

# “Out of the Broom Closet”: The Resurgence of Witchcraft and Neo-Paganism

In recent years, the popularity of witchcraft and neo-paganism has risen sharply in North America, due in great part to the growth of feminism and environmentalism, as well as to the perceived inadequacies of established religion. Whether the interest in witchcraft and neo-paganism will survive these movements and establish themselves as traditions in their own right, remains to be seen.

by Patti Ryan

Blue-eyed, baby-faced and smiling, Dave seems an unlikely candidate to fill the solemn position of summoner at the Ottawa Occult Shop's weekly rituals.

But his job demands a dual personality. As the person who greets newcomers when they venture into the shop for their first encounter with witchcraft, he has to be approachable and reassuring. As the witch who later dons a black hooded robe, wields a staff and guards the ritual circle against intruders, he must assume a more intimidating presence.

The Wiccan Church holds weekly public rituals in the basement of the Occult Shop. It is only one of innumerable traditions of witchcraft thriving in North America today. As with “Christianity,” “witchcraft” is an umbrella

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term for a group of religions that share a basic world view, but differ in beliefs and practices; in witchcraft, these different subgroups are called traditions.

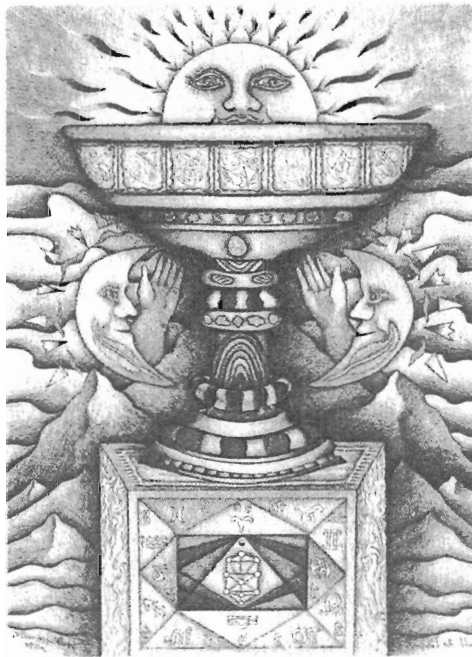
It is difficult to be precise about the numbers because

many witches keep their identities a secret. Furthermore, witchcraft is loosely organized and informal, with no central authority or well-defined theology that binds all its traditions together. Feminist (women only) covens are extremely secretive and keep an even lower profile than most other traditions. Then there are “solitaries” who choose not to join a group at all, but instead practice alone or simply learn the Craft and live its lifestyle.

The result, say researchers, is that the number of self-declared witches is probably small compared all those

who practice some form of the Craft. Shelley Rabinovitch, who travelled across Canada to interview more than 130 witches, estimates there are anywhere between 10,000 and 15,000 witches in Canada.

*An' it harm none, do what ye will.  
The Wiccan Rede*



*“Tools of the Craft”: Tarot cards—Ace of Cups (L.), “the cup of light or birth”, and Six of Wands (R.), “guarding everything that grows and prospers”. [Walter Wegmuller, *New Age Tarot*]*

Margot Adler, author of *Drawing Down the Moon*, suggests similar numbers in the U.S., with approximately 10,000 self-proclaimed witches. Census figures for 1991, released in May, showed the number of people identifying themselves as witches or neo-pagans had more than doubled since 1981. And over 100 pagan periodicals currently exist in press.

In the United States, in fact, witchcraft is expected to out-

## Herbal Charms

Herbal charms are small bags filled with herbs and other symbolic objects. They can be worn on the person or kept in the house to attract what you desire. Here are some suggested combinations.

### To Attract Love

Use a circle of rose-colored or red (for more sexually passionate love) cloth. Fill it with acacia flowers, myrtle, rose petals or buds, jasmine flowers, and lavender. Add a red felt heart and a copper coin or ring. Tie it with blue thread or ribbon, in seven knots.

### To Heal A Broken Heart

Use a circle of blue cloth, filled with All-Heal, Balm of Gilead buds, feverfew, myrtle, and rose petals (white). Take a white felt heart cut into two pieces, sew it together with blue thread while charging the charm, and add it to the herbs. Add a copper coin to draw new love. Tie it with white thread.

### To Get A Job

Use a square of green cloth. Fill it with bay laurel, lavender, and High John the Conqueror Root. Add four other herbs governed by—

- *Mercury*—for a job involving communications
- *The Moon*—for a job involving healing, women's work or health, or psychology
- *Jupiter*—for a job involving leadership and responsibility, or the law
- *Mars*—for a job requiring aggressive, assertive action
- *The Sun*—for a job outdoors, in agriculture or nature, or for an easygoing, enjoyable job
- *Saturn*—for architecture, history, or any job where you will be limiting others' actions or freedom (police work, for example)

Add a silver coin, for wealth, and pictures of any important tools you may use in your work. Tie it with purple thread.

### For Inner Power

Use a square of royal purple cloth, filled with bay leaf, Dragon's Blood, elder flowers, High John the Conqueror Root, rosemary, vervain, oak leaf, holly leaf or berries, and mistletoe. Tie with blue thread, and embroider or draw on your own personal symbol.

Source: Starhawk. *The Spiritual Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of The Great Goddess*. Harper Collins, 1989, pp. 136-137.

pace Christian fundamentalism to become this year's fastest-growing religion. In 1988, a Toronto witch went to court to argue for paid religious holidays for witches—and won. Witches are currently awaiting formal recognition of their religion by the Canadian government; in the United States, they already have it.

Though witches are a tremendously diverse group with little tying them together, Rabinovitch finds that they are generally highly literate. Because of the Craft's low-profile, and because witches are opposed to proselytizing, its members tend to come to it through study; or through dissatisfaction with their current faith, all of which involves research and reading.

The Wiccan Church of Canada is one of the most public, easily accessible traditions, and as such is often the gateway into the world of witchcraft for the uninitiated.

## The Ritual

On any average ritual night at the Occult Shop, people arrive early and mill around the store, waiting for a signal from the summoner that the ritual is about to begin. The air is filled with incense and perfumed oils. Behind the front counter, shelves are lined with dozens and dozens of glass jars of herbs and other ritual elements: incense, crystals, scented oils, and candles. Books—on everything from Tarot cards to ecofeminism—take up most of the store's space.

The crowd is mostly young, and somewhat alternative looking—men with long hair tied back, and many of the women in beads and long skirts. There are at least as many men as women.

Dave, the summoner, eventually reappears at the back of the shop, now wearing a black cloak and carrying a staff, which he bangs three times on the floor to silence the group.

Following Dave's lead, the group slowly begins its barefoot descent down an unlit staircase to the basement, chanting: "*Mother, mother, come be with us/Mother, mother, come be near us/All around us, all within us/Above, below, all flowing through us...*"

At the bottom of the stairs, the group files into a small, dark room and forms a circle, still chanting. Black fabric completely drapes each of the room's windowless walls, and a few candles provide the only light.

"Perfect love and perfect trust," intones Dave, before the ritual begins. No witchcraft circle will usually begin before these words are spoken; they are meant to symbolize the way all members must feel towards each other before they can participate fully and freely.

Two priestesses and a handmaiden stand at one end of the circle. (Often there will be a priestess and a priest, to emphasize balance between the sexes.) The group remains standing, eyes closed, as Dave leads a meditation exercise to create a mood conducive to trance states.

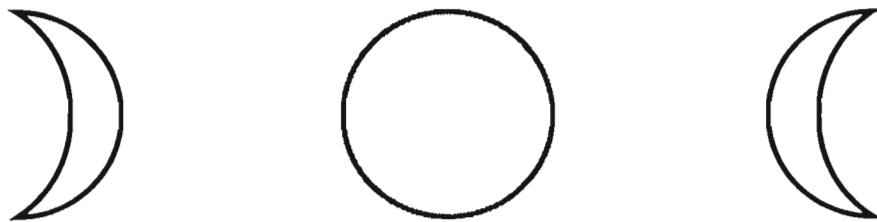
Now deeply relaxed, group members anoint each other in turn with scented oil—an exotic combination of flower, musk and spice essences. The vial makes its way slowly around the circle as each dabs some on the other's forehead, tracing the sign of the pentagram before passing it on with the customary blessing: "Blessed be." The group is still chanting rhythmically.

(The pentagram is a five-pointed star whose points symbolize the four elements—earth, air, water and fire—as well as a fifth entity witches call spirit. It is to witches what the cross is to Christians.)

When everyone is anointed, the priestesses invoke the four

elements. Slowly and with great ceremony, one walks along the circle's interior, sprinkling scented sand on the ground to symbolize earth. Next, incense represents air, then a candle for fire, and a fourth person circles the room with a bowl of water. The elements correspond to the different directions: south, west, north, east, respectively. This is known as casting the circle, or drawing down the moon.

Everything to this point is fairly universal to a witchcraft ceremony, and with the exception of the chants, it rarely changes. But what happens next does. Each ritual will have a different theme, usually emphasizing earthly pleasures and powers, cycles of birth, death and rebirth, and gods and goddesses assuming natural forms. The group might simply choose to invite a particular goddess to participate. To entice the goddess into the circle, the group must generate energy by chanting, focusing, holding hands, and sometimes swaying or dancing.



*Waxing, full and waning moons: the goddess in her three incarnations—maiden, mother and crone.*

During the ritual, no member can leave the circle without the summoner's permission. This is to prevent interruption of the energy generated by the group. To leave, you must make eye contact with the summoner, who will escort you from the circle. To end the ritual, the group—led by the high priestesses—says goodbye to the elements, directions, and goddess, turning to face each direction separately.

"We bid thee goodbye and farewell," the high priestess tells the goddess. Then she claps once to break the circle.

"So mote it be," she says solemnly, ending the ritual with the traditional, archaic Wiccan words.

## Origins and Evolution of Modern Witchcraft

Modern witchcraft falls under the greater category of paganism, now more often called neo-paganism to distinguish it from both the negative literal meaning ("country-dweller") and from Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions considered "pagan" by virtue of not being Christian, Jewish or Islamic. As Margot Adler explains, neo-paganism is pantheistic, a "view that divinity is inseparable from nature and that deity is immanent in nature." As a category, pantheism most often refers to people who identify with some sort of new or re-created form of witchcraft.

In its modern incarnation, witchcraft draws heavily on the 1950s works of writers like Gerald Gardner, Robin Skelton, and the Farrars, who built a system of

beliefs and practices based partly on history, partly on anthropological studies of the 1920s, and partly on imagination. There is strong debate over the connections between modern witchcraft and its medieval counterpart, primarily raised by those who doubt that medieval witchcraft ever existed.

But the debate over the origins of Wicca has not tarnished the tradition in the eyes of witches, precisely because it runs counter to its premise—pantheism. In other words, the fundamental principle of the tradition is its decentralization, which translates into an acceptance of individual interpretations and expressions. Today, "witch" can describe anyone who labels themselves as such, and traditions of witchcraft range widely.

There is, however, one ethic which all witches share, known as the Wiccan Rede: *An' it harm none, do what ye will*—in other words, if it will not hurt anyone, go ahead. They believe in what they call the "threefold law of karma": whatever they do, good or bad, will revisit them three times. Most

witches also share the belief that all living things have souls and spiritual power, and that the world is composed of a network of spiritual forces. Most worship a Goddess who rules the universe with her male consort, the Horned God.

## The Believers

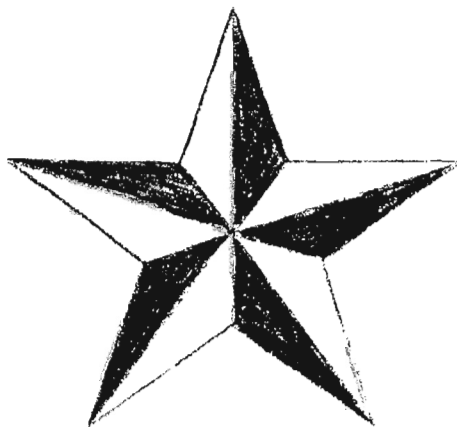
For his first 15 years, Thorbjorn—his pagan name, meaning "thunder bear"—was Catholic. Then, searching for something different, he began to study Zen Buddhism. But that did not suit him either, and one night he finally worked up the nerve to drop in on a free Wiccan class.

The experience was more than he bargained for.

"When I showed up, they weren't having a class so much as they were going over to a house to exorcise it," he recounts, in a tone that still reflects a sense of disbelief. "I thought, okay, sure...I hung around. We went to this house across the street, and they did a ritual to banish any evil spirits."

More intrigued than apprehensive, he decided to stick around for more classes. "I became more and more interested," he says. "I even wore a pentacle for a while."

Several years later, Thorbjorn is an Asatru pagan. As it turned out, witchcraft, he says, was not really for him; something was still "missing." But through the contacts he made in the witchcraft community, he stumbled across the Asatru tradition—a closely related form of paganism. He describes finding Asatru as a sort of religious "coming home."



*The pentagram: representing earth, air, water, fire and spirit.*



Women: "more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit." [Woodcut, Albrecht Durer (Basel, 1493), *Der Ritter von Turn*]

Asatru, which means "true to the northern gods," attempts to reconstruct Norse paganism. Members brew their own beer, wine and mead, produce all their own ritual tools, such as runes and rings, and often share bank accounts. Many have been witches and retain close ties with the witchcraft community.

Now happily settled in the Asatru tradition, Thorbjorn married another Asatru pagan last summer in a pagan handfasting ceremony. His wife, Runreg—whose name means "rune wisdom"—was once a handmaiden in the Ottawa temple of the Wiccan Church.

"I went from neophyte to initiate, and I got a lot of training from an Ottawa coven," says Runreg. The handmaiden allows the priesthood to focus on the ritual without attending to the details of the ceremony—keeping the candles lit, the incense burning, and the worshippers focused. But after eight months, Runreg says, her heart was no longer in it, and she had begun having "theological discussions" with the same person who had first introduced Thorbjorn to Asatru.

"I just felt that his stuff made a lot of sense," she says. "It was like, hey, I put the right shoes on this time." She was initiated into the tradition the same day as Thorbjorn.

The stories of Thorbjorn and Runreg are typical: most newcomers to witchcraft encounter it through the Wiccan Church, dabble in it for a while, and then either move up the ranks in Wicca or move on to a more suitable form of neopaganism. Their experience is just one example of the sheer diversity within witchcraft and neo-paganism.

### Image Problems: A Troubled History

Many practising witches refuse to "come out of the broom closet" about their religious identities. Some do not call themselves witches, preferring the term Wiccan, which is generally considered to be less threatening. Historically, it derives from the Anglo-Saxon word "wic," as in to bend, or "wicce," meaning wisdom or wise.

Within feminist branches of witchcraft, the term "witch" is sometimes used to reclaim female power, in much the same way some activists in the gay movement have reclaimed words like "queer" and "dyke." But within the broader Wiccan sys-

tem, "witch" simply means an initiate of the religion.

Stereotypes regard witches as weird, flaky, spooky, yet powerful—malevolent hags able to practice black magic, sending evil spirits into the lives of their enemies. Centuries of literature and folklore have emphasized witchcraft's most dramatic aspects: "*Double, double, toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble,*" cackle the three Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's darkest tragedy, *Macbeth*. "*Round about the cauldron go; In the poison'd entrails throw...*"

Suspicion in the general public about witchcraft now stems largely from misconceptions arising out of Halloween stereotypes and misinformation. But these attitudes are also fostered by the secret, mysterious nature of witchcraft. Most witches are happy to clear up misconceptions about what they *do not do*; but often, they will not (or cannot) tell you what it is that they *do*.

Some theorists believe witchcraft's much-maligned image grew out of its competition with Christianity in earlier centuries. Robin Skelton, a well-known British Columbia witch and author who has been studying and practising witchcraft since the 1950s, writes that witchcraft was at first "tolerated" by early Christians.

"In the 11th century it was common for there to be a 'pagan' altar in the church, which was almost invariably built on ground once used for pagan worship, and people would pay their respects to the pagan altar by the north door of the church as well as to the Christian altar in the east," writes Skelton in his 1991 book, *The Practice of Witchcraft*. "Later in the 14th century the Church began to persecute witches. From the middle of the 14th century until the middle of the 20th, witchcraft was illegal in most countries of the Western world."

Although laws against witchcraft in Great Britain were not repealed until 1951, by the end of the 17th century persecution of witches had largely died in both the U.S. and Europe. With the Enlightenment, new and more rational forms of inquiry now questioned the use of witch hunts and superstition to explain the natural and supernatural worlds.

But the legendary witch trials are not completely confined to the history books. In 1972, a woman was "tried" by a group of locals from her rural Nova Scotia town who found out that she was a witch and decided she should be burned. The woman claims she was accosted by a group of six adults on a deserted beach, where they tried her "in the name of the Roman Catholic Church" and sentenced her to death.

She says they accused her of "sacrificing infants, blighting crops, interfering with livestock, casting the evil eye, causing illness and death, and ensorcelling men." Though she escaped, when she returned to the town nine years later she was warned to leave within six months or someone would be hired to shoot her.

### Women and Witchcraft

Though many men have joined the movement, the modern relationship between women and witchcraft has strong historical roots. In the 15th century, two Dominican priests, Heinrich Institoris and James Sprenger, wrote the volume that for centuries was used to explain the proclivity of women to witchcraft, and then to justify the execution of alleged witches.

In their *Malleus Maleficarum* ("The Hammer of Witches"), they argued that "[w]omen are naturally more impressionable, and more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit...They have slippery tongues, and are

unable to conceal from their fellow-women those things which by evil arts they know...All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman." "Women," the priests continued, are quicker "to abjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft." Heresy is therefore to be expected of women. "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable."

The *Malleus Maleficarum*, which went through 13 printings, was provided to interrogators and confessors, who were almost always male. Although the priests conceded that men too could submit to witchcraft, their writings reflect not only a hatred and fear of witchcraft, but also of women. About 90 per cent of witch trials from the 15th to 17th centuries, most of which involved women, occurred after the first publication of *Malleus Maleficarum*. The book's publication also preceded the Vatican's decision to define witchcraft as an exceptional crime, thereby removing all legal limits on torture for accused witches.

Historians disagree over the exact number of witches that were executed. Estimates range widely, from tens of thousands to nine million. This is the legacy that modern witches carry with them. As recently as the late 17th century, 20 people were executed, and about a hundred more imprisoned, following accusations of witchcraft in the New England communities of Salem and Danvers.

Carol Karlsen, in her book *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, argues that almost all those accused of witchcraft in colonial New England shared two characteristics. First, they were inheritors of property or money, unusual in a society where sons were first in line for inheritance; second, they were disagreeable women who frequently challenged the hierarchy of colonial society. Hence, Karlsen concludes, witchcraft in New England reflected fears of powerful women more so than fears of non-Christian beliefs.

### **Social and Religious Explanations for the Growth**

Witches and researchers alike agree that both the environmental movement and feminism go a long way to explain the religion's current popularity. "A couple of things are in play at the same time, and I think one of the really major ones is the whole environmental crisis we're wrestling with," says Rabinovitch. "Traditional Jewish and Christian thought has always been one of ownership: God gave dominion over the animals, the birds, etcetera, to Adam and Eve, and that's been interpreted as the ability to take whatever we want for ourselves, which has led us into the pickle we're in now."

"As an alternative to that," she says, "Wicca and most

neo-pagan thought is about equals: this tree is equal to me, this cat is equal to me, this black person, this Chicana, is equal to me, and that means you have no right at all to exploit anything. I hate to say 'spiritual correctness,' but it's hitting people at a level deeper than political correctness, and it makes sense."

But Bill Marvee, a Catholic priest and prominent Canadian theologian, cautions that this is just one interpretation of traditional Christian thought. "It's true that in the Genesis story of creation, it is said that human beings are ultimately created as the summit of all God's creations," he relates. "But whether all the extremes can be attributed to Christian and Jewish faith is another question...It seems to me we would have devastated nature even without Christian faith, too."

Barrie Zwicker, a frequent critic on social and religious issues, thinks people who have been in a state of "deep denial" until now are starting to wake up to environmental concerns and relate to them on a more spiritual level.

"In times of crisis, people review their basic value systems, their basic beliefs," says Zwicker. "Now, people are looking for simple answers. They want to go back to the old ways and then everything will be okay. That explains both the

rise of neo-Nazis and the rise in New Age beliefs, and it explains fundamentalism and various other religious sects, not excluding the Davidians. In that larger context, you have witches. They're logically going to come in for extra attention as explainers of the human dilemma that we're in."

Some witches say part of what drove them to witchcraft in the

first place is the way the Christian church has historically limited female role models. "The problem with Christianity for women is that the roles it offers are so limiting: you have either the Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalen," says Corainder, 23, who has been a witch for eight years. "If you choose to follow the Virgin Mary, you have to serve your husband as he serves God. If you follow Mary Magdalen, you're a slut."

Naomi Goldenberg, a professor of religious studies at the University of Ottawa, says women are feeling the reverberations of feminism from the 1960s and 1970s in their spiritual lives. "The women's movement is a whole cultural revolution that takes time to work through," says Goldenberg. "These ideas are seeping into our culture, and women are getting more and more interested. Many of them are dissatisfied with the kinds of symbols that traditional religions present. Women are thinking more about what they need in religious practices."

Some witches with Christian backgrounds maintain that Christianity is not changing at the same pace as society, and is having trouble meeting the needs of its congregations' younger members. Catholics wrestle especially hard to reconcile their

*And thou who thinkest to seek for me,  
know that thy seeking and yearning shall  
avail thee not, unless thou knowest the  
mystery: that if that which thou seekest  
thou findest not within thee, thou wilt  
never find it without thee, for behold: I  
have been with thee from the beginning,  
and I am that which is attained at the end  
of desire.*

### *The Charge of the Goddess*



Limiting female roles.  
[Kirk Anderson]

faith with issues like divorce, abortion and birth control that confront them daily.

"Confusion in the extreme," is how one Christian theologian—who wished not to be identified—sums up the situation of how the church's hierarchy handles real human problems. "A lot of people, at least in the context of Canadian culture, don't feel that the church should be telling them what to believe. They go, 'Yeah, right. Who are you? You're a 75-year-old man who's never had sex. How can you tell me about my sex life?'"

Marc Tyrrell, a witch who researched Ottawa's witchcraft community, also suggests three personal reasons that motivate people to explore witchcraft: a search for the female as divine, a search for magic in the sense of "wonder" or "enchantment," and a quest for personal power in the material and social worlds.

Ideally, a coven serves as a training ground for each witch to develop her or his personal power. Witches think of power as another word for energy: an invisible network of forces shaping reality. Rituals create a situation that allows the individual to reach and control her or his psychic abilities. The net effect is a feeling of power from within that can effect change in the individual's immediate world. The chance to learn how to harness this kind of personal power, says Tyrrell, attracts many newcomers.

## And in 10 Years: Religious Fad or Serious Faith?

How does all this bode for the future of witchcraft?

Its close alliance with so many current social issues seems to characterize it as a trend whose long-term potential is uncertain. It has some of the classic textbook characteristics of new religious movements—but it is missing considerably more.

Despite Wicca's relatively small following, underground nature and apparent appeal to victimized people, it defies being typed as a cult because in structure, content and purpose it fails to meet most of the major criteria. Most importantly, it emphasizes self-empowerment, which is antithetical to cult mentality. Cults, unlike most witchcraft traditions, usually have one charismatic leader and well-established hierarchies. Cults actively recruit new members; witches do not.

As it now stands, witchcraft seems to be a curious hybrid of social movement, spiritual movement, and new religion—a

paradox entirely in its own category.

One question is whether the religion's apparent momentum will falter if and when the media lose their fascination with issues like women's spirituality and environmentalism. Will it have gained enough of a foothold by that time to evolve into a legitimate religion with long-term potential from the social movement it is frequently viewed as now?

"I don't know in Canada if there ever will be a recognized pagan faith," muses Thorbjorn. "Maybe Wicca in a few years. But it's very hard in Canada to be recognized... Paganism comes from all cultures. It's hard to be seen as *the* pagan faith."

Its popularity might also hinge, in part, on the collective religious mentality of Canadians. From that perspective, Professor Reginald Bibby, a sociologist at the University of Lethbridge who has been analyzing religious trends in Canada for some 20 years, throws some cold water on the religion's prospects:

"Looking at it as a product that frankly is often characterized as something that's rather deviant, it's really had a tough time trying to crack the religious marketplace," he says. "There are certainly some Canadians who have an interest. But interest in something like Wicca is still pretty small, relative to what the vast majority of Canadians are inclined to do."

But he adds one caveat: "We're finding over and over again that there still is a market for spirituality; there's still intrigue with the supernatural. If religions have something to say to those things, they'll survive."

Professor Nicholas Spanos, a Carleton University psychologist, compares witchcraft to any other "fringe religion" that attracts people searching for meaning and a sense of connection: as long as there are people who feel alienated from their society, witchcraft and other fringe movements will survive. "These people are looking for stable interpersonal relationships. They're joining because members seem to have their heads on straight and offer friendship as well as perspective," says Spanos.

Meanwhile, perplexed religious studies scholars are still scratching their heads over how to characterize it. Like its individual practitioners, witchcraft refuses to be classified, and squirms under researchers' attempts to quantify, pigeon-hole or dissect it.

Perhaps Rabinovitch expresses the paradox best.

"Neo-paganism," she says, "defies the traditional boundaries of what religion is." ●

### Suggestions For Further Reading

- Margot Adler. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today.* (Viking Press, 1986 [1979]).
- Reginald Bibby. *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada.* (Irwin, 1987).
- Carol F. Karlson. *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England.* (Vintage, 1987).
- Kevin Marron. *Witches, Pagans and Magic in the New Age.* (McClelland-Bantam, 1989).
- Robin Skelton. *The Practice of Witchcraft.* (Press Procepec, 1991).
- Starhawk. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Religion of the Great Goddess.* (Harper and Row, 1979).