental and social stresses it causes.

scientists stated that this shift was not indicative of a dramatic pole switch, this idea has been given an apocalyptic spin by many Wiccan thinkers.

The third aspect of this apocalyptic millenarian vision postulates that the mass disruption of technology will cause the advanced civilized world to plunge into chaos unless a dramatic transformation of social ideals and behaviors takes place. To support such contentions, my Wiccan interlocutors regularly referred to Truth or Dare by the popular Pagan author Starhawk, who described the changes that will be necessary for a successful post-apocalyptic society:

A society that could heal the dismembered world would recognize the inherent value of each person and of the plant, animal, and elemental life that makes up the earth's living body; it would offer real protection, encourage free expression, and reestablish an ecological balance to be biologically and economically sustainable. Its underlying metaphor would be mystery, the sense of wonder at all that is beyond us and around us, at the forces that sustain our lives and the intricate complexity and beauty of their dance (1987:314).¹⁰

Following Starhawk's model, the typical Wiccan millenarian discussion that I heard posited that the patriarchal West will be replaced by a peaceful, egalitarian, Goddess-oriented matriarchy, based on harmonious and agrarian-based living, the recognition and advocacy of the central importance of women, and the destruction of 'harmful' patriarchal power structures and ideologies—all of which were presented as basic Wiccan ideals.¹¹ This utopia was often envisioned as conforming to an idealized pre-technological 'golden age' presented in the writings of early twentieth-century writers such as James Frazer (1963 [1922]), Margaret Murray (1970 [1921]), and Robert Graves (1966 [1948]), as well as those writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, such as Merlin Stone (1976) and Starhawk (1987; see Palmer 1997: 160, 163).

In order for this ecotopia to emerge from apocalyptic chaos, however, my interlocutors claimed that there needed to be a modicum of prior preparation—a development of Wiccan beliefs and practices that were ready to be fully expressed should the opportunity arise (see Clifton 1996: 129; diZerega 2000). For eco-conscious Wiccans, their own pragmatic, nature-oriented philosophy—which included their veneration of and relationship with Gaia, cultivation and use of herbs for health and healing, development of self-awareness and self-sufficiency, and heightened awareness of the body and its energies—represents an ideal strategy both to cope with the dramatic destruction of

¹⁰ Starhawk's ideas in this quote were expanded and discussed throughout her later text, *The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature* (2005).

¹¹ The fantasy novel series by S.M. Stirling, including *Dies the Fire* (2005), *The Protector's War* (2006), and *A Meeting at Corvalis* (2007), directly explored these scenarios as the Wiccan protagonists attempted to survive and deal with the complete loss of the world's technology and electricity. This series affirmed the Wiccan perspective that adherents were better equipped to handle various forms of destruction due to their religious practices and related interests.

the environment and to construct a post-patriarchal, post-consumer, post-industrial, postapocalyptic civilization that is a productive alternative to that which initially caused environmental degradation.¹²

The resulting concept of living in a ‘natural balance’—about which many apocalyptic millenarian discussions have revolved—was presented as an ideal toward which all people should strive (see Farrar, Farrar, and Bone 1995: 100–101). Related to the emphasis placed on this ideal, many Wiccans also claimed that an ecologically minded lifestyle in conjunction with Gaian-oriented religious practices could actually mitigate or forestall the impending destruction of the natural world by alleviating some of the most pressing problems.

Such heightened awareness of Gaia, and personal responsibility for the rapidly increasing environmental problem, also functioned for many practitioners as a major aspect of the development and maintenance of their identities as ‘nature-religion practitioners’ (see Davy 2000; Pearson 2000; Pearson, Roberts, and Samuel 1998; Crowley 2001:9). During three years of research with a Wiccan coven in Tennessee, I regularly witnessed the group leaders espousing environmentalist and apocalyptic rhetoric as key reasons for practicing the religion.¹³ In this context, apocalyptic ideals functioned as calls to learn how to live in harmony with the flora and fauna of the Earth, as explicit criticisms of Western society, and as reinforcement strategies for emphasizing the legitimacy and importance of Wicca in the modern world.

The Propagation of Apocalyptic Millenarian Beliefs

As my interlocutors sought ways to understand and explain their beliefs that the Earth and its inhabitants are in immanent danger, they found evidence of the critical nature of environmental problems from a variety of sources. My Wiccan contacts discussed a range of literature that engaged in apocalyptic speculation, such as Art Bell’s Quickening theory, Lester Brown’s theory that ecological destruction would quickly become incurable, and Mayan calendar debates.¹⁴ They introduced me to numerous

¹² See Taylor 2000 for a discussion and critique of the social philosophy advocated by deep ecologists, which is in many ways similar to the Wiccan worldview discussed here.

¹³ In observing teaching and interaction, I saw that some coven members already had apocalyptic views, others adopted this worldview as they learned about Wicca, and others politely agreed while they were in the situation but held dissenting opinions when interviewed later.

¹⁴ See www.ArtBell.com and www.worldwatch.org. The World Watch Institute is an organization devoted to ‘independent research for an environmentally sustainable and socially just society’. One common piece of evidence that was used to support theories of the immanent destruction of the current state of life on Earth was the perceived end of the Mayan calendar on 21 December 2012 (Jenkins and McKenna 1998), which was believed to represent either a cyclical epoch change or an eschatological moment. While the specific outcome may be questioned, the significance of the date is not. For example, Jean-Claude Koven argued that even if the physical world does not end, major changes in perceptions of, and approaches to interacting with, the world will certainly occur (2005).

websites that catalogued the rising occurrences of all manner of natural disasters, catastrophes, weather events, and pollution problems. Also, I was shown public reports of futurists (scientists who work to predict future global events based on scientific computer models and historical trends),¹⁵ news stories about rampant social problems, diseases, global warming, and war; many television shows about natural disasters;¹⁶ and articles written by environmentalists and Wiccans that detailed supposed environmental harbingers of destruction. For those with whom I spoke, and one would suspect among other Wiccans, another important factor in propagating apocalyptic beliefs was communication with like-minded others through personal interaction and print media.¹⁷

One of the most relevant media sources was the *Witches' Voice*—the largest and most visited Wiccan- and Pagan-oriented news website—which regularly posts news articles about environmental activism, ecological concerns, perceived changes in and on the Earth, scientific theories that demarcate pro-environmental agendas, government interference with ecological preservation, and other Earth-oriented materials. One subsection of the site also posts articles for people who are looking for opportunities to participate in ecological activism, Earth-healing rituals, and other activities to alleviate the Earth's perceived egregious problems. The regular inclusion of these items, as well as supportive practitioner commentaries, demonstrates the continued importance of such things to Wiccans, since most items on the site are submitted by viewers (see also Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003: 67; Harvey 1997).

Wiccan apocalyptic ideas also stem from more general cultural influences, such as environmentalist and feminist groups who have promoted these perspectives.¹⁸ Early feminist apocalypticism merged with the Wiccan agricultural focus, for example, initially under the guidance of the preeminent feminist Pagan author Starhawk, who developed this into a particular form of ecofeminist religion (see Arthur 2001; Clifton 2006). Many of Starhawk's books have contributed to the Wiccan apocalyptic argument that those who love nature only have to look around to see that nature is being desecrated (Starhawk 1987, 1989, 1993, 2005). She has also provided accessible exercises for her readers more fully to engage in developing their own awareness of, and intuition about, the extent of current problems and fully to realize that, 'Environmentalism is simply what we have to do in order to keep some of the environment alive in

¹⁵ For example, James Lovelock, author of the 'Gaia Hypothesis', claimed in 2006 that the Earth was in immanent danger of developing a cataclysmic 'morbid fever'— due in part to human pollution—that will last up to 100,000 years (Lovelock 1979, 2006).

¹⁶ Interestingly, due in part to the popularity of such ideas across the United States, the National Geographic Channel developed the 'Naked Science' series and the Weather Channel created the 'It Could Happen Tomorrow' series, each of which has envisioned and forecasted how human environmental destruction and natural disasters could annihilate life on Earth.

¹⁷ See Barkun 2000: vii; Bromley 1997: 36; Crowley 1994: 32–38; Howard 1997; Ivak.hiv 242; O'Leary 2000: 34849; Sutcliffe 1998: 35.

¹⁸ See Palmer 1997: 163; Robbins and Palmer 1997b: 12; Taylor 2001.

order to have something to practice our religion around' (Starhawk, in Hopman and Bond 1996: 333).

Wiccans indeed have many sources to support their apocalyptic interests. The most important source, however, according to many of my conversation partners, was personal intuition about the energies of the Earth. They explained that many aspects of the Wiccan religion are geared toward developing personal intuition about environmental and ecological issues through meditation and ritual practices focused on the Earth, as both a sacred place and as a deity.¹⁹ These practices and beliefs explicitly incorporate the Earth's geological components; its meteorological aspects; seasonal correspondences; the plant, mineral, and animal kingdoms; and other constituents such as the four Aristotelian elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Furthermore, relevant mythological stories from cultures around the globe; creative visualization techniques; and a wide range of metaphors, symbols, and images from the general Wiccan worldview are integrated into ritual practices and teaching situations.

The resulting cosmological correlative system is meant to reinforce the teaching that all life is interconnected. As Christopher Penczak argued, 'I think the answer goes back to a fundamental flaw in our collective civilizations. They forgot the spirit running through all. Everything is connected. Everything is alive. Everything affects everything else. Everything must be honored. If we remember [this], I think we have a chance even if we live in cities' (2001: 297). The basic Wiccan ritual format fosters such interconnection, including the invocations of the four elements and the divine on astrologically significant dates such as the equinoxes, solstices, and full moons in order to help participants to 'attune to' (develop acute awareness of) the patterns and fluctuations of energies (of the Earth, the individual, the influence of deity, horticulture, etc.) throughout the year and as witnessed in daily life.

Such understanding continues to shape Wiccan environmental intuition and certainly influences the way believers like those with whom I interacted understand news items. The wide range of evidence for environmental destruction that my Wiccan contacts encountered functioned as a conglomeration of self-evident signs of dramatic change and immanent global catastrophe. The resulting apocalyptic vision was viewed with apprehension by most, but welcomed by many because of their utopian ideals and disillusionment with contemporary society.

Wiccan Reactions and Proposed Solutions

Apocalyptic millenarianism has been a fundamental belief for many Wiccans and has directly informed the development of the religion; however, this ideology is rarely the most prominent among Wiccan ideas. Based on my fieldwork, I would argue that apocalyptic millenarianism most often takes the form of secondary teachings that are

¹⁹ See Taylor 2001 for a variety of relevant ways that radical environmentalists have also used ritual processes to develop connections to the Earth.

propagated as part of Wicca's semi-private oral tradition. These ideas are not often exposed to scholars doing research unless they involve themselves in Wiccan communities and personally interact with the holders of such beliefs (see Pike 2000).

Identifying and understanding the relationship between the Wiccan worldview and apocalyptic millenarianism offers a unique contribution to millennial studies.²⁰ Research on apocalyptic groups often has focused on the most violent, outspoken, withdrawing, and/or counter-cultural groups. For example, David Bromley argued, 'Apocalyptic groups unequivocally reject the social order in which they reside and invest their loyalty and identity in a new order whose arrival they view as immanent and inevitable' (1997: 33). The Wiccans with whom I interacted, however, were neither this rigid in their interpretation of future events, nor did they emphasize the future over the present. Rather, they worked to create a better present state so their idyllic future would come to fruition (see Valiente 1978: 46).

A large number of religious groups, including mainstream Christianity, have had apocalyptic and/or millenarian beliefs, but these beliefs in and of themselves have not generated violence, and contrary to many theories of apocalypticism, my research indicates that the secondary nature of Wiccan apocalyptic beliefs has led to a noticeable lack of urgency associated with these beliefs and therefore a lack of activism and violence within Wiccan apocalyptic discourse (see O'Leary 2000: 345). For example, compared to Michael Barkun's study of the Christian Identity Movement (1997: 252–53), Wicca as a whole seems to embody none of the major principles of this apocalyptic millenarian group: Wiccans have not developed paramilitary activities; they have no belief in an insidious infiltration of some ultimate evil that corrupts society and threatens one's beliefs, group, and life; with the exception of a few more outspoken activists among the Wiccan community—a very small percentage overall—they tend to avoid inflammatory rhetoric directed toward outsiders; they do not resort to violence due to fear of defeat; and they do not advocate radical separatism and withdrawal from society—although there are cases where individuals and families attempt self-sufficient living to decrease their overall strains on the environment and their connections to negatively perceived aspects of contemporary culture. Additionally, since Wiccan communities are by nature very looseknit, this general lack of community coherence could also account for their lack of large-scale activism or urgency related to their apocalyptic millenarian beliefs.

I argue that Wicca can provide a useful case study for re-evaluating many prior assumptions about apocalyptic millenarianism because the Wiccan worldview contains a set of coping mechanisms that effectively mitigate believers' reactions to apocalyptic sentiments and fears.²¹ It seems that, in general, a lack of coping mechanisms among apocalyptic groups leads to a rigidity of beliefs and an increase in overall stress about

²⁰ This was an important area of divergence between my Wiccan informants and radical environmentalists who held apocalyptic millenarianism as a central tenet (see Taylor 2002: 49).

²¹ Taylor (1998, 1999, 2001, 2002) offers a wide range of mitigating factors that explain why radical environmentalist ideologies rarely lead to violent outbursts. His insightful and important findings are

the immanence of the apocalyptic moment, which in turn can lead to violent outbursts due to the inability constructively to express and deal with fears of dramatic change (see Robbins and Palmer 1997a). Among the Wiccan examples of which I am aware, there is no evidence of the dynamic of punitive reaction, alienation, and deviance that Roy Wallis considered essential to religious violence (in Barkun 1997: 256–57).

The Wiccan ideal I encountered during my research, in contrast, promoted finding ways to maintain a certain malleability of thought about and to embody an ethic of non-violence when engaging in life's challenges. The most readily apparent coping mechanisms, which assisted these religionists in dealing productively with what they considered to be apocalyptic facts, were found within fundamental Wiccan practices and beliefs, such as beliefs about the divinity of Gaia, learning to live attuned to the natural cycles of the year, and practicing Earth-healing rituals. I have found that the Wiccan apocalyptic vision functioned most often to provide motivation for diligent work on the present state of affairs, not for proselytizing or violent activities. Furthermore, my contacts regularly expressed the belief that the Earth Goddess would perpetuate any needed violence to subdue her decimators, so Wiccans had no need to focus their efforts in that direction.

With Wiccan post-apocalyptic goals not being dictated by agendas and timeframes, perceived advances in goals are encouragements to continue their activities, and any disappointments become further incentives to redouble their efforts. The Wiccan worldview, in other words, is not predicated on a stressful immanent event, so collective energies of frustration have not come to fruition in violent outbursts; they are expressed in healing rituals that vocalize and ritualize their dissatisfaction with the current status of the environment while providing a positive outlet for change.

Among my interlocutors, images of immanent ecological crisis and apocalyptic change often were utilized as motivating factors for developing an environmentally and ecologically conscious worldview; for stressing the importance of working for the Earth through a variety of practices, including environmental activism, garbage collecting, recycling, composting, and religious rituals; for learning sustainable living skills;²² and for developing a special relationship with the world as a divine entity. In other words, some Wiccans worked to construct a nature-oriented belief and practice system that ideally could provide rational solutions to perceived problems in people's environmentally oriented behavior, to circumvent the coming apocalypse, and to prepare for cataclysmic changes if their preventative efforts were unsuccessful.

applicable to understanding the similar ideas and practices of apocalyptic millenarian Wiccans (see also Sutcliffe 1998: 36).

²² Although most Wiccan texts do not discuss these issues directly, my interlocutors relied on many additional sources, such as *Mother Earth News*, for this knowledge.

The major forms of Wiccan environmental activity are Earth-healing rituals and eco-magic practices.²³ These were performed, according to my informants, because ‘Gaia had been hurt’ and ‘She needs all the love and support that we can send in order to rectify the situation’. For example, Kate Bowditch explained the need for her ocean-healing ritual when she wrote:

I felt a need for this ceremony because I sense the Water cycle is ill, and is very tired. The oceans are giving up. They have developed a fever, and are coughing up their dead on our shores. The earthquake and following Tsunami in December of 2004 are part of the delirium of the very ill. This Ocean Healing Ceremony could be the beginning of an antidote to what is happening to the Blood of the Earth... The Ocean heard us, and felt our intent, and answered. She does not feel strong, however, and much needs to be done (2005).

Rituals such as this were commonplace at the Wiccan gatherings I attended. Many of my interlocutors professed that these rituals were the most important type of environmental action, since they affected the Earth on a subtler, yet more profound, energetic level than did picking up litter and recycling. This emphasis on healing and purification was a major reason why political activism was not a priority for these practitioners—because it was penultimate to spiritual resources (see Cunningham 1995: 47). As such, the majority of the festivals at which I conducted research hosted workshops and rituals for practitioners to increase their perceptions of personal connections to the Earth and actively to participate in supporting and healing the ‘injured, struggling spirit’ (Telesco 1993: 134) of the natural world. The typical Earth-healing ritual was structured so that practitioners could chant, sing, and dance to activate their personal energies, before the group held hands and collectively focused upon and visualized this healing energy being sent into and around the Earth.²⁴

Many of my interlocutors argued that the immanent apocalypse could be averted, or at least its worst parts could be mitigated, if enough people focused their energies on healing the Earth and preventing further damage.²⁵ Earth-healing rituals not only functioned to elucidate their views about the destruction of the sacred natural world,

²³ See Adler 1986: 401; Crowley 2001: 15; de Angeles, Orr, and Dooren 2005; Farrar and Farrar 1984: 268; and Pike 2000:48. Sarah Pike also found that political and social activism was not the most prevalent expression of environmental concern among the majority of Wiccans (2000: 48).

²⁴ A particularly vivid description of a large Earth-healing ritual was described by Orion 1995: 176–78. See also Bromley 1997: 40; Cabot 1989: 290; 1994: 4. Interestingly, Chas Clifton has criticized these basic ‘unfocused “heal the Earth” rituals’ because they perpetuate a mythical agrarian fantasy of universal scope. Rather, he argued, environmental action should begin with participation in the natural cycles of the relevant region in which the practitioner resides (in Davy 2002: 92).

²⁵ See Cabot 1989: 292; Clifton 1996: 129; Crowley 1994: 33; Cunningham 1995: 47; Davy 2002: 91; G’Zell 1971; Telesco 1993: 139. This is similar to some beliefs of radical environmental activists, according to Taylor (2000).

but they also created individual, religious solutions that did not require major social activism on their part—because it was not expected to be as efficacious—yet still allowed them to enact their commitments to Gaia (see Pike 2000:48). In performing healing rituals, these eco-conscious Wiccans were creating their own communities that actualized their ideals in microcosmic form, and they believed that their work aided them in progressing toward their goals, however slowly. Furthermore, some Wiccans used the fact that an apocalypse had not occurred as an affirmation that their environmentally oriented activities and religious beliefs have slowed the destruction of the natural world and have increased awareness of the Goddess and the sacredness of the Earth (see Taylor 1999, 2002).

In working to realize their spiritual goals, Wiccans have developed a complicated apocalyptic millenarian vision that addresses fears about the immanent destruction of the Earth's environment. Wiccan religion functions as an expressive, ritualized means by which these fears are recognized, discussed, and productively mitigated through environmentally friendly practices. By witnessing and contributing to the popularity of environmentalist tendencies, Wiccans are able to avoid the frustration and violence that plays a central role in many apocalyptic millenarian groups while further contributing to a religious tradition that works to reintegrate concerns about the Earth into human identity.

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