

WHY NOT BURN WITCHES?

By Bill Honsberger

The reality of the resurgence of witchcraft in modern times so often ridiculed and dismissed as sheer fantasy, can no longer be ignored. It has become the pagan expression of choice to many; the darling of the feminist, the haven for the rebel, and most troubling, the object of fascination among many teenagers. There are many forms of this type of belief. Called Wicca, neo-paganism, goddess worship, or simply the craft, it may be practiced openly or held in secret. Centered on the divine nature of all things, this movement is coming out of the "broom closet", and it is quite vocal as to who is to blame for its problems and for those of the world.

Two years ago, the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago brought together a collection of religious leaders and laypeople from all around the world. One of the most popular groups at the Parliament was the Wiccans. Phyllis Curolt, head of one group called "the Covenant of the Goddess", talked about the rapid growth of their organization, (from 20,000 in 1986 to 350,000 in 1993!) and about how witches and pagans of all sorts have been the victims of Christian prejudice and violence for generations.

She branded Christianity as immoral, based on two charges which have been echoed by many Wiccans that I have spoken with. Her first charge is that Christianity is immoral because of its claim to be the only truth, the only way to know God. She did not attempt to establish the truth or falsity of Christianity's truth claims. Rather, she was insulted at what she considered the arrogance and prejudice of making such a claim. Secondly, she charges that Christians killed nine million witches during the medieval ages. Her conclusion was that Wicca was a far better option because it is loving and benign, while Christianity, of course, is cruel and bloodthirsty.

What are we to make of these claims? Let's consider charge #1 first. Is Christianity immoral because it claims to be exclusive? In our pluralistic culture, "intolerance", newly defined as rejecting that all ideas are equally valid or true, is the only real sin. If intolerance, as defined this way, is immoral, certainly Christianity must plead "guilty", since from its inception it has made unabashed declarations of the exclusive nature of "the way to God" and of truth itself.

But is exclusivity immoral? If you think about it, our lives are full of exclusive claims. We do not consider such claims to be immoral, merely true or false. For example, (1) "Wheaton, Illinois is the capitol of the United States." Or, (2) "I am writing this article on an IBM clone computer." Or, (3) "My eyes are only brown." Now all of these are exclusive claims. It is Wheaton, and not some other town, IBM rather than any other type of computer, or brown and no other color, which I single out for my purposes. The really relevant question is whether or not these claims are true. It is quite clear that none of them are immoral merely on the face of them. Can the exclusive claim as it relates to the color of my eyes be perceived as immoral? Is it somehow unfair to blue eyes or green eyes, that my eyes are brown? This seems like a silly argument no matter which way you look at it. It is truth itself which is exclusive. The claim about Wheaton is clearly false, but there is an exclusive truth regarding the capitol, one that rules out or excludes Wheaton! But let us suppose for a moment that exclusive claims are in fact immoral, as Wiccans and other relativists claim. When a person says "I am a Witch", isn't he or she excluding Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Jews, etc. from the category, thus making an

exclusive claim of his or her own? So if exclusivity is immoral, one can only conclude that Witches are immoral as well. Of course, we as Christians don't want to confuse categories. We would prefer to simply question whether a given claim is true or false.

It should also be remembered that it is not the Christian who makes the exclusivity claim for his belief. It is Jesus Himself who makes the claim in John 14:6 that He is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no man comes to the Father but by me." Christians are merely piggy-backing onto the claims of Jesus Christ. If He is wrong then we are wrong. But if He is right, then the claim is not prejudicial or immoral, but is true.

The second charge is that Christians are immoral because they have killed 9 million witches since the medieval ages. I want to respond to this in two ways, first historically and then logically. Historically, it must be noted that the 9 million number comes from outer space. There is absolutely no evidence or scholarship to support any such claim. But the lack of evidence does not seem to bother the Wiccans. Gerald Gardner, a leading proponent of witchcraft, notes that witches are inventing their own history but believes that this is fine. "Victim hood" is the ticket to sympathy and then acceptance in our society, and larger numbers would produce the greatest amount of sympathy.

But there are even larger historical problems with this claim. The two events used to bolster this claim are the Inquisition in Europe, and the Salem Witch trials in New England. Let us take a closer look at these incidents and see if they actually have merit.

Let me say very clearly at the outset that if even one witch was killed by a Christian, then that was one too many. Murder is wrong. Whoever took part in the murder of witches, or people accused of being witches, whether representing a church or involved in a mob action, disobeyed a direct command of the Lord that Christians are not to kill their enemies, but rather to love them. Having said that, what about the large numbers of victims claimed? The medieval inquisitors generally kept records so that they would receive credit for their "work". In this sense, it was in their interest to inflate the number of people who had been put to the question, so as to please the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Even with that, most historians place the total number of people killed during the inquisition somewhere between 30,000 and 300,000, which includes all sorts of people. Even using the higher number, it is an incredible leap to argue that 9 million witches were killed. But there is more.

It is important to understand the primary purpose and targets of the Inquisition, so that one can see through this argument. The primary target of the inquisition for most of its 600 year history was pre-reformation Protestants! Followers of Wycliffe and Huss, Waldensees, Albigensians, and so on. The secondary target of the inquisition was the Jews. It was only in the late 15th century, after the publication of a book by some monks condemning witchcraft, that witches become a target. The most serious example of this is the death of 5,000 witches in one French community. If true, this would be a most heinous and terrible wrong, though far from the enormity that would be required to reach a total of 9,000,000 killed. But I think it can be shown that even these types of accounts are questionable at best. The issue is; were these people really witches or was there something else going on? Let us proceed to the Salem trials in 1692 to exemplify this problem.

The trials in 1692 are considered by Wiccans to be a prime example of how Christians have historically treated witches. The public image of the trial is that these cruel, coldhearted Puritan ministers gleefully dragged these benign, earth loving proto-hippies to unjust trials and to the grave. This of course shows how evil the Puritans were and therefore can be seen as a grand indictment of all Christians. Nothing could be more non-historical than this perspective. While there were a few Puritan ministers involved with the trials, the majority of the Puritan ministers were extremely opposed to the proceedings and berated the magistrates for allowing them to continue. Most of the ministers had been educated at places like Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard, and they thought that the trials were wrong. They especially believed that the type of evidence used was seriously flawed. This evidence was known as "spectral" evidence. What this meant was that the accuser claimed that they saw spirits and demons surrounding the accused. The fact that these specters were not visible to anyone else in the courtroom apparently did not bother the magistrates. The ministers, however, believed the introduction of this type of evidence to be against the Law of Moses, and against the laws of the land. Sadly, for twenty people, the minister's rebuke and magistrate's cessation of the trials came too late. But again a knowledge of history is important, because these twenty people were almost assuredly not witches! In a Monty-Pythonish sort of fashion, those accused of witchcraft would have been merely punished and released if they confessed to the crime of witchcraft. But if someone pled innocent to the charge and was subsequently convicted, the penalty was death. For many people, the course to take seemed obvious; give the court the confession it wanted and save your life. But for twenty that would not do. They would not confess to the charge and were killed for it. Many of those executed prayed for their accusers before their executions, that God would forgive them, much as Jesus had prayed prior to his execution. The picture of these proceedings that the Wiccans present has little to do with historical reality.

The conclusion that one can responsibly draw from the Inquisition and the Witch trials in Salem, is that Christians have indeed been immoral and bloodthirsty, but that has very little to do with witchcraft. Historically, it is true that some in the name of Christ have been prolific in murdering other Christians. It is also true that some witches, or those accused of practicing witchcraft, were indeed murdered, although the number do not add up to anywhere near the nine million claimed. So if witches want to attack the sins of the Church, please let me help. Our "dirty laundry" is out there for everyone to see, and I think it is incumbent upon Christians to admit the sins and foibles of our past and our present. This is not to the detriment of the Christian position. Rather, it an admission of what both the Bible and our empirical senses tell us, that we still struggle with sinful inclinations.

Let me suggest another way to respond to this murder charge. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that it is a true claim that Christians killed nine million witches during the medieval ages. Well, my question is, why not burn witches? What could be wrong with burning, hanging, stabbing, shooting or spitting on whomever we may please? This needs to be explained. It is one of the central tenets of all the different versions of witchcraft and paganism that I have come across, that there is no absolute standard of right and wrong. People have the right to decide for themselves what is right and no one else can judge them. At the Parliament, I attended a meeting of witches who illustrated my point in this way. They went around the room taking turns explaining what it is that they believed. Each person in turn stated, almost as if it were rehearsed, "Well, I cannot speak for anyone else, but for me witchcraft means this ... [fill in the

blank] and then the next person would make a similar disclaimer all around the circle. Phyllis Curolt used the example of the Christian's sexual monogamy to prove that Christianity was too stifling. Each person, she claims, has the right to sleep with whomever they chose, and no one has the right to judge anyone else's choices. Since all are divine, then each "god" can make his or her own decisions concerning morality. This belief is not incidental to Wicca; it is primary. Almost every time I have ever talked to pagan/witches, and have asked what it is they believe, the relativity of ethics is one of the first things mentioned. Why is this important? Let me return to my question: Why not burn witches? If what witches say about morality is true, then why would it be wrong for me and a few of my Baptist friends to go up to Boulder some Friday night and kill a few witches for fun? After all, if we think it is ok, no one would have the right to judge us, would they? And by this same reasoning, aren't all the medieval inquisitors also justified, since they were merely doing what they thought was right and no one has the right to judge them or legislate their values? If there are no absolute standards in ethics, that would validate witch hunts, wouldn't it? But of course no witch wants that to be the case. They believe and argue that the killing of the witches was morally wrong and that Christians are therefore culpable for these heinous acts. But how can this be so if each person decides what is right. Burn the witch - drown the witch - take the witch out for lunch, are all equally moral actions, depending upon the person making the choice.

So I repeat the question; Why not burn witches? From the Christian perspective there is an answer. It is wrong to burn witches because God has said so. It is wrong today; it will be wrong tomorrow. It is wrong here and it is wrong in France and in New Guinea and everywhere else. In order to say this we must have a transcendent ethic, which is not the cumulative collection of individual opinions, but rather a standard by which all opinions must be judged. The god of nature cannot qualify. Let me illustrate.

I talked to a Theraveda Buddhist at the Parliament. I asked him how he knew that mankind should practice non-violence, since he was an atheist. He responded that "Nature teaches us non-violence." I replied, "That is an interesting idea, but all one has to do is watch a David Attenborough video for about five minutes before figuring out that the sum total of nature is animals eating other animals and making little animals which will eat other animals and so on". I went on to say, "Nature has a lot of beautiful things in it, but the one thing one cannot say is that nature teaches us non-violence." He responded by yelling at me, "You just think we need a personal God or something to tell us what is right and wrong?" I said, "Yes, that is exactly what we need". You see, he did not want non-violence to be an option for some and not for others. He wanted it to be a binding absolute that all would honor. But in rejecting God, he had left himself with no way to justify a claim that would bind all of us.

The witches have the same problem. Phyllis Curolt is right about the immorality of those who killed witches, whether one or nine million. But she is wrong about the relativity of ethics. If she is right about ethics, then her claim is blown apart, and by her own standards she might be accused of judging others, which of course is not supposed to be done. If she is right about the immorality of murder, then her whole belief system built upon this foundation of relativism collapses into incoherent nonsense. In a way, you could say that her attack upon the church is really an argument for Christianity, an appeal for justice based upon Christian moral standards.

The only way her claim can be justified is if she is wrong and Christians are right. Why not burn witches? Because there is a God who has the right to set standards, and He has said it is wrong.

For Further Reading:

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