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Possibly the oldest religion in the world. Why is it not a religion in the eyes of the law?

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Bacon is made from pigs, zebras are black and white, panda's are an endangered species, and witches are evil. One of those statements is untrue.

Take a large pot of mainstream religious arrogance, add a pinch of two thousand year old stereotyping, add a hint of government indifference and finish it off with a cup of modern media clichés. And what have you got? The average persons view on Wicca, witchcraft and paganism. Many Christians see witches as evil devil worshippers, and are really quite fond of telling witches this. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Is one of their favorite quotes. Forget *Charmed*, *harry potter*, and *Buffy the vampire slayer*. Witchcraft is not the, demon fighting, Latin language, mystical chosen ones, object that the media have made it out to be. Wiccans have said for centuries that witchcraft is an ancient nature loving religion, in which they worship a god and goddess and they try to work in harmony with the world around them.

The origins of witchcraft are said to be early human efforts to deal with women's mysteries, particularly the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, and childbirth. We can't be certain when witchcraft first started, although it probably started around the same time that pre-humans mastered fire, around 400,000 years ago. The oldest evidence of witchcraft is a piece of whalebone from 106,000 years ago that has a crude calendar marking the phases of the moon and a woman's menstrual cycle.

Early witchcraft combined magic ritual with herbal preparations, built on millennia of lore passed down through generations of wise women. As one example, consider the use of the rose. Modern science has revealed that the rose hip (the sweet part at the centre of a rose) has the highest concentration of iron of any plant, it is also an excellent source of vitamin C. A woman loses a lot of iron during her period, and a natural supplement of iron has obvious positive benefits. Additionally, there are a few dozen minor trace ingredients in rose hips, many of which help stabilise a woman's emotions and moods while on her period. Obviously early witches didn't know the scientific details, but they did know that eating rose hips (either fresh or dried rose hips used to make rose hip tea) helped during menstruation. So, taking rose hips during menstruation became a fairly standard part of witchcraft. In fact, it is believed it is this witchcraft practice that led to the association of roses with romance. Before Christianity, the use of rose hips or rose hip tea during a woman's period was fairly common knowledge. The men who were close to a woman, particularly her husband or mate would make sure that they brought their lover plenty of roses during her period. And obviously a man would have to be on intimate terms with a woman to know the right timing for when to bring roses. Several early Christian popes attempted to eliminate the practice of witchcraft, including outlawing growing or possessing flowers with the death penalty, because witchcraft made so much use of various flowers for herbal preparations. This harsh penalty caused a lot of the common knowledge about the herbal effects of various flowers to be lost in Western civilisation, but the association of roses with romance and love remained long after the actual witchcraft meaning was lost. Witchcraft, like any religion, has blossomed and grown and changed through the millennia, and now has

lots of different forms. But all of those new forms can be traced back to early maternity care.

Witches are coming out of their proverbial broom closets and speaking up, they've been misunderstood, mocked and even murdered over the centuries. But today, pagans are more willing to come out of the closet to speak of their beliefs and practices, which are rooted in ancient times. At the same time, they're asking for tolerance and understanding from others, particularly Christians, which seems to be the only religion that has a negative few on modern witchcraft.

Whatever the truth of its origin Wicca and Witchcraft have now become a fast growing minority religion since its revival in the 1940s. It possibly now has as many followers in some western countries as other more officially acceptable alternative religions such as the Sikhs. Wicca is now even recognised by some government bodies such as the American military, which recognises it as an official religion. Even in Britain, the UK Home Office has authorised Wiccan prison visiting priests and priestesses.

In September 1986 a federal appeals court ruled that Wicca was a religion protected by the Constitution, for American witches at least, this was good news. While witchcraft is recognised by the UK home office, witchcraft is not actually recognised as an official religion by the UK government. UK witches are not protected under the same laws that protect other religions, and their followers, against discrimination. The last UK census reports have revealed that there are between 6,000 and 15,000 witches in England alone. It is said that, if all witches in the world gathered together in one spot, they would fill France to bursting point. It is estimated that if witchcraft continues to grow as fast as it is, then in less than twenty years, it will rival Christianity as the most popular religion on the planet.

What all wiccans, pagans and witches really want is for witchcraft to be recognised as an official religion, so they can be protected under anti-discrimination laws. But they need more than that. Being protected is nothing, if the prejudice still remains, so the wish for most wiccans is that children would be taught about witchcraft in school religious education lessons. We are not saying turn religious lessons into witchcraft lessons, we only ask to give the same look at wicca that they would give to Christianity, Sikhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and any other religion on earth. While many parents may feel that they want the schools to provide permission slips that they must sign if they want their children to study witchcraft. Any self-respecting pagan would ask, why? In my opinion children know the difference between right and wrong, and would not take part in something that is obviously evil. I would say, let your children learn about witchcraft and make up their own minds. While equality without education may sound preferable to parents who may have a problem with witchcraft. This method has been happening in America since 1986 and has unfortunately failed. As was proved by the tragic events that took place on 20th of February 2001 involving a 12-year old girl named Tempest Smith.

Two young people dress in black, they are teased and taunted at their school and presumed to be Goths and interested in Witchcraft (They weren't.)

And if these same two young people then one-day decide to go to that school with some guns and kill several of their Christian classmates, their teacher and themselves, the media just can't get enough of it. It becomes a national tragedy

Every written and spoken word is given a new meaning. Every aspect of their home and school lives are scrutinised. Every host on every talk show and every editorial writer from the New York Times to the Rocky Mountain News had a theory, a commentary or a soaring inspirational piece about the tragedy. And in the end they were also left with a new Christian martyr. The name of Cassie Bernall and Columbine has become forever branded into American history.

When Tempest Smith dressed in black, she was teased and taunted at her school and presumed to be a Goth and interested in Witchcraft (She was.) And if she resolves not to go to school one day in 2001 with a gun, but decides instead that she will simply end her pain by taking her own life, well that doesn't make her a national tragedy; it just makes her another teen suicide. What may make this case different from the first is that twelve-year-old Tempest Smith's tormentors ARE the Christians. Their weapons of choice were not guns, but "Christian hymns." Will the notebooks and computers of Tempest's classmates be seized and searched now? Will their CDs be examined for subversive anti-Pagan lyrics? Will their parents be questioned about their family's prayer life by the local police station? Will they be sued for not exerting proper parental control over their vocalising offspring? No, it doesn't look like Tempest is going to be elevated to Cassie Bernall status anytime soon. "But, maybe" she will make an interesting lesson plan.

"Gunmen targeted a Christian girl because of her beliefs." BIG story there! And why not? "Christians targeted a Pagan girl because of her beliefs." No big story there. And why not?

Tempest Smith has unfortunately proved that just because witches in America are recognised and protected by the constitution, the stereotypes still remain because schools refuse to teach their pupils anything about witchcraft for fear of offending Christian parents. Because the pupils never learned anything about witchcraft, they were stuck believing the stereotypes that were laid down before them by a prejudiced Christian society. Pagans all over the world, pray for only these two things. Recognition that what they are practising is an official religion, and for pupils in schools to be taught about that religion, just the same way they would teach about any other religion. So that another Tempest Smith will never occur.

Because of their fear of being killed, witches have had to remain hidden for many centuries. But they have been able to carefully influence the world over the centuries. But their influence has affected the world the most over the last decade. In the late nineties people became more willing to take part in what was called "New age remedies" or "alternate remedies" such as crystal healing, herbal remedies, meditation and many more, all of which can be traced back to witchcraft.

Many witches believe that the passing of the millennium was the sign for our return. The time when society was mature enough to accept who we are and we could finally come out of hiding and let ourselves be known to the world. To show it that we hid only for our personal safety and not because we have evil deeds that need hiding. We are a part of this world, we always have been and we always will be. We're here to

stay, so you might as well get used to us. We extend our hand in friendship to all people and their religions. We respect their right to believe what they want to believe and ask that they do the same for us. We're not looking to convert anyone, we don't go out and preach to people. If a person wants to become a witch then it is a path they must tread on their own; we only offer help and advice when asked. The world has changed, and it has changed to accommodate us, we only want you to realise that fact so you will accommodate us too. Welcome to the new world, I'm sure you'll all be very happy here if you give it a chance.