

The Wiccan Rede

One of the few written documents most witches acknowledge[i], The Wiccan Rede is an ethical guideline in the form of a poem. Tracing The Influences The first written reference to the ethics of a Wiccan is a passing reference in Gerald Gardner's The Meaning of Witchcraft: " . . . the morality of the legendary Good King Pausol, "Do what you like so long as you harm no one". But they believe a certain law to be important, "You must not use magic for anything which will cause harm to anyone, and if, to prevent a greater wrong being done, you must discommode someone, you must do it only in a way which will abate the harm.[ii]" What Pausol actual said was: "I. Do no wrong to thy neighbor. II. Observing this, do as thou pleasest.[iii]" One of Gardner's influences, Aleister Crowley wrote in his Liber AL vel Legis (The Book of the Law): "Who calls us Thelemites will do no wrong, if he look but close into the word. For there are therein Three Grades, the Hermit, and the Lover, and the man of Earth. Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.[iv]" Crowley himself was influenced by Francois Rabelais, specifically his Magick in Theory and Practice, where he says: "DO AS THOU WILT because men that are free, of gentle birth, well bred and at home in civilized company possess a natural instinct that inclines them to virtue and saves them from vice. This instinct they name their honor.[v]" Public Mentions The Wiccan Rede was not publicly referred to until 1964, when Doreen Valiente mentioned it in a speech to a gathering of witches sponsored by Pentagram, a newsletter and witchcraft review. She demanded tolerance between covens as well as toward the outside world, and reminded the gathering: "Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill, An' it harm none, do what ye will.[vi]" In 1965, Justine Glass mentioned the Rede "The other, only slightly less important belief of the witches is in hurtlessness . . . One of the rules of the Craft is that magic must not be used to hurt any person.” Interestingly, she goes on to say: "It would be unrealistic to imagine that the rule has been kept always; witches do not pretend to be saints . . . [vii]" I will return to this ethical dilemma later. Around the same time (1965-1966) the quarterly newsletter, The Waxing Moon, published an account of the dinner Valiente spoke at, including the text of her speech. This newsletter circulated primarily in America. In the early 1970s Alex Sanders, a contemporary of Gardner, distributed a series of lectures designed for novices in Alexandrian Wicca, the tradition he founded. Here to, the ethical precept we recognize as the Rede is mentioned: "The Book [of Shadows] is closed in front of him [the one being initiated] and he is shown the cover, on which is often written the motto of Wicca: "An it harm none - do what ye will.[viii]" In 1974, Earth Religion News, the short-lived (but incredibly informative) quarterly newsletter edited by Herman Slater, published The Wiccan Rede” Bide within the Law you must, in perfect Love and perfect Trust. Live you must and let to live, fairly take and fairly give. For tread the Circle thrice about to keep unwelcome spirits out. To bind the spell well every time, let the spell be said in rhyme. Light of eye and soft of touch, speak you little, listen much. Honor the Old Ones in deed and name, let love and light be our guides again. Deosil go by the waxing moon, chanting out the joyful tune. Widdershins go when the moon doth wane, and the werewolf howls by the dread wolfsbane. When the Lady's moon is new, kiss the hand to Her times two. When the moon rides at Her peak then your heart's desire seek. Heed the North winds mighty gale, lock the door and trim the sail. When the Wind blows from the East, expect the new and set the feast. When the wind comes from the South, love will kiss you on the mouth. When the wind whispers from the West, all hearts will find peace and rest. Nine woods in the Cauldron go, burn them fast and burn them slow. Birch in the fire goes to represent what the Lady knows. Oak in the forest towers with might, in the fire it brings the God's insight. Rowan is a tree of power causing life and magick to flower. Willows at the waterside stand ready to help us to the Summerland. Hawthorn is burned to purify and to draw faerie to your eye. Hazel-the tree of wisdom and learning adds its strength to the bright fire burning. White are the flowers of Apple tree that brings us fruits of fertility. Grapes grow upon the vine giving us both joy and wine. Fir does mark the evergreen to represent immortality seen. Elder is the Lady's tree burn it not or cursed you'll be. Four times the Major Sabbatsmark in the light and in the dark. As the old year starts to wane the new begins, it's now Samhain. When the time for Imbolc shows watch for flowers through the snows. When the wheel begins to turn soon the Beltane fires will burn. As the wheel turns to Lamas night power is brought to magick rite. Four times the Minor Sabbatsfall use the Sun to mark them all. When the wheel has turned to Yulelight the log the Horned One rules. In the spring, when night equals day time for Ostarato come our way. When the Sun has reached it's height time for Oak and Holly to fight. Harvesting comes to one and all when the Autumn Equinoxdoes fall. Heed the flower, bush, and tree by the Lady blessed you'll be. Where the rippling waters go cast a stone, the truth you'll know. When you have and hold a need, harken not to others greed. With a fool no season spend or be counted as his friend. Merry Meet and Merry Part bright the cheeks and warm the heart. Mind the Three-fold Laws you should three times bad and three times good. When misfortune is enow wear the star upon your brow. Be true in love this you must do unless your love is false to you. These Eight words the Rede fulfill: "An Ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will[ix]" Then, in 1975, the Ostara issue of Green Egg published an article, "Wiccan-Pagan Potpourri” which included the poem "Rede of the Wicca”: Rede Of The Wicca” Being known as the counsel of the Wise Ones: Bide the Wiccan Laws ye must In Perfect Love and Perfect Trust. Live an” let live - Fairly take an” fairly give. Cast the Circle thrice about To keep all evil spirits out. To bind the spell every time - Let the spell be spake in rhyme. Soft of eye an” light of touch - Speak little, listen much. Deosil go by the waxing Moon - Sing and dance the Wiccan rune. Widdershins go when the Moon doth wane, An” the Werewolf howls by the dread Wolfsbane. When the Lady”s Moon is new, Kiss thy hand to Her times two. When the Moon rides at Her peak Then your heart”s desire seek. Heed the Northwind”s mighty gale - Lock the door and drop the sail. When the wind comes from the South, Love will kiss thee on the mouth. When the wind blows from the East, Expect the new and set the feast. When the West wind blows o”er thee, Departed spirits restless be. Nine woods in the Cauldron go - Burn them quick an” burn them slow. Elder be ye Lady”s tree - Burn it not or

cursed ye’ll be. When the Wheel begins to turn - Let the Beltane fires burn. When the Wheel has turned a Yule, Light the Log an’ let Pan rule. Heed ye flower bush an’ tree - By the Lady Blessèd Be. Where the rippling waters go Cast a stone an’ truth ye’ll know. When ye have need, Harken not to others greed. With the fool no season spend Or be counted as his friend. Merry meet an’ merry part - Bright the cheeks an’ warm the heart. Mind the Threefold Law ye should - Three times bad an’ three times good. When misfortune is enow, Wear the Blue Star on thy brow. True in love ever be Unless thy lover’s false to thee. Eight words ye Wiccan Rede fulfill - An’ it harm none, Do what ye will.[x] Controversial Origins The “Rede of the Wiccae” was attributed to Lady Gwen Thomson, a hereditary witch from New Haven, CT (USA) who, in turn, said that her paternal grandmother (Adriana Porter dead since 1946) gave the text to her. Lady Gwynne had been teaching witches in the New England area since the 60s, and founded The New England Coven of the Traditionalist Witches (NECTW) in 1972. Many people dispute that Adriana Porter was the author of the Rede. They cite the Lady Gwynne had been a subscriber of Waxing Moon and had received a lot of information from its editor (Joseph Wilson), concluding that she ‘borrowed’ the Rede (and perhaps added to it). That said, it may simply be that she adapted information she did receive from her grandmother and made it ‘more Wiccan’ by creating a Rede. No one is sure who wrote the version published in Earth Religion News. Lady Gwynne has said that it was a former student of hers who took her words (as given within her tradition) and rewrote them[xi]. The fact that it predates Lady Gwynne’s supports the theory that Lady Gwynne was not the original author of the Rede. It is certainly interesting to realize that Valiente’s book, An ABC of Witchcraft Past & Present (published in 1973) made no mention of the Rede. She discusses the basic Beliefs of Witches and says “Their morality can be summed up in one sentence, "Do what you will, so long as it harms none."[xii]” So, we again have the ‘eight words’, but not the whole poem. Modern Perceptions As more ‘witchcraft 101’ books began to be published in the 1980s, the Wiccan Rede became more and more commonly known and discussed. Early books often lacked references and bibliographies, some even claimed to be completely original, later scholars easily point to the true source material. The Wiccan Rede fell prey to this as well. It was re-written several times and often copied with no author reference, particularly when people first began sharing information online. Tricky Ethics: How Serious is the Rede? Although it is called The Wiccan Rede, traditional Wiccans do not follow it; they follow the Charge of the Goddess as their moral compass instead. It might more accurately be called “A Witches’ Rede.” Moreover, it is most useful for those who practice outside of a coven. The essential group dynamics of the coven serve to create trust and promote ethical communications and actions (you can’t perfectly love or trust someone who is a shit on whatever level). But as the witchcraft became better known and increasing numbers of practitioners were learning from books or in ways outside of the traditional coven structure, an ethical guideline was needed that could sustain the multitude of eclectic practices that fall under the heading of witchcraft. It also became an easy catch phrase to soothe those outside the craft who were inclined to believe the stereotypes of the evil witch. Being able to say “all witches follow the Wiccan Rede, which specifically says ‘harm none’” is a great way to alleviate those fears. The early days of witchcraft in America made the reclaiming of the word ‘witch’ from its negative stereotypes a political tool, and we were obliged to over-emphasize our ethical conduct as a placating measure. Our earliest references made the Rede a guideline, not Law. Moreover, poetry aside, the Rede itself is only eight words: An it harm none, do what ye will. Early witchcraft was practiced and promulgated through the coven structure, where ethical conduct was guided and regulated by group dynamics. Witches are not perfect, they are human. Harm includes manipulation, control, domination, physical and emotional injury. In this light, our ethics are that of any other right-thinking ethical being. It is similar the to Christian Golden Rule (Do unto others as you would have done unto you) or the Ten Commandments. Unlike long lists of dos and don’t ‘thou shalt’ and ‘shalt not’ the Rede requires that we make conscious decisions about all of actions and decisions. Most importantly, it requires that we accept the consequences of our decisions. Our choices are sometimes limited, our decisions difficult, but this is part and parcel of the spiritual path we follow.

[i] Please note that Wiccans are a subgroup of witches; not all witches are Wiccan. To draw an example from another religious group, one may be a Buddhist, but not a Mahayana Buddhist. [ii] page 127, 1999 (originally published in 1959). [iii] Les aventures du roi Pausole (The Adventures of King Pausole), 1901 [iv] Chapter 1, verse 40. [v] Gargantua, 1534. [vi] Hans Holzer, The Truth about Witchcraft, 1971, page 128 [vii] Justine Glass, Witchcraft, The Sixth Sense, 1965, page 58. [viii] Baker, J. (ed.), The Alex Sanders Lectures, 1984, page 67. [ix] Earth Religion news, 1974. [x] Green Egg magazine, Vol. III. No. 69 (Ostara 1975) [xi] <http://www.waningmoon.com/ethics/rede7b.shtml> [xii] Doreen Valiente, An ABC of Witchcraft Past & Present, 1973, page 55