



***Contemplative Wicca:
Reflections on Contemplative Practice for Pagans***

Teresa Chupp

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Review by Literata Hurley

Teresa Chupp's *Contemplative Wicca* attempts to establish a theological basis for a type of Wicca practiced solely through contemplative efforts at mystical union with a singular divine. Her effort draws on mainstream scholarship in traditional theological understandings of mysticism and is heavily influenced by developmental psychology and the author's own beliefs about the nature of individual and societal development and progress over time towards her preferred style of mystical union and its theoretical benefits for people and the environment.

Chupp's first chapter argues the benefits of doing theology for Wiccans and then positions the ideas of contemplative Wicca as connected to traditional Wicca in their reverence for nature. She then describes numerous key departures from commonly held Wiccan beliefs and practices such as polytheism (in any of its "soft" or "hard" forms, a distinction she neglects to discuss) and ecstatic, often group, ritual.

The second chapter, "God," expands on these distinctions by arguing for a panentheistic monotheism which seems to this reviewer to verge more on a sort of monism. She grapples with concepts such as whether God is all-good or all-powerful, but brushes

aside any specific characterizations of the divine with terms other than "God" as unworthy anthropomorphisms which inevitably lead to tribalism and thus run counter to the values of compassion through recognizing unity that she advocates. The emphasis that deity cannot be gendered excludes any discussion of feminist spirituality or feminine conceptions of the divine, which are major features of Wicca that attract many current practitioners.

In Chapter 3 she examines the contributions of psychology to understanding the roles of religion and how religion can best help humanity. Her discussion of Evelyn Underhill's landmark study of mysticism as it can be experienced by Pagans and Wiccans is fascinating; however it is hampered by her continued emphasis on the preeminent value of contemplative mystical union without discussing any of the connections to more common Wiccan practice.

Similarly, her discussion of ethics in Chapter 4 turns much more heavily on a generalized application of the value of compassion springing naturally from a sense of the oneness of all things in order to achieve a society founded on values. These values are supposed to be different from virtue ethics, but the distinction remains



unclear as she spends more effort theorizing about the sort of pacifist, compassionate society she would like to see created as a result of this seemingly inexorable progress along a developmental scale for which she advocates.

When she discusses the actual methods she advocates for practicing contemplative Wicca in Chapter 5, she spends as much space arguing against the ideas and uses of magic as widely practiced in Wicca today as she does explaining how her own possible methods more closely resemble eremitic life as understood by contemplative branches of mainstream religions, with an emphasis on withdrawal from daily life to deepen contemplative practice. She raises interesting ideas of what an eremitical Wiccan life might look like, but then fails to discuss what would make such an eremitical life specifically Wiccan rather than generally peaceful, contemplative, and mystical, aside from a generalized reverence for nature that has been shared by mystics from many faith traditions.

In Chapter 6 she continues to argue against animism, repeatedly characterizing it as a mistake of thinking that is meant to be outgrown, and thus explains much more what she is against than what it is about her form of contemplative Wicca that is a theological understanding of death and the soul that would motivate practitioners and believers to engage with her suggested approach. By the conclusion, she repeats her assertion that theology must point to a monotheistic (or monist) conception of the divine in order to support her preferred values of unity and compassion among humanity, and in so doing argues against almost all the

distinguishing characteristics of Wicca as it is commonly practiced today.

Chupp's tone alternates within chapters, and even within sections, between the academic addressing other academics with reference to scholarship and established ideas of theology and the believer explaining how her preferred type of contemplation leads to mystical union that will (dare one say 'magically'?) benefit all of humanity and the environment, if only more people, especially Wiccans, would try her methods. Her developmental perspective emphasizes progress to such an extent that a distinctly triumphalist tone repeatedly emerges, even as she tries to situate herself within the context of Wicca while simultaneously disregarding and even disparaging its unique features and typical practices. In the end, this reader found the work a convincing description of why the author's preferred type of contemplative practice is loosely rooted in Wicca and deeply beneficial to the author herself, but as a discussion aimed at other Pagans and Wiccans it falls short; she may be mostly preaching to the choir.

Literata Hurley holds master's degrees in education and history and has written about Wicca in a variety of contexts. She leads a coven in Columbus, Ohio and teaches in person and at conferences including Convocation, Sacred Space, and Between the Worlds.