TO EMPOWER THE SPIRIT:  
ACTIVISM AS AN EXPRESSION OF SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction

“Practice what you preach” is a common charge leveled at people who dispense hypocritical advice in our culture. Another expression related to the same principles is to “walk your talk”. We have these sayings that remind us to let our actions reflect our inner beliefs and principles, yet how many of us actually do this, especially in the political realm? And if we do not, why not? Some political scientists have recently begun to take into account the ties between religious and ethnic ideology and political inclination. They see that the “…energies which release themselves in public life are emotional as well as rational, cultural and ideological as well as economic and pragmatic.” (Kelley 1997:531) My aim is to investigate the relationship between spirituality and activism, specifically social and political activism. I will do this by examining two seemingly disparate religious groups, Reclaiming Witches and the Religious Society of Friends, that seem to have incorporated an ideology which encourages and empowers their practitioners to act on their beliefs. As groups and as individuals they often choose to act upon issues of social justice which creates a link between spirituality, social activism and politics.

What is Reclaiming tradition Witchcraft?

Popular culture has traditionally linked Witchcraft to Satanic worship but contemporary Witches are more likely to be part of the earth and Goddess worshipping religion of Wicca. There are many traditions of Wicca or Witchcraft just as there are many different versions of the well-known religions, but most traditions of Wicca have in common polytheism, worship of a Goddess deity, and a deep reverence for the earth, typically considering the earth to be the body or manifestation of the Goddess. In addition, it has been my experience that a common teaching is “Thou art Goddess” and that the Goddess is within everything. This belief is akin to the philosophy of deep ecologists who believe that “all species (of) life holds intrinsic worth, and as a
result, the whole of nature is part of the moral community.” (Lee 1997:123-124)

Reclaiming is a tradition of Witchcraft that began in the San Francisco area of the United States but has branched out to most other states and even to other countries since its founding over twenty years ago. According to the description published in every issue of the Reclaiming Quarterly, they are “a community of women and men working to unify spirit and politics. Our vision is rooted in the religion and magic of the Goddess - the Immanent Life Force. We see our work as teaching and making magic - the art of empowering ourselves and each other…We use the skills we learn to deepen our strength…to voice our concerns about the world in which we live, and bring to birth a vision of a new culture” (NightMare and Willow 2002:20-21).

Ideologically, the Reclaiming tradition has roots in feminist and Celtic witchcraft since some of the founding members had formal training in those traditions. In addition to traditional Wiccan practice, many of the original Reclaiming Collective were also actively supporting or engaging in civil disobedience during anti-nuclear protests, some lived communally and some were anarchists so activism became a prominent practice in this tradition of Witchcraft and they have “always espoused a connection between spirituality and political action” (NightMare and Willow 2002:19-21).

Who are the Religious Society of Friends?

Many people have no idea what the Religious Society of Friends is, but if you ask them if they’ve ever heard of Quakers then images of oatmeal containers appear in their minds immediately. Unfortunately, like the inaccurate stereotypes of Witches, most portrayals of Quakers are also off the mark. Many people don’t even realize that the Religious Society of Friends is still around, since a popular misconception is that it was a religion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and has since disappeared. Most people don’t know that President Richard Nixon was a Quaker, and many of his lesser known policies reflected his religious beliefs (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 2000-2001).

The Religious Society of Friends was founded in England by George Fox during the political and social turmoil of the English Civil War of the seventeenth century. (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 2000-2001) George Fox believed that the Christian church had lost the message of the Apostle Peter, who proclaimed that Jesus was present on the earth in the Spirit and that he empowered and purified the hearts of his devotees. Fox, believing this Holy
Spirit had a personal relationship with each individual, establishing a non-hierarchical, “radical, egalitarian, spirit-filled Christianity” that became known as the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. (Hoare 2002). Like the Reclaiming Witches, the Quakers were embroiled in activism right from the start. In addition to suffering religious harassment, the Quakers insisted on equal treatment of women and this was one of the reasons the Puritans persecuted them during Colonial times. (Bacon 1987:97-98). During the past three centuries they have been acting in the forefront of such social movements as anti-slavery, women’s rights and the peace movement. Currently the most visible organization of Quaker social concerns (non-Quakers are members also) is the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). Founded in 1917 “to carry out a ‘service of love in wartime’” the AFSC was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1947. (Kentworthy 1987:7) According to the AFSC website, their work is to “understand and address the root causes of poverty, injustice, and war. We are called to confront, nonviolently, powerful institutions of violence, evil, oppression and injustice…Seeking to transform the institutions of society, we are ourselves transformed…” (AFSC 2002)

Some Common Beliefs

This vision of societal transformation is present in both Reclaiming Witch and Quaker thought and both groups explore methods of empowerment and change. For instance, many Quakers and Reclaiming Witches see our culture as being founded in paradigms of violence and dominance, and both groups examine the role of cultural myths in shaping and perpetuating those paradigms. Mary Lord spoke on this subject when she addressed the Annual Meeting of Friends World Committee for Consultation. She talked about the insights of theologian and author Walter Wink who pointed out that “we all live in a culture…founded in the belief in combat as the way that goodness overcomes evil. This belief…is the undercurrent of our myths…(this) belief in ‘redemption through violence’ becomes the underlying structure of our culture and actions.” (Lord 2002). Lord describes it as a system of religious faith in the use of force, and she urges us to examine the success and effectiveness of such a strategy. The fact that Quakers are noticing and confronting such issues means they are taking the first step toward acting in ways that can resist deadly effects of this mythical undertow.

Reclaiming Witches are trained to be aware of these cultural myths since an underlying principle of the magic they practice is that consciousness has
structure and that structure determines how energy flows. In our culture many myths are used to shape the structure of our consciousness so that it complies with authority and the use of force. In Dreaming the Dark, Starhawk states that “culture is a set of stories we tell each other again and again. These stories have shapes. The shapes of the stories...shape our expectations and our actions.” (1982:19) She examines the role of several Western cultural myths, including the myth of the apocalypse and its role in shaping how we view time (linear instead of cyclical), its relationship to our cultural view of God being separate from us, and how these perspectives shape a mental structure that “allows certain absolutes to stand outside the world, where they take precedence over the values of the world…” (Starhawk 1982:19-20) As a result, we see ourselves as being separate and fail to notice interconnections and relationships between ourselves and the world which, in turn, blinds us to power relationships us and allows us to be controlled and manipulated. Again, the first step toward change is to be aware and then to create changes in our language and our myths for “Nothing does change, unless its form, its structure, its language also changes.” (Starhawk 1982:26)

Another way these two groups link their spiritual beliefs to their social and political practices is found in some beliefs held by both religions. Reclaiming Witches and the Religious Society of Friends believe that the same spirit moves through all of us, that love is a transforming power, and that the self is an agent of transformation. According to the AFSC website, they believe that “there is that of God in each person, leading us to respect the worth and dignity of all.” (AFSC 2002) Kentworthy says “At the heart of the Quaker message is the belief in that of God in every individual. That belief carries with it tremendous implications…” (1987:22) If you see “that of God” in every person then you must treat every person as if they are of God. Most Witches, not only Reclaiming Witches, share a similar belief, although they may phrase it in differently gendered terms. As I mentioned before, “Thou art Goddess” is a popular salutation, but one could just as easily say “You have God in you.” Another small difference is that Witches tend to extend this circle of divinity beyond only humans to include the whole earth and all that goes with it. Starhawk phrased it best when she wrote:

“She is alive in us: we are alive in her as in each other
as all that is alive is alive in us
and all is alive” (1987: 3)

In addition to sharing the belief that the same sacred spirit moves within us all, these two religions also ascribe to the transforming power of love and the concept of the self as an agent of transformation. According to the
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Quakers believe the “power and love of God is over all, erasing the artificial division between the secular and religious” and that Friends continuously are “striving to trust in love rather than react in fear.” (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 2000-2001) The organizational principles and guidelines for the AFSC state that they “assert the transforming power of love and nonviolence as a challenge to injustice and violence and as a force for reconciliation,” and they “seek to address the goodness and truth in each individual.” (AFSC 2002) The Reclaiming Principles of Unity begin with a quote from The Charge of the Goddess, “My law is love unto all beings…” and further states that they “value peace and practice non-violence, in keeping with the Rede, ‘Harm none, and do what you will.’” (Reclaiming 2002) Reclaiming Witches see love as the key to self-empowerment and the tool to bring about their vision of a more sustainable culture. “Love connects; love transforms. Loving the world, for what it is and our vision of what it could be, loving the world’s creatures (including ourselves)… we can transform. We can reclaim our power to shape ourselves and the world around us.” Starhawk 1982: 44) This power to shape the world is present in all individuals, a fact that Quakers and Reclaiming Witches both emphasize.

**Action is an expression of spirituality**

The Friends and the Reclaiming Witches have in common the idea that action is an expression of spirituality because they do not see a separation between the world and the spirit. As I stated above, Quakers believe that God’s love erases the division between religion and the secular world. (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 2000-2001) The AFSC calls itself “a practical expression of the faith of the Religious Society of Friends” (AFSC 2002), and other Quakers claim that their most important message is that religion is experiential. (Hoare 2002) “It is not just a matter of accepting words or practices but of experiencing God for oneself. The fact that God is always present means that the whole of a person’s life is sacramental.” (Hoare 2002) Activism is the result of living a sacramental life, experiencing your beliefs. Frances Irene Taber in discussing Quaker personal growth says a “realization comes that (the) inner and outer lives are connected, that for the inward life to continue to grow, there must be a response from the outward life. It is at that point where awareness dawns that spiritual knowledge itself comes from an open relationship between one’s inner and outer lives, and from a free movement between the two.” (1987:59) (italics added) Interestingly, other Christian churches have made this connection at times, especially the social gospel movement that
“demanded the church demonstrate its faith by active concern for the poor and dispossessed.” (Findlay 1990:66-67) Another example is how many churches were motivated to social activism by various events during the civil rights movement. (Findlay 1990:71) The difference between these Christian churches and The Religious Society of Friends is the tempo of their social movements. Quaker social activism moves to a steady beat while the other churches are quiet for periods with occasional crescendos of activist periods.

Like the Quakers, Reclaiming Witches have a similar view of action being a part of spirituality. To begin with, Reclaiming rituals are “participatory and ecstatic, celebrating the cycles of the seasons and our lives, and raising energy for personal, collective and earth healing.” (Reclaiming 2002) Witchcraft tends to be a way of life that is practiced rather than just a belief. As a result, many Witches do not see a division between the natural and the supernatural. According to Starhawk, this split between the natural and supernatural world began during the Renaissance when the scientific worldview of a non-living world replaced an organic worldview that valued the living body of the earth. When people see themselves as apart from the earth and each other they are more amendable to domination and control. (1982, 1987) This is where the political aspect comes into play. Starhawk states that “…our ideals, our visions, are meaningless until they are some way enacted.” (1987:8) In her book Dreaming the Dark she says, “This is a book about bringing together the spiritual and the political. Or rather, it is a work that attempts to move in the space where that split does not exist…” (1982:xxv) Witches practice magic and if “magic is ‘the art of causing change in accordance with will,’ then political acts, acts of protest and resistance, acts that speak truth to power, that push for change, are acts of magic.” (Starhawk 1982:169) This is why Reclaiming Witches advocate political and social activism as part of their spiritual practice. Other Wiccan groups may have individual members who work for environmental and social justice, certainly many Neo-Pagans of different persuasions are attracted to such issues, but such activism is not part of their creed.

Robert Kelley examined the relationship between religious and ethnic groups and their political affiliations. He found that religion does affect political views, specifically that religion affects our view of the world, how other ethnic groups are seen in relation to ourselves, and the role government should play in our lives. (Kelley 1977) As we have seen, for some groups politics and religion are not only interrelated, but inseparable. The Religious Society of Friends has been around for more than three hundred years and during that time they have made a long career of political and social activism.
and reform. Reclaiming Witches are a newer group, but they are just as committed to ideals of social justice and a truly egalitarian society. Both of these groups recognize the oneness of the spirit moving within all humans, acknowledge the transformational power of love and seek to reform our culture into a more egalitarian and just society. They are two religious groups who “practice what they preach.”

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