

Potter-mania and Wicca: Harmless Hobbies or Avenue to the Occult?

A little research on the Christian response to the rise of Wicca and witchcraft and their relationship to feminism and neopaganism reveals a little burst of writing in 1999. We don't know whether that is more a reflection of a collective recognition of, or the actual ubiquitousness of, all things occultic beginning in the late 90s, but it does seem that the popularity curve, if you will, began noticeably rising then. By 1999, *Potter* novels, like the latest hysteria-producing tome *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, had taken hold as perennial top-performers among *New York Times* bestsellers. TV shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* and films like *Practical Magic* featured young females and their Craft in new and exciting ways and the whole enterprise of the occult seemed to spring from the dark basement to the mainstream of culture at the turn of the Millennium.

1999 is also the year when our lead author for this Special Focus collection, Linda Harvey, first penned *Heresy in the Hood: Teen Witchcraft in America*. Her follow-up article ([featured here](#)) reflects the need to update the original with cultural examples due to their sheer abundance. In its four years here, her original article evoked more feedback to this Web site - which boasts 8,400 resources and receives scores of feedback messages a month - than any other single title on our site. Her article samples the often-reactionary (when not incendiary) responses from Wiccans, many of them teens, defending their newfound faith against myths perpetrated against harmless nature-centered practitioners who have nothing to do with Satan or evil spells. This is in keeping with a concerted attempt by adherents of Wicca, reportedly the fastest-growing religion in America, to put the best foot forward with an increasingly aware public. (Perhaps that's why most of our feedback reads like identical, mass-produced talking points.)

Some confusion, it is true, persists regarding the relationship of Wicca, an amalgam of beliefs centered in a female deity-personification or Goddess and oriented heavily to nature, and traditional witchcraft associated with black magic and curses. Wiccans are fond of pointing this out and emphasizing the upbeat nature of the neopaganism they promote. Wicca's ties with feminism are hard to miss, as well. Charlotte Allen, in a review below, traces the intertwining of the two, writing, "Goddess worship is everywhere in the literature and praxis of feminism." Reverence for "the Goddess" and the heretical doctrine of "feminist spirituality" has even made its way into mainline Christian seminaries and churches. Thus, as Russ Wise writes in *Goddess Worship* below, "Whether the individual seeks the goddess through witchcraft, the feminist movement, the New Age, or the liberal church, he or she is beginning a quest to understand and discover the 'higher self'...often referred to as the 'god self.'" This is the original lie in the Garden of Eden: "You will be like gods."

Where does that leave the uninitiated, trying to understand a complex and overlapping array of religious and philosophical themes? For the Christian, recalling the biblical prohibitions against witchcraft and divination is paramount. Practically, this means that the pervasive appeals to personal and spiritual empowerment, earth-friendliness and

meaning-laden rituals - especially for young girls who haunt Wicca sites and take in the books, shows and movies in increasing numbers - are competing against traditional worldviews like Christianity (and often winning, testimonies reveal). What are the stakes? Does a seemingly benign work like a Harry Potter novel create the risk of drawing kids into occultic dabbling and, eventually, full-on practice? That depends on the child and parents working with him or her using biblical discernment, according to Sue Bohlin (below). Christian English professor Alan Jacobs sees better questions regarding Potter. Regardless of this or that particular book or movie, the pattern seems to be a media- and profit-driven groundswell - not necessarily applauded in that sense by Wiccans - that takes advantage of Westerners' penchant for spirituality unfettered by doctrinal or traditional parameters. That is, neopagan witchcraft has made a real comeback, it would seem, on the coattails of the zeitgeist of the West - namely "I'm spiritual, but I'm not into organized religion."

Explore with us some of the surprisingly complex religious-philosophical underpinnings of this movement in our Special Focus so you won't get sucked in unawares. If you are a Wiccan or lean that way, test the waters with an open mind and let us know what you think.