

Is the Wiccan Rede Enough? Proposing a New Wiccan Code of Ethics

By Merlyn

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I propose that the Wiccan community should develop a code of ethics to help clarify what are acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for those who claim to be members of our religion. Presently our one rule is the Wiccan Rede, "An ye harm none, do as ye will." Suggesting that we need a Wiccan code (more rules!) is a controversial act on my part, because no higher authority can tell a Wiccan what to believe or how to act. In Wicca each person is responsible for his/her own spirituality and corresponding behavior.

Many Wiccans think the Rede is sufficient and no other written rules are needed or desirable. However, as the Wiccan community continues its rapid growth, I think it is time to develop a brief code that helps define what it means to follow the Wiccan Rede. Such a code is needed for the same reason that traffic rules are needed. In England I drove 800 miles on the "wrong" side of the road, so I know that even "simple" traffic rules cannot be assumed to be the same everywhere. We need to know which side of the road to drive on.

Who would get to write and enforce the Wiccan ethical code? We all would! At this year's Magickal Mountain Mabon (Jemez, NM) I hosted a workshop, "Living the Wiccan Rede," as a first step toward developing a code. Two women attendees opposed developing any "rules" to clarify how the Wiccan Rede should be applied. Instead they felt that a person's own intuitive sense of appropriate behavior (an internal moral compass, as I interpret it) should be applied to each gray situation encountered.

Relying on internal moral guidance is fine, I feel, for the experienced Wiccan. But expecting new Wiccans to effectively apply the "correct" interpretation of the Wiccan Rede to all gray areas in their personal relations is like expecting a toddler to successfully run a 5K race. In time, both the new Wiccan and toddler will be able to successfully complete their own respective races—one physical, the other moral—but first a learning and developmental process must occur. A typical learning process for new Wiccans usually involves spending several years, first as a student or pre-initiate, and then as a first and second degree initiate in a Gardnerian-style coven. Each person receives individual instruction and ideally is nurtured and guided by a more experienced elder. Unfortunately this present system of individual education can only serve a limited number of people.

Problems arise when two Wiccans following two different personal ethical codes (e.g., two different sets of unwritten rules) first begin to interact. Calling yourself a Wiccan should communicate something about the common values you share with other Wiccans.

What have other religions used for a personal ethical conduct? I will describe one of the codes of Buddhism, a religion that I respect. Buddhists have Five Precepts (rules) that a practicing lay Buddhist is expected to follow. These are to refrain from murder, lying, stealing, intoxicants, and sexual misconduct. When two Buddhists meet for the first time, each has a reasonable idea of what kind of behavior to expect.

The Buddhist precepts are a good starting point for discussing what should be in a Wiccan code of behavior. Refraining from lying, stealing and murder makes common ethical sense to me and is consistent with the "An ye harm none" part of the Rede. Exceptions covered by the self-defense principle may exist, but killing, stealing or lying should only be done to prevent some greater imminent harm, such as stealing a gun from a potential murderer. In addition, I also believe that Wiccans should refrain from using violence towards others, except in self-defense or to prevent a greater harm. For example, you may justifiably knock down a fleeing thief who has just stolen the cash box at a pagan festival.

The last two Buddhist precepts concern drug use and sex, and do not directly reflect Wiccan attitudes. Both precepts should be modified to reflect our common Wiccan values.

Some Wiccans claim that drug use (both legal and illegal) is essential to their spiritual practice. In contrast, other Wiccans are recovering addicts who have turned their lives around by avoiding all drugs. If the principle of harming none is consistently applied to drug use, two obvious issues should be considered. First, the potential harm that an individual may do to himself or herself. These include addiction and the legal consequences of being arrested. Second, there are negative effects individual drug use can have on the larger Wiccan community. Sitting at home alone or camping way out in the woods by yourself you may use illegal drugs (usually marijuana) and bring harm to no one else. However, the same illegal possession or consumption at a public Wiccan event can clearly harm others. If the Wiccan festival, ritual, or other community gathering is perceived by the outside society as promoting, accepting, or merely tolerating illegal drug use, that event's future can be jeopardized. A raid by the local drug squad would be a front page public relations disaster. Public and private campgrounds could refuse to rent space to us for the next festival. In some states, property can be seized and forfeited if it is connected with illegal drug use. Passively allowing minors to drink alcohol or adults to drive drunk after our events can also bring similar negative consequences, such as lawsuits and adverse publicity. I suggest that one application of the Wiccan Rede to drug use would be that we refrain from actions involving drug use (both legal and illegal) and possession that potentially jeopardize the safety and/or security of other Wiccans. No outright ban on any form of private drug use is stated in this "rule."

What about the last Buddhist precept of refraining from sexual misconduct? Traditionally, all sexual intercourse with a person other than one's legal spouse was sexual misconduct and often illegal. Today's larger Wiccan community has experienced premarital sex, open marriages (meaning sex with other partners), and multiple sexual relationships including polygamous and polyandrous marriages. Many non-traditional sexual relationships may be loving and equal, but some are not. Unfortunately, sexual abuse and harassment occur in the Wiccan community, too. Substituting the principle of "refraining from sexual harassment" in place of "refraining from sexual misconduct" might do, as this statement is consistent with the Wiccan Rede. In this way, no specific sexual behaviors are prohibited. In practice a Wiccan who consciously refrains from the sexual harassment knows that "no means no" and would gracefully retreat after his or her sexual advance was rejected. No guilt or hard feelings should arise, because it should also be acceptable to ask a person once about his or her availability.

In summary, I believe that a personal code of conduct acceptable to most Wiccans will develop gradually after many long (and possibly heated) meetings and discussions. Because we do not recognize a higher authority that can impose an ethical code on us, we must write our own code. Adoption of a Wiccan ethical code of behavior would make it clearer to Wiccans and those outside our community that those who do not adhere to our common code are not part of our religious community. It should be clear to others that Wiccans are identified and distinguished by their code of ethics, not by jewelry and fancy robes.