

# **The Bahá'í Faith and Wicca - A Comparison of Relevance in Two Emerging Religions**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to make comparisons between the growth and potential for further development of the Bahá'í Faith and Wicca in Britain. This study uses the Theory of Relevance developed by Sperber and Wilson to explain cognition in the field of linguistics and applied to the field of religious studies by the author in an earlier work.

The paper begins by outlining the milieu in which both traditions began and notes possible overlaps of individuals and networks. It continues by contrasting motifs of beliefs and values between the two systems and investigates the history of both by arguing that relevance is the driving force in their respective development. Thus, the Bahá'í Faith which began by attracting radical and progressive elements gradually became more conservative as its principles became generally accepted and its legalistic structure ensured the upholding of traditional concepts of family and sexuality. Conversely, the interaction with feminism and the ecology movement caused Wiccans to embrace a radical and inclusive perspective which was not present in the inception of Gardnerian tradition. Finally, the potential for growth and influence of both traditions is assessed within the context of the Theory of Relevance.

## **Introduction**

This genesis of this paper was the introduction of a course on Wicca which caused me to peruse some of the literature outlining the life and work of Gerald Gardner and the re-emergence (or invention) of Paganism, the work which I found of particular interest was Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon*<sup>1</sup> which described the macrocosm of language, belief and culture in which Wicca emerged, many of these seemed very similar to the networks I had previously described as contexts and used in the study of the early Bahá'ís in the British Isles<sup>2</sup> This raised the question of possible overlaps of either individuals and networks the identification of which is the purpose of the first part of this paper

## **Definitions**

### *The Bahá'í Movement and the Bahá'í Faith*

There is plenty of introductory material available on the Bahá'í Faith it suffices to say that it was founded in Persia in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The first of its key figures was Siyyid Ali-Muhammad (1819 – 1850) titled The Bab (The Gate). The teachings of the Bab, were seeped in traditional Islamic magic, His use of talismans and sigils, often in the shape of pentagrams, were the same as those Arab philosophers and

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford: OUP, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> Abdo, LCG. *Religion & Relevance, the Bahá'ís in Britain 1899 – 1930* (PhD thesis, SOAS London University, 2004)

occultists expounded. The Bab proclaimed himself to be the Promised One of Islam, the Qa'im, and said that his Mission was to alert people to the imminent advent of another Prophet, "Him Whom God shall make manifest". This was Mirza Husayn-Ali (1817 – 1892) titled Baha'u'llah (The Glory of God) the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith who revealed some fifteen thousand Writings (referred to as Tablets) which include the revelation of the foundation principles of a "new world order of society founded on the unity of mankind, equality and justice."<sup>3</sup> Baha'u'llah named His eldest son Abbas (1844 – 1921) titled Abdu'l Baha (the Servant of the Glory) as His successor, Abdu'l Baha made two historic journeys to the West, between 1911 and 1913 in the course of these journeys he met and spoke with his Western disciples and was required to answer their questions and address their agendas. The fourth and final figure is Shoghi Effendi (1897 – 1957) grandson of Abdu'l Baha and designated Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith; he was educated in Oxford and married to a Canadian, his mastery of the English language was exceptional and he was fully conversant with Western manners and customs. When Shoghi Effendi died without an heir the leadership of the Bahá'í community passed to The Universal House of Justice an elected body of nine men based in Haifa.

The Bahá'í Faith, as it is known today, did not begin to emerge in Britain, even in an inchoate form, until the mid 1930s, what existed prior to that, from 1899 until the early 1930s, will be called here the Bahá'í Movement or Baháism which is how its adherents referred to it and to distinguish it from the Bahá'í Faith which was to follow.

In Britain, the loosely knit groups of individuals who first identified themselves as Bahá'ís became the Bahá'í Movement, which was subsequently replaced by the Bahá'í Faith. It is important to Bahá'ís today to be recognised as a discrete world religion, and much Bahá'í literature begins by stressing its separateness from other religions. This has not always been the case; the Bahá'ís in Britain prior to 1930 repeatedly denied that they were a new or separate religion, some referring to themselves as Bahá'í Christians and retaining or, in some cases, acquiring church membership. The principle distinction, then, between the Movement and the Faith, was that the majority of pre-1930 Bahá'ís did not perceive themselves to be part of an independent religion, but rather saw Baháism as being a supplement to their existing religious beliefs, and, in many cases, practices. This paper, then, defines the British Bahá'í Movement as a 'supplementary religious movement', based on the following criterion: membership of the Bahá'í Movement required no act of conversion; adherents remained in (and in some cases joined) other religious organisations and no break with pre-existing belief was required. Baháism was not seen as an alternative to other traditions, rather as a method whereby these traditions could be interpreted in a wider context.

In the case of the British Bahá'ís of this period, pre-existing links were the basis of networks within the Bahá'í Movement, and each network had its own understanding of what constituted Baháism, so people were thus attracted to a particular version of Baháism which dovetailed with pre-existing beliefs and which was reinforced by pre-existing social relations.

### *Wicca and the Pagan Movement*

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<sup>3</sup> Momen, Wendi, ed.. *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989) 41

Wicca, witchcraft or Paganism is much harder to define, as it has no single authority, no single canon of scripture and an amazingly varied set of beliefs and practices, in fact it seems hard to find consensus amongst Pagans, despite this vagueness (or perhaps because of) Pagans seem happy to differ and many operate in eclectic groups. One event is, however, agreed upon to be of great significance in the re-emergence of Paganism and that is the publication of *Witchcraft Today* in 1954. This slim volume was the work of Gerald Gardner (1884-1964) a retired civil servant who had spent most of his adult life in the Far East, when he returned to England in 1936 he had missed the religious ferment of London in the first decades of the century and was not a part of a pre-existent network. Gardner would claim that he encountered witches in the New Forest through the Crotona Fellowship which formed part of a Rosicrucian Theatre group. The beliefs and rituals of these witches Gardner claimed were survivals of a pre-Christian religion similar to that described by Margaret Murray.<sup>4</sup> Gardner was certainly familiar with Far Eastern magical ideas; he had published a number of monographs on Malay culture and Cypriot metalwork which demonstrate a preoccupation with the magical uses of daggers<sup>5</sup>. That he met with Aleister Crowley on a number of occasions and was initiated into the O.T.O. by Crowley in 1947 is well known, what is disputed is the role of Crowley in the development of the rituals Gardner would describe in his book. Those questions are outside the scope of this paper; however, what may be significant was Gardner's inability to revive the O.T.O. this may have caused him to consider the use of a different approach when he set about publicising Wicca. It is possible that Gardner's interest in a public museum, where he was "resident witch" chatting to the customers and articles in the popular press may have been an attempt to make contact with groups and or individuals – if there were any "survivors" out there they would be drawn to his beacon.

The authenticity of Gardner's claims to the antiquity of the rituals he described do not concern us here, but the parallel development with the Bahá'ís. Any person claiming a hereditary Pagan background<sup>6</sup> or even simply that Wicca was a survival of an Old Religion, was tacitly acknowledging a "supplementary religious movement" because anyone openly practising such a tradition prior to the repeal of the Witchcraft Act would, presumably have been subject to prosecution, consequently some form of conformity to Christian norms was required.

I had originally intended to restrict the content of this paper to remarks on what might be termed "Gardnarian Wicca", however, the process by which Wicca has developed into the nucleus of the wider Pagan Movement is worthy of interest in so far as it is almost a reversal of the process by which the Bahá'í Movement became the Bahá'í Faith. Consequently the second part of this paper includes references to the wider Pagan community.

### *The Theory of Relevance*

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<sup>4</sup> Murray, Margaret, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1921)

<sup>5</sup> Hutton *ibid* p223

<sup>6</sup> For example, Alex Sanders is quoted in Hutton (*ibid*, p. 320) as having "been told by his grandmother of a witch ancestress"

For the full statement of the theory of relevance, recourse must be had to Sperber and Wilson.<sup>7</sup> what follows now is the very barest of its bones. When we overhear part of a conversation, that is something not addressed to oneself, it is often incomprehensible, even though it is in one's own mother tongue. Let us say we overhear the sentence: "They are all at it." We do not know who they are, nor what they are up to, only that it is probably something highly reprehensible. What comes from our automatic and inevitable processing of the sounds is technically known as a partial semantic representation. What we do not know is the context of the utterance, and we might allow our imagination freedom to fit any number of possible contexts to this partial semantic representation just for our own speculative amusement. If we knew the appropriate context to apply, and every conversation creates much of its own rolling context, then the utterance becomes disambiguated and enriched and can create a considerable contextual effect such that our amusement might be instead horror and outrage at the awfulness of what was taking place. Two types of action are then involved in comprehension: the first, linguistic processing to yield a partial semantic representation; the second, inference whereby contexts are matched against the representation until the appropriate one fits, thereby generating its contextual effect through disambiguation, reference assignment and enrichment. The question is, how do we know what the appropriate context is? Here the theory of relevance offers an explanation.

The theory of relevance proposes that everything addressed to someone by somebody else comes with a guarantee of relevance. Not only that, but the speaker will have put it in such a way that the addressee will have no difficulty grasping it. The theory of relevance therefore proposes that the appropriate context is the one which produces the maximum contextual effect with the minimum of processing effort. It argues that having contextual effects is a necessary condition for relevance, and that, other things being equal, the greater the contextual effect, the greater the relevance. A context is a set of assumptions, which are likely to be held with varying degrees of strength or conviction, with which the new information interacts, thereby producing the contextual effect. The contextual effects discussed in the theory are of three main types: contextual implication, the contradiction of existing assumptions and the strengthening of existing assumptions. Ultimately the theory emerged from the shift that took place a few decades ago in linguistics from production theory to reception theory, which led to greater interest being taken in pragmatics. It also derived from developments in the cognitive sciences and in semantics and logic. One of its most significant innovations is its recognition that the context is not the predetermined given, as was previously assumed, but rather there is, even in everyday conversation, a choice of contexts, the choice resolved by the principle of relevance, the pursuit of which, they argue, is the goal of human cognition.

It used to be thought that humans had a special 'language' faculty that distinguished humankind from the animal and other kingdoms. It is now recognised that in fact we use the same procedures in processing speech and meaning as we do in processing and making sense of the world. Further, as Sperber and Wilson emphasise, language is not unique to humans,<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sperber, Dan and Deridre Wilson, *Relevance, Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986)

nor is communication, what is original, as far as one knows, is the human use of language in communication, alongside other mediums.<sup>9</sup> What matters here, is that relevance is not restricted in its application to the domains of cognition and communication. Relevance intuitively can figure in all domains. What is proposed now is that the theory of relevance is the most elegant and fruitful way of accounting for how individual people are attracted to religious movements. There is a neutrality about relevance, as there is about the notion of a good fit, because the two notions belong to a realm at the interface of fact and value. There is a bit of fact and a bit of value in both, but not too much of either. To say that an individual was drawn into a particular religious movement because it was relevant to them at the time, or fitted and suited them as they were then, is greatly to be preferred both to the attribution to them of social or psychological inadequacy, as in the deprivation theory of the anti-cult movement, or to the suggestion they attained sainthood in some Damascene transformation, as can be implied in the term conversion. How then would the principle of relevance work in the domain of religion?

Every individual can be considered a context, or at least, a potential context, in that they can be seen as a unique sets of assumptions, values, feelings and attitudes at any given moment. Just as each new utterance changes the context of the next utterance in communication, so individuals are ever-changing contexts, although they often represent themselves to themselves and others as remaining more or less the same person. In the course of their lives individuals are constantly processing new information, filtering out and dismissing much that which does not appear relevant to themselves. Largely this is an automatic process of the human reactive mechanism which gives an instant yes or no to an idea, feeling or sensation, quite often before it has reached the threshold of conscious awareness where individuals imagine they make choices. Despite the kaleidoscopic nature of the individual as a context, and the automatic pre-conscious censorship of the reactive mechanism, people, like the 'selfish gene', are actively alert to anything which is relevant to themselves. Depending on the individual's biography and the accidents which have conditioned much of the automatic reactive mechanism, there are many for whom that which pertains to the 'religious' or 'spiritual' is potentially relevant, to the point that their reactive mechanism lets such 'messages' through for conscious consideration.

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<sup>8</sup> "The activities which necessarily involve the use of language (i.e., a grammar governed representational system) are not communicative but cognitive. Language is an essential tool for the processing and memorising of information. As such, it must exist not only in humans but also in a wide variety of animals and machines with information processing abilities. Any organism or device with a memory must be able to represent past states of the world or itself. Any organism or device with the ability to draw inferences must have a representational system whose formulas stand on both syntactic and semantic relations to each other. Clearly these abilities are not confined to humans." Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> "The great debate about whether humans are the only species to have language is based upon a misconception of the nature of language. The debate is not really about whether other species than humans have languages, but about whether they have languages which they use as mediums of communication. Now the fact that humans have developed languages which can be used in communication is interesting, but it tells us nothing about the essential nature of language. The originality of the human species is precisely to have found this curious additional use for something other species also possess, as the originality of elephants is to have found that they can use their noses for the curious additional purpose of picking things up. In both cases, the result has been that something widely found in other species has undergone remarkable adaptation and development because of the new uses it has been put to. However, it would be as strange for humans to conclude that the essential purpose of language is communication as it would be for elephants to conclude the essential purpose of noses is for picking things up." Ibid. pp. 173-4.

The degree of relevance to the individual is measured by the contextual effect created when the new ‘message’, in whatever form it takes, - it could be an experience, an encounter, or a simple act of love and consideration, as well as a communication, - meets with the assumptions, values, feelings and attitudes of the individual in their configuration at that particular moment. The three main contextual effects discussed above, contextual implication, the contradiction of existing assumptions and the confirmation of existing assumptions, will serve well here. To be told: “Christ died for you” can, and should, have profound implications for every Christian, and can be taken as an example of the first type of contextual effect. For the second type, one’s personal beliefs contain deeply held assumptions, and when these are challenged it can and does produce a considerable effect, although whether this results in the need to author a treatise *contra* someone or other, or produces, after deliberation, a change of mind, will depend on the circumstances. Of the third type there will be many examples in what follows. It is not just a case of saying the producer of the ‘message’ is ‘right’, or the self-satisfaction of being ‘right’ oneself, nor the anticipation that the producer might be useful to one’s cause, rather it is more often that the contextual effect is created by the confirmation that one’s own personal subjective reality is shared and has, thereby, an objectivity as well.

There remains one highly important element in relevance theory to consider: that of the inferential process that matches the appropriate context to the partial semantic representation and permits the disambiguation, reference assignment and enrichment which then gives rise to the contextual effects. When a message is ambiguous or unclear, it leaves room for individuals to disambiguate it in their own ways, to make their own inferences and to enrich it as they will. The enigmatic guru is often the most ‘charismatic’ simply because his followers have the scope to interpret and enrich his status and behaviour according to what they most desire him to be and do, often later to be disappointed.

### **Part One – Overlapping Circles**

The most significant difficulty in relating the Bahá’í Movement to Wicca and the most obvious is chronology, the Bahá’í Movement as I have defined it ended in 1930, six years before Gardner’s return to England and twenty four years before the publication of *Witchcraft Today*. It seemed unlikely there would be direct contact between Gardner’s circle and the Bahá’ís. Furthermore the exact membership of Gardner’s group is not known, so it appeared even less likely that any of the few undisputed names would have a Bahá’í connection, however, this contention proved unfounded as a central figure of “The First Rosicrucian Theatre in England”, the woman credited with introducing Gardner to the elusive Dorothy Clutterbuck was Mabel Scott Besant. Mabel Scott Besant was the daughter of Annie Besant, both women were Theosophists and Co-Masons. Annie Besant met ‘Abdu’l Baha several times in London. ‘Abdu’l Baha addressed the Theosophical Society in London at her personal invitation as President of the Society. Such a cordial relationship between the leaders of these two movements strongly suggests the possibility that that Annie Besant would have introduced ‘Abdu’l Baha to her daughter and successor.

Another link may be found it is a small booklet (16 pages) called "Woodcraft Chivalry" by Aubrey T. Westlake, B.A. Printed by The Mendip Press,Ltd. in Weston-Super-Mare and dated 1917 on the title page is printed " A paper read to the London Bahais, December,1916". The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry had been founded by Ernest Westlake and his son Aubrey in 1916, when they grew disillusioned with the Boy Scout movement. In 1922 Harry Dion Byngham joined the Order, Byngham is suggested by Hesleton to have been important to Gardner's thinking: "There is one individual (Byngham) whom it is highly likely that Gardner met some time during the crucial years between 1936 and 1940 and who had substantial influence on him"<sup>10</sup> Just how influential Byngham was, or even if he ever met Gardner is open to question, however, some writers have gone as far as suggesting that a group within The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry that was central to the development of Wicca "Steve Wilson ... claims to have proved: ... that there was in the New Forest, a group working the 4 quarters, stark naked, and invoking a horned god and moon goddess using Crowley's Hymn to Pan by 1923".<sup>11</sup> The role of Byngham and the Woodcrafters may be disputed but there clearly was a link with the Bahá'ís as early as 1916.

Whilst many of the Bahá'ís had links with Theosophy and 'Abdu'l Baha spoke at a number of Theosophical venues, the network amongst the Bahá'ís which had the most in common with the ideas which would crystallise into Paganism in its broadest sense were the Celtic Network. The Celtic Network is the term used to describe those who adhered to the Bahá'í Bahá'í Movement from the perspective of the Celtic mystery tradition or the Western occult systems. The dominant figures of this network were Wellesley Tudor Pole and Alice Buckton. Members of this network were mainly known to each other prior to their involvement with Bahaism. Their interest in Celtic mysticism is the bond between them and consequently the context in which they found relevance in the Bahá'í teachings.

In 1902 Wellesley Tudor Pole experienced a dream which was to have a profound effect on him and incidentally initiate the second of the networks around Bahaism. Pole dreamt that he was a monk at Glastonbury Abbey. So powerful was the experience he felt compelled to travel to Glastonbury, he claimed he found the town just as he had seen it in his dream. Pole became convinced that Glastonbury was his spiritual home and that something awaited him to discover it there. He also received an impression that he would need a "triad of maidens" to find the relic.<sup>12</sup>

Pole was one of the five children of Thomas Pole and Kate Wansborough. Thomas Pole was an unconventional man involved in Fabian socialism, theosophy and the Garden Cities movement.<sup>13</sup> This latter interest was shared by his friend Sir Patrick Geddes, who would play an important role in the Bahá'í activities in Edinburgh. The entire Pole family were enthusiastic amateur spiritualists and between them published several short books channeled from the spirit world. In September 1906, Wellesley with his sister Katherine and her friends Janet Allen and Christine Duncan (née Allen) discovered an artifact in St. Bride's Well in

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<sup>10</sup> Phillip Hesleton, *Gerald Gardner & the Cauldron of Inspiration* (Milverton: Capall Bann, 2003) 111

<sup>11</sup> Steve Wilson, *Wicca: The Real History* 2000 zee-list, quotes in Hesleton (ibid)

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Benham, *The Avalonians* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 1993) 56.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 53

Glastonbury. Their find was a curious blue glass bowl. Dr. John Arthur Goodchild (b. 1851) had placed the bowl in the well in 1899. Goodchild was an English medical practitioner. He spent the winters in Bordighera, [Italy] treating the many English tuberculosis patients resident there. His summers were spent either in Hampstead or Bath. In February 1885 he purchased the glass bowl and platter in a tailor's shop in Bordighera. The vendor claimed these items had been found bricked up in the walls of an old building which was being demolished in Albegna, a village between Bordighera and Genoa.<sup>14</sup> Goodchild took the items back to London. He showed his find to Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-1897), Keeper of the British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum. Franks' findings were inconclusive. The bowl was unlike any other known example. He thought it was probably ancient and could not explain the process of its manufacture. The bowl and dish were locked away in a cupboard in the Goodchild home in Hampstead, where they remained for the next ten years.

Goodchild was not merely a physician. He wrote books of poetry and prose but he was also engaged on a much higher quest: to seek out the true roots of spiritual life in the West.<sup>15</sup> Whilst much mystical seeking at this time was directed towards the East, there was also a movement to rediscover the Western mystical tradition, much of the emphasis of this movement centered on the pre-Christian Celtic culture of the British Isles. Goodchild believed that a high culture had existed in Ireland prior to the coming of Christianity. He began to write up his theories in a work that would eventually bear the title *The Light of the West*. In *The Light of the West* Goodchild outlined a history of Ireland, which he claimed was a matriarchal, goddess worshipping society. Central to this scenario is the figure of Saint Bride [Brigit] (453-523), whose traditional role as the foster mother of Christ is recounted to integrate both the pagan and Christian aspects of Celtic culture. Goodchild's understanding of Celtic religion was intensely feminist. He argued for the restoration of the feminine in all aspects of life. Goodchild summed it up:

The Light of the West is the beauty of womanhood. It inculcates the hatred of warfare, and of empires established by the greed of nations or rulers. It preaches woman's desire for the empire of love.<sup>16</sup>

In 1897, shortly before the publication of his book, Dr. Goodchild was staying in Paris on his way back to Italy. He experienced an intense psychic experience in his hotel room. He heard a voice telling him that Jesus once carried the bowl in the house in Hampstead. It was also to be important in the century to come. The voice told Goodchild to hide the bowl in St. Bride's Well, Glastonbury, where a woman would find it. The bowl was to be cared for by a woman. Thus Pole, his sister Kitty and her two friends eventually found the bowl. The Poles knew Goodchild. He was a very close friend of William Sharpe (1855-1905), a man who wrote novels about the Celtic past under the name of Fiona McLeod. Sharpe claimed the spirit of this Highland woman possessed him when he wrote. The nature of Fiona was a secret even from Goodchild, whose friendship with Sharpe began with a correspondence with his non-existent "cousin" Fiona. Ms McLeod's publisher was none other than Thomas Pole's friend in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>16</sup> John Arthur Goodchild quoted in *ibid.*, 19.

the Garden City Movement, Sir Patrick Geddes. Sharpe was also friends with W. B. Yeats whose connections with both the Golden Dawn and the politics of the Celtic Revival are well known. Yeats refers to Sharpe's work on several occasions.

The Allen sisters met with Basil Wilberforce in London and at a subsequent meeting in Dean's Yard in July 1907 about forty people were present amongst them R. J. Campbell and Alice Buckton. Both of these people would play an important role in the growth of Bahaimism. Alice Buckton, a writer and educationalist was to become deeply involved in the Celtic Network around the vessel and Glastonbury. Alice Mary Buckton was born in Hindhead, Surrey in 1867. She was one of the eight children of the polymath and scientist George Bowdler Buckton (1817-1905). From her youth Alice was interested in helping others. As a young woman she was involved with Octavia Hill's (1838-1912) Southwark Women's University Settlement. She was deeply impressed with the work of Hill in the field of housing. Although herself childless, Buckton was deeply concerned about mother-hood, children and education, Patrick Benham writes "She saw woman pre-eminently as mother, but a mother-hood not confined to the raising of her own children. It stood for a power to feed and nourish and support life, wherever and however that life required it."<sup>17</sup> Buckton seems to have been well acquainted with feminine notions of spirituality based on the concept of the universal mother. The German Friederich Wilhelm August Froebel (1782-1852) influenced her in the field of education. Buckton visited the Pestalozzi-Froebel Haus in Germany. She persuaded the principal, Annette Schepel (d. 1931) to join her in England and work in the Sesame Garden and House for Home Life Training in St. John's Wood. Buckton and Schepel were life long partners. They lived together until Schepel's death in Glastonbury in 1931. Alice Buckton was already a well-established playwright and poet when she accepted Wilberforce's invitation to hear Pole explain about his Glastonbury bowl. The meeting changed her life. She wrote to Pole describing her feelings about the bowl on 8 August, six days later he met her. On 20 September 1907 Buckton made her first visit to the Clifton Oratory. The emphasis on women's' spirituality and the role of the bowl in the reinstatement of the feminine in the religions of the West were totally in line with her own ideas.<sup>18</sup> On the 23 September, the members of the triad took her to visit the well. The next day Buckton met Dr Goodchild for the first time. Buckton expressed her belief that a community of women should eventually be formed in Glastonbury around the spiritual beacon of the cup. To this end Buckton purchased the Chalice Well and the former Catholic seminary in whose grounds it was in 1912.

Dion Fortune (1890-1946) stayed at Alice Buckton's community guest house in Glastonbury, before purchasing her own property in the town. Fortune, who was arguably the most important figure in the revival of occultism in Britain, wrote extensively about Buckton in her book about Glastonbury, *Avalon of the Heart*. She also wrote about the "Christos" as part of a sequence of bringers of esoteric knowledge in a way very similar to the Bahá'í concept of "Progressive Revelation". In the passage below Dion Fortune equates Abdu'l Baha with Buddha, Osiris and Krishna:

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Benham, *The Avalonians* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 1993) 146.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

Each Christos who comes to the world has a special mission to fulfill in relation to the evolution of humanity. Osiris taught his people the arts of civilisation, Krishna taught them philosophy, Buddha taught the way of escape from the bondage of matter, Abdul Baha taught social morality. If there are those who object to these Great Ones being ranked with Our Lord as manifestations of God<sup>19</sup> and Saviours of mankind, then esoteric science must agree to differ from them ... initiates of the Western Tradition will not agree to Our Lord being swept aside as merely a good man who taught according to his lights, nor yet as a medium who was used by the by the Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Fortune was well known to the Celtic Network Bahá'ís and the above passage (written about 1930 but reiterating concepts developed earlier) would indicate that their relevance for people seeped in Western occult tradition would be obvious. Fortune is one of the four people described by Hutton as one of the “God (and Goddess) Parents” of Wicca. It is not known if Fortune and Gardner ever met, however, Heselton<sup>21</sup> speculates they may have met at the Fouracres naturist club in Bricket Wood. Whether or not Fortune and Gardner met, Fortune's importance to the development of modern Paganism is undisputed, as is her knowledge of and interaction with some of the Bahá'ís.

Despite her unconventional ideas Buckton remained firmly within the Church of England. Benham writes,

Unlike a lot of other people working for social change and recommending new ideas, Alice had never forsaken the Anglican Church of her upbringing. She certainly transcended the *status quo*, embracing a kind of mystical pantheism while keeping hold of the essential tenets of the faith. The small fly-leaf dedication to *Eager Heart* summarises her view perfectly: “Inscribed to all who see and worship the One in the Many.”<sup>22</sup>

Buckton was however committed to Baháism as part of her understanding of Christianity as did most of the Celtic Network influenced as they were by New Theology and Christian socialism. Pole described his introduction to Baháism in an interview in the *Christian Commonwealth* of 28 December 1910.<sup>23</sup> He said “I first heard of the movement when on a visit to Constantinople prior to the Turkish revolution in 1908 ... When I returned to London I found very little was known about the movement and I determined to visit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.” Pole goes on to reinforce his point “And it is extraordinary that so little should be known of the movement in England.” What is significant about this passage is the fact that as far as Pole was concerned Baháism was virtually unknown in England when he discovered it in Constantinople in 1908. Pole was known to Buckton, Campbell and Wilberforce from mid 1907, clearly none of them knew about Baháism at that time. Consequently it can be asserted

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<sup>19</sup> The description ‘Manifestation of God’ is a peculiarly term and may indicate Fortune was familiar with terminology and writings

<sup>20</sup> Dion Fortune, *Aspects of Occultism* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1978) 24

<sup>21</sup> Hesleton *ibid* 131

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> “A Wonderful Movement in the East: A Visit to Abdul Baha at Alexandria,” *Christian Commonwealth* 28 Dec. 1910, 231.

with confidence that Pole and his Celtic Network were well established prior to their discovery of Bahá'ism. This means that they found relevance in their understanding of Bahá'ism by fitting it into established ideas about religion, mysticism, spiritualism and the role of the spiritual in history.

## Summary

Whilst some of the interplay between the Bahá'í Movement and the circle around Gardner could be dismissed as generalised and simply part of a vague “alternative religion” milieu, there are some significant overlaps. In some ways the Celtic Network Bahá'ís could be considered more the forerunners of the modern Pagan movement than of the modern Bahá'í Faith. Their interest in the Western occult tradition albeit in their case from a generally Christian perspective, is still central to today's Wiccans and Pagans, whilst it is hardly present at all in Bahá'í circles. Pole chose to withdraw from the Bahá'í community in 1923 and although Buckton and Schepel remained members until their deaths, they were inactive.

The Bahá'ís were becoming increasingly inward looking, as early as 1935 Bahá'ís in the United States of America were told to leave “non- Religious Organisations”<sup>24</sup> in a letter dated February 1957 Shoghi Effendi requested Bahá'ís withdraw from Masonic orders and other secret societies<sup>25</sup>, he further stated that “A Bahá'í cannot at the same time be a Theosophist<sup>26</sup>”. Bahá'ís had been required to terminate church affiliation<sup>27</sup> and to leave “Spiritist” groups<sup>28</sup>, furthermore in 1955 Shoghi Effendi<sup>29</sup> reinforced earlier prohibitions on political involvement, calling for Bahá'ís to “refrain from associating themselves ... with the political pursuits of their respective nations”, membership of political parties was not allowed and voting in elections limited to voting for individuals rather than parties. Although political quietism had been part of Bahá'í Teaching from the earliest days in Iran, it would not have pleased some of the early British Bahá'ís who were involved in women's suffrage issues. This was a closing down of networking and consequently a reduction in contextualisation of relevance. The Bahá'í Movement had shared its members with the Theosophical Society, Masonic Lodges, Churches and the Independent Labour Party, the emergent Bahá'í Faith was to stand aloof from such diverse organisations.

That the Bahá'ís had declined numerically is clear from the recollections of Philip Hainsworth (1919-2001) who became a Bahá'í in 1937. “I came across some old records and was able to work out that there could only have been eighty registered believers in England, and none in the whole of Ireland, Scotland and Wales at the time I became a Bahá'í.”<sup>30</sup> This would be substantiated by the *Bahá'í Journal* of February 1938 which

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<sup>24</sup>Helen Hornby, ed., *Lights of Guidance*, (New Delhi: BPT, 1983) 424 Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the NSA of USA & Canada

<sup>25</sup> Hornby, *Ibid.*, 421/2 Letter from Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer February 17<sup>th</sup> 1957.

<sup>26</sup> Hornby, *Ibid.*, 423 Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the NSA of India June 28<sup>th</sup> 1950.

<sup>27</sup> Hornby, *Ibid.*, 159 Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the s of Vienna, June 24, 1947.

<sup>28</sup> Hornby, *Ibid.*, 425 Letter from Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer April 14<sup>th</sup> 1934.

<sup>29</sup> Shoghi Effendi *World Order* (Chicago: BPT, 1955)

<sup>30</sup> Philip Hainsworth, “Bahá'í Story,” n.d. MS. National Bahá'í Archives, London.

lists only thirty-five “isolated believers,” that is Bahá’ís outside of the two towns of London and Manchester, which had functioning assemblies.

In 1951 when Gardner founded his own coven Hainsworth quotes the 1951 National Spiritual Assembly’s Report to Convention “there were 274 voting believers of which 55 were of Persian origin”, he then points out “This meant the community had increased its numbers threefold in a decade, the Persian element being 20 per cent.”<sup>31</sup> The reason for this growth spurt was that after a protracted period of stagnation the British s had embarked upon the first of a series of strategic plans for growth. Both Wicca and Bahá’í were on the cusp of making the change from a supplementary religious movement to an independent religious tradition. Superficially the s with their centralised administration and international structures based upon clearly defined beliefs looked the more likely to make the transformation than the two small groups around Gardner and his book. However, fifty years later when the UK Census asked questions about religion for the first time, the Bahá’ís after half a century of tirelessly “teaching the Faith” numbered only 6,000 while the assorted Pagans could muster 100,000<sup>32</sup> with no effort at proselytizing at all – which leads to the second question addressed by this paper – how were the Pagans so much more relevant?

## **Part Two – The Goddess and the Maiden**

To attempt an overall comparison of Bahá’í and Pagan development in the second half of the twentieth century would require a study much larger than this, consequently only the issue of women and feminism will be scrutinised in relation to relevance and numerical growth.

### **Women – the Divine Feminine**

Both Wiccans and Bahá’ís reject a patriarchal, masculine God, in the case of Wiccans whilst there are differing opinions about the nature of the divine, the centrality of a goddess to Wicca was ensured by Gardner’s recounting of “The Myth of the Goddess”<sup>33</sup> and his description of the Drawing Down the Moon ritual. Gardner’s work was not isolated but drew heavily upon the work of a number of anthropologists who had hypothesized that prior to the arrival of Christianity all of Europe had worshipped a single great goddess. Whilst this theory was popular in the early twentieth century no witch trail cited worship of a goddess in evidence. It does not therefore appear to be a factor earlier than the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, however this feminising of the deity was to prove exceptionally important in the production of relevance for feminists, who would play a significant role in the development of American Paganism.

In the Bahá’í Writings Baha’u’llah refers throughout to The Holy Maiden, who represents the remembrance of God. The Holy Maiden is an undoubtedly female symbol. She is sometimes represented as a bride of either the Báb or Bahá’u’lláh, such as in the

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<sup>31</sup> Philip Hainsworth, *Looking Back in Wonder*, (Skyeset: Stroud, 2004), 105.

<sup>32</sup> The Pagan Federation claim as many as 240,000 Pagans making Paganism the eighth largest and fastest growing religion in the UK.

<sup>33</sup> *Withcraft Today* p.41

*Hidden Words*.<sup>34</sup> Many of the references to her appear in texts that are still untranslated into English. A number of these references to "maids of Heaven" might be analogous with the "black eyed maidens" of the Qu'rán, but the parallel is probably only superficial. The Maid of Heaven, or Holy Maiden, plays an especially important part in Bahá'u'lláh's visionary, allegorical writings during His stay in Baghdad.

Bahá'u'lláh states that He had a vision of the Maiden whilst imprisoned in the Black Pit in Tehran during 1852-3. He recounts the vision in the "Sura of the Temple,"

While engulfed in tribulations I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice,  
calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden - the embodiment of  
the remembrance of the name of My Lord - suspended in the air before Me"<sup>35</sup>

The Maid of Heaven thereafter appears as a personification of the spirit of God throughout Bahá'u'lláh's writings. She next appears in the "Ode of the Dove," a two thousand verse poem which Bahá'u'lláh wrote at the request of Kurdish divines. The poem is about the relationship between the Manifestation of God and the Most Great Spirit. It takes the form of a dialogue between Bahá'u'lláh and the Holy Maiden. Bahá'u'lláh praises and glorifies the Holy Maiden and dwells on His past sufferings, He speaks of His loneliness and grief, whilst affirming His resolution to continue with His ministry.<sup>36</sup>

The "Tablet of the Maiden" continues this theme. Again, two figures appear in the drama: Bahá'u'lláh, as the Supreme Manifestation of God, and the Holy Maiden, symbolising some of the attributes of God previously hidden from humankind. In the course of the dialogue between the two, Bahá'u'lláh recounts His afflictions and describes the uniqueness of His station.<sup>37</sup> Other tablets from this period, such as the "Tablet of the Deathless Youth," and the "Tablet of the Wondrous Maiden," also contain the symbolism of the Holy Maiden. All convey the glad tidings of the new revelation in highly allegorical language, with the symbol of the Holy Maiden representing the spirit of God.<sup>38</sup> None of them have been translated into English; English-speakers find the most familiar references to the Holy Maiden in the *Hidden Words* (Persian number 77) and "The Tablet of the Holy Mariner."

Later works such as the "Súratu'l Bayán," revealed in 1873, are rather different in style from Bahá'u'lláh's Baghdad writings. Lamentation and torment are replaced by triumph and glorification of a new revelation.

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<sup>34</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975) Persian number 77

<sup>35</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975) Persian number 77

<sup>36</sup> A. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 2, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1988) 63

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 125

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 213, 218.

Step out of thy Holy chamber, O Maid of Heaven...drape thyself in whatever manner pleaseth Thee.... Unveil Thy face, and manifest the beauty of the black eyed damsel....<sup>39</sup>

These passages are quoted because superficially the expectation that a belief system stemming from the strictly monotheistic Islamic tradition and Wicca with its roots (authentic or otherwise) in pre-Christian polytheism, would be highly divergent in their conception of the godhead, however, the union of Baha'u'llah and the Holy Maiden is similar the union of the God & Goddess described by Gardner<sup>40</sup>. Furthermore, Gardner stated that a being higher than the God and the Goddess was recognised by the witches as the "Prime Mover", but remains unknowable<sup>41</sup> Patricia Crowther also referred to this supreme godhead as *Dryghten*<sup>42</sup> and Scott Cunningham called it "The One"<sup>43</sup>. This mirrors the belief in an "Unknowable God" above and beyond human understanding<sup>44</sup>, indeed, it is impossible to even hint at the nature of God's essence<sup>45</sup> according to Baha'u'llah. The similarities of theological understanding mean that relevance would be produced by both traditions for people with a similar view of the Divine, this does not mean that they would be in direct competition for converts as the Wiccans were not seeking them and the Bahá'ís did not stress this element of their beliefs in teaching programmes.

### **The Role of Women**

In both Wicca and Bahá'í there have been an extraordinary number of important and prominent women. Perhaps the most significant of the early s was Fatimah Baraghani (1814 – 52) known by many names including Quratu'l Ayn and Tahirih. Most unusually for a woman she was a recognised as a major scholar of Islam and a poet, she accepted the teachings of the Bab and became one of his most charismatic disciples. She was of major importance in the radicalisation of the Babi movement and her removal of her veil was of both symbolic and political importance. She was martyred in September 1852. Little of her writing remains but her poetry is highly regarded in Persian literary circles. One of the surviving poems of Tahirih that celebrates life and a time of renewal may actually have been written on Naw-Ruz, the Persian and festival which falls on the Spring Equinox, as she refers to the day in the poem.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, "Tablet of the Holy Mariner," in Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986) 714.

<sup>40</sup> Gerald B Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*. (Lakemont, GA: Cople House Books 1988) 260-261.

<sup>41</sup> Gerald B Gardner, *Ibid* pp 26-27

<sup>42</sup> Patricia Crowther, *Witch Blood! The Diary of a Witch High Priestess!* (New York City: House of Collectibles, 1974)

<sup>43</sup> Scott Cunningham, *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (St. Paul: Llewellyn, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab – i- Iqan; The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, London BPT, 1982 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. (USA) 1935) p.63

<sup>45</sup> Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings* trans. Shoghi Effendi, , London BPT, 1978 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. (USA) 1935) pp. 3-4, no.1

<sup>46</sup> see *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry* trans. by Amin Banani and Anthony A. Lee, (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press)

This poem is again an erotic allegory and the idea of spring as a male lover being reawakened is familiar in Pagan tradition. Here again is shared imagery and symbolism, which might be argued, would produce relevance for a similar context.

## Feminism

The first phase of feminism is usually related to the struggle for suffrage for women and amongst the early British Bahá'ís Women's suffrage was an important issue; numerous members of the group can be identified as active in the suffrage movement. The best known from the Bahá'í point of view of the suffragists is Lady Sarah Blomfield. Both she and her daughters were involved with the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). In 1914 as part of a mass protest against force-feeding of prisoners, Mary Blomfield (Mary Basil Hall) used her presentation at court to address the king; H. R. H. George V. Christabel Pankhurst describes it thus:

A deputation to the King did enter Buckingham Palace after all and the King heard our petition. The deputation consisted of one girl, Mary Blomfield, daughter of Sir Arthur Blomfield, a friend in his day of King Edward, and granddaughter of a Bishop of London. As Mary Blomfield, at her presentation at Court, came before the King, she dropped on her knee, with her sister Eleanor standing by her, and in a clear voice claimed votes for women and pleaded: 'Your Majesty, stop forcible feeding.'<sup>47</sup>

Her sister, Sylvia also mentions the incident and refers to Lady Blomfield and her involvement with the Bahá'ís, neither of which seem to impress her overmuch,

At a Court function afterwards, Mary Blomfield dropped on her knees before the King and cried "For God's sake, Your Majesty, put a stop to forcible feeding!" She was hurried, as the *Daily Mirror* put it, from "the Presence," which, so the public was relieved to learn, had remained serene. Lady Blomfield intimated to the Press her repudiation of what her daughter had done Lady Blomfield had been enthusiastic for militancy of the most extreme kind, so long as it was committed by other people's daughters. She had come to me at a Kensington WSPU "At Home," shortly after my release in 1913, expressing her delight that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, of whom she was proud to call herself a follower, had spoken with sympathy of the Suffragettes; he had suffered forty years imprisonment, she told me ecstatically, for preaching the unity of all religions and the brotherhood of man. Under his teaching she had lost all regard for the pomps and vanities of earthly existence.'<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Christabel Pankhurst, *Unshackled: The Story of How We Won the Vote* (London: Cresset Women's Voices, 1987), 277.

<sup>48</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London: Virago, 1977), 554.

Also involved with the WSPU was Elizabeth Herrick (1864 - 1929). In an unpublished and anonymous biography in the Bahá'í archives it is stated:

Elizabeth Herrick placed herself as a soldier at the disposal of the Pankhursts; one day in obedience to orders went into Kensington High Street with a little hammer and broke a window. She spent her birthday that year in Holloway Prisons and when she came out her business was ruined. She had again flung material success to the winds for the sake of a spiritual idea.<sup>49</sup>

Herrick's involvement with the WSPU is confirmed by mention of her imprisonment for two months hard labour in the suffrage periodical *Votes for Women*. The sentence was light because the damage inflicted on the windows of a government building was worth "not more than a few shillings."<sup>50</sup> She is also referred to under her professional name of "Madame Corelli" donating hats to WSPU fund raising sales from 1911 onward.

Another important link between Bahaism and feminism was Charlotte Despard. Mrs. Despard, during her long and eventful life embraced every radical cause from vegetarianism to women's suffrage, from Sinn Fein to sandal wearing.<sup>51</sup> It is a mark of her farsightedness that most of the causes she espoused, with the possible exception of sandal wearing, have either been won or are now seen as mainstream. It is not known when she first became involved with the Bahá'í Movement, or through whom, but her path crisscrossed that of others involved in the Movement again and again. Between 11 and 26 August 1911, she addressed a Theosophical Society summer school, on "Some Aspects of the Women's Movement." Wellesly Tudor Pole was also there, his topic -- "Bahaism." In September 1911 the Women's Freedom League newspaper *The Vote* ran a three part article by Despard entitled "A Woman Apostle in Persia"<sup>52</sup> but this account of Táhirih, significantly, does not describe her as a suffragette. She addressed a meeting at the Clifton Guest House, owned by the Pole family and where 'Abdu'l-Bahá would stay when in Bristol, on Friday 15 March 1912. Her subject was the Women's Movement.<sup>53</sup> The fourth International Summer School organized by *The Path* advertised Sir Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), (who would play an important role in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Edinburgh) Despard and Stapley as speakers was advertised in the *Christian Commonwealth* on 12 July 1912. A prominent supporter of the WFL was Reginald Campbell, the minister of the City Temple, who wrote a pamphlet for the WFL. The publication of his church *The Christian Commonwealth* frequently carried reports of WFL activities and advertisements and vice versa. A number of other people within the Bahá'í circle can be connected to the suffrage and feminist movements. Wellesley Tudor Pole's Clifton oratory was visited by a number of leading suffragettes including Annie Kenny and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (1867-1954).<sup>54</sup> Mary Allen, the elder sister of Janet

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<sup>49</sup> "Biography of Elizabeth Herrick," n.d. MS. National Bahá'í Archives, London.

<sup>50</sup> [Suffragist Cases in Court], *Votes for Women* (London) (15 March 1912), [p.380]

<sup>51</sup> Despard's sandals were made by Edward Carpenter (1844-1929), the writer on, amongst other issues, homosexual rights. He also wrote about sm in *Pagan & Christian Creeds* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920).

<sup>52</sup> Charlotte Despard, A Woman Apostle in Persia," *The Vote* (London) (30 Sept., 7 Oct., and 14 Oct. 1911).

<sup>53</sup> "Mrs Despard at Clifton," *Christian Commonwealth* (London) (27 March 1912), p. 428.

<sup>54</sup> Patrick Benham, *The Avalonians* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 1993) 109.

and Christine Allen, who with Kitty Tudor Pole formed the triad of maidens around the vessel in the oratory was deeply committed to the WSPU. She was imprisoned and went on hunger strike for political prisoner status. Constance Elizabeth Maud who wrote a book about the Bahá'ís entitled *Sparks among the Stubble*, also wrote about the suffrage cause in a book called *No Surrender*.

When the struggle for the vote was won for the most part feminism declined as a political and social force, at the time of Gardner's publication (1954) the role of women was perhaps more firmly entrenched as home maker and wife than at any other time in the twentieth century. Whilst Wicca produced numerous influential female figures most notably Doreen Valiente (1922 – 1999), Sybil Leek (1917 – 1982), and Maxine Saunders none of these were overtly feminist, in fact despite the importance of the goddess(es), the role of high priestess and the traditional identification of the term “witch” with women, the early Gardnerians seem apolitical and if anything slightly right of centre. By the 1950's the Bahá'ís in Britain were consumed with the campaign to spread the Bahá'í Faith throughout Africa, their teachings were mainly promoted in the form of a number of social principles, including racial and sexual equality. The number of women dominating the leadership and the community began to decline and it was single men and couples who would “pioneer” to Africa.

The Second Phase of Feminism is usually dated from the mid 1960's, in the United States the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 might be argued to signal the start of the Women's Liberation Movement against the backdrop of the Civil Rights and Anti Vietnam War demonstrations. This second wave of feminism involved not just legal rights but raised the issue of the relationship between the personal and the political. In the British Isles it can be dated from the 27 and 28 February and 1 March 1970 when women's groups from around the country met at the first National Women's Liberation Conference at Ruskin College, Oxford to discuss the challenges facing women and the liberation movement and to work out a series of demands.

One of the most esteemed theorists of the roots of women's oppression was Frederick Engels who had argued in *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* that an early stage of human social development was “primitive communism” a hunter gatherer society in which women took an equal role with men, before the development of private property led to patriarchy. This hypothesis gave a respectable revolutionary veneer to Murray's matriarchal goddess society and a number of Marxist historians incorporated elements of her work into their own. Two highly influential feminist writers Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly both began to consider the claims of WITCH (Women's International Conspiracy from Hell) a New York group which had published a manifesto in 1968 which stated that witchcraft had been the religion of all Europe before the arrival of Christianity and that for centuries afterwards it had survived amongst the poor. Its suppression could therefore be viewed both in terms of class and in the subjugation of women. Daly and Dworkin repeated these assertions but initially saw witchcraft primarily as an obstacle to the patriarchy rather than a religion<sup>55</sup>. In 1973 a book entitled *Witches*,

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<sup>55</sup> Hutton p.343

*Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*<sup>56</sup> was published, in a single stroke not only was the “wise woman” reinvented as a feminist, but the demonisation of the male dominated medical profession, already distrusted because of the abortion debate, was completed. In 1976 Merlin Stone published *When God was a Woman*<sup>57</sup> restating the great goddess theory and repackaging it for feminist consumption, put very simply feminists found relevance in witchcraft and its suppression, the “Burning Times” might be argued to have a particular relevance for white, middle class women seeking a mantle of victimhood. Wiccans, Pagans and/or witches did not seek out feminism, I have been unable to locate any specifically “feminist” writings from Pagans prior to the publication of Daly’s seminal *Gyn/Ecology* in 1978, however the extent of relevance is such that in the 1980’s the dominant writers in the field addressed feminism from a Pagan perspective. The first of these was a Hungarian living in the United States and calling herself Zsuzsanna Budapest<sup>58</sup>, and Starhawk<sup>59</sup> a particularly talented writer whose books have sold in huge numbers. Such was the dominance of these Pagan writers that whilst there is a sharp decline in feminist publications generally the women’s spirituality genre seems buoyant.

The 1990’s saw the emergence of “Feminist Theology” a scholarly development by which various religious traditions fought for the soul of feminism. With a pagan perception of history now firmly entrenched within feminism more traditional religions were forced to make themselves relevant to women’s spirituality. Christians, in particular the Anglicans, rallied by success of the Movement for the Ordination of Women attempted to “rediscover” the feminist intentions of the founders of their faith. Biblical tradition and interpretation were reevaluated by scholars such as Phyllis Trible<sup>60</sup> in *Texts of Terror*, while Karen Armstrong<sup>61</sup> and Rosemary Radford Ruether<sup>62</sup> took on Christian history and the Church Fathers, some were apologists like Elaine Storkey<sup>63</sup>, and others like Mary Daly abandoned the Church for the goddess. Overall, although traditional monotheism put up a spirited attempt at feminisation the majority of those in the pews still seem to prefer their religion patriarchal.

The Bahá’ís had been unable to react to the second wave of feminism in the way they had to the first. The Bahá’í teachings on marriage, sexuality, sexual orientation and abortion were well known within the Bahá’í community and they did not reflect the thinking of the Women’s Liberation Movement<sup>64</sup>. Whilst individuals might have been initially attracted to the Bahá’í Faith’s radical sounding social principles, they may have lost interest when they discovered the only acceptable form of sexual expression for Bahá’ís

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<sup>56</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich & Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* New York, The Feminist Press

<sup>57</sup> Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman* York: Harvest Books, 1976.

<sup>58</sup> Zsuzsanna Budapest, *Grandmother Moon* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991)

<sup>59</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (New York:Harper Row, 1979)

<sup>60</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984)

<sup>61</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994)

<sup>62</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk* ( Boston: Beacon Press, 1983)

<sup>63</sup> Elaine Storkey. *What’s Right with Feminism?* (London: SPCK, 1985)

<sup>64</sup> I have discussed the failure of the Faith to address second wave feminism elsewhere, Lil Abdo, "An Examination of Androgyny and Sex Specification in the Kitab-i-Aqdas," Fourth Irfan Colloquium, DePoort Conference Center, Netherlands, November 1994. Lil Abdo, "Possible Criticisms of the Bahá’í Faith from a Feminist Perspective," Eighth Irfan Colloquium, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, U.K., December 1995.

is within marriage and that marriage is only permissible with parental consent.<sup>65</sup> In 1979 the Iranian Revolution meant that the Bahá'ís were faced with persecution and uncertainty in the land where their Faith began, many Persians fled their homeland and settled in the West, whilst this migration would ultimately bolster the communities, an influx of Persian refugees was unlikely to push feminism higher on the agenda. The Bahá'ís did make some attempt to address issues raised by feminist theology, there were, after all fairly well placed with the Holy Maiden iconography, the historic commitment to women's equality and apart from the membership of the Universal House of Justice issue, a good record of women in leadership roles. In 1994 The Association for Bahá'í Studies dedicated an issue of its journal<sup>66</sup> to feminist theology and whilst a number of interesting articles were published it was of little interest to ordinarys because it feminist theology failed to become relevant to the main current of Bahá'í thinking.

## Conclusion

In considering why the Wiccan/Pagan movement has been so much more numerically successful in the United Kingdom the Theory of Relevance would suggest that over the last half century the Wiccan/Pagan movement has swum with the tide of relevance, while the Bahá'ís have swum against it. Whilst there were significant overlaps in both beliefs and personnel at the start of the twentieth century the Bahá'ís “stalled” and failed to address the issues raised by second and third phase feminisms and feminist theology, conversely Pagan writers were able to “steal their clothes” and present a radical politicized version of female spirituality, ironically in the tradition of Tahirih. The Pagans have been assisted by the fact that the two most important issues of the last half of the twentieth century have been feminism and the environment, issues which were and are integral to Pagan world view and consequently maximized relevance. The Bahá'ís have created an exclusivist and highly structured organisation where plans and strategies are relayed through a “top-down” administration with varying levels of success, conversely, the Pagan movement, unconstrained by administration and critical (in some cases) of structures has flourished and become increasingly inclusive. The prohibition on political activism fors has meant that whilst the widespread acceptance of some of the Bahá'í principles might have encouraged growth the inability to be involved in radical movements may have restricted it, conversely American writers like Starhawk have introduced a political dimension to Paganism which has further increased its relevance to activists. The limited moral and ethical teaching of Paganism has meant it has a resonance with the relative morality of post Christian Britain. Perhaps the widest gulf between modern Pagan and Bahá'í traditions is that the former having outgrown the constraints of Gardnerian orthodoxy is now a widely divergent form of personal spirituality, none of its adherents have any ambition for it to be anything else. The Bahá'í Faith, however, is consciously promoted as not just a spiritual path but a model for future civilization, with laws and organisational structures.

Only time will tell which is the model of religion for the twenty first century.

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<sup>65</sup> There is some evidence of short term growth in the Bahá'í community in the 1970s, the difficulty appears to have been in retaining rather than attracting converts.

<sup>66</sup> *The Bahá'í Studies Review* Vol. 4, No. 1 1994

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