

Wicca and the Making of Magic: Material Agency, Gender, and the Politics of Religious Categorization

Evelyn Safar, 2025

This summer, I used my fellowship funding to advance my honors thesis research on contemporary Wicca, a modern Neo-Pagan religion rooted in goddess worship, ritual practice, and magic. My project explores how Wiccan practitioners can challenge longstanding assumptions about magic as irrational or illegitimate and how Wiccan practice can reclaim magic as a meaningful form of spiritual and social agency. By combining historical research with ethnographic fieldwork, I examine how gender, material practice, and questions of legitimacy can shape Wiccan experience.

The first part of my project focused on how Western scholars defined “magic” against “religion.” Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers like Edward Tylor, James Frazer, and Émile Durkheim often framed magic as primitive, private, and socially suspect, while elevating religion as rational and communal. These ideas shaped enduring associations of magic with secrecy, deviance, and femininity. My thesis situates Wicca against this backdrop, showing how some Wiccans invert these categories: what earlier scholars dismissed as irrational or illegitimate becomes, for these practitioners, a powerful way to connect with divinity, embody agency, and resist patriarchal or institutional authority.

The second part of my project centered on fieldwork. This summer, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Wiccan practitioners from several covens and lineages in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. These conversations revealed both clear points of agreement and areas of divergence among these interviewees. The vast majority of practitioners I spoke with emphasized the importance of categorizing Wicca as a religion rather than a vague ‘spirituality.’ They stressed the structured nature of their practice—complete with liturgy, initiation, priesthood, and ritual tools—as a way of claiming legitimacy on their own terms. Many also pushed back against outside portrayals that trivialize Wicca, especially their own lineaged traditions, as unserious or overly eclectic.

There was also broad agreement about the relationship between magic and agency. Practitioners described magical practice as a way of asserting power and effecting change in the world, whether through candle rituals, seasonal festivals, or acts of healing. Yet their explanations varied: some emphasized magic as a cooperation with divine forces, while others described it as an extension of personal will, mediated through ritual form. Several noted that balancing the “mundane” and “magical” worlds is a constant challenge, since initiation often changes how they perceive everyday life.

At the same time, these interviews revealed a number of striking contrasts. For example, practitioners differed on how to use and identify terms like witch, priestess, or occultist. Some embraced these titles interchangeably, while others stressed distinctions, seeing “initiate” or “priestess” as signaling deeper levels of commitment and authority. Participants also disagreed on the role of syncretism: some saw the blending of Wicca—across different lineages and traditions, or with New Age practices or other Pagan traditions—as a strength, while others worried it diluted the tradition and led to appropriation.

In short, the Wiccans I spoke with understand magic as both a practical means of shaping the world and as a framework for redefining power, gender, and legitimacy. By locating agency in embodied ritual, material tools, and the divine, these practitioners show magic to be structured and relational rather than irrational or antisocial, as earlier scholars claimed. What may appear marginal or illegitimate to outsiders can serve, to some practitioners, as the foundation of a meaningful religious identity. While they shared broad commitments, my interviews also found differences in self-description, ritual practice, and views on syncretism, underscoring that for these practitioners, making space for disagreement was itself an important part of their religious life. This summer’s research demonstrates that, to these practitioners, Wicca’s vitality lies in its ability to hold both common commitments and diverse interpretations, turning its decentralized, contested, and marginalized position into a resource for reimagining religious authority. In documenting these perspectives, my project not only contributes to the study of contemporary religion but also shows how the practitioners I spoke with redefine the boundaries between magic and religion, offering new ways to understand agency, authority, and belonging.

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