

The Wiccan Rede

Information and research by Living Green

The Rede consists of two lines: An Ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will

The Rede is comprised of eight words, not just the two "Harm None". This fact is lost on many, many Wiccans, had become so indoctrinated with the abbreviation "harm none" and was so defensive about criticisms that such a command is impossible to keep, that I missed the forest for the trees. The Rede does not command us to "harm none". It tells us that any action that will harm none is acceptable.

And what about actions that do cause harm? I believe "harm least" is implied by our desire to harm none. But we also believe in common sense. Consumption of food harms something, yet it is natural to eat. And self-defense, bringing up an issue by those arguing against the idea of "harm none," is certainly not banned by the Rede. Witches do not believe that true morality consists of observing a list of "thou-shalt-nots". Their morality can be summed up in one sentence, "Do what you will, so long as it harms none." This does not mean, however, that witches are pacifists. They say that to allow wrong to flourish unchecked is not 'harming none'. On the contrary, it is harming everybody.

The Rede is not a law. "Rede" means advice. I doubt human words will ever be able to express a truly perfect law of ethics. The Lycian Tradition attempts to clarify the matter with a slightly longer Rede: "An it harm none, do, as you will. An it cause harm, do as you must. "

Gardner's old laws, also sometimes broken into the 161 laws, calls for a limited version of "Harm none," stating you may bind or restrain, but never harm, with magic. Today most Wiccans don't even follow the Old Laws, finding them to be too much a throwback of a time when we still believed ourselves to be following the old religion. Many, many people refer to the Wiccan Credo, or "Rede of the Wicca", as the Wiccan Rede when it is in fact a separate document that just happens to state the Rede at its end.

History of the Rede: In the *Meaning of Witchcraft*, published in 1959, Gardner first touches upon the ethics of Wicca. While the Rede as it is known today is not mentioned, Gardner states that: "[Witches] are inclined to 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. " (Good king Pausol, incidentally, happens to be a literary character in the story *The Adventures of King Pausole* (1901) by Pierre Louÿs.) "Gardner maybe got it wrong. The Rede reads 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.'"

Many suggest that Gardner borrowed and adapted the Law of Thelema from Aleister Crowley, which reads "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" in creating the Rede. According to Crowley, if people knew their true wills and followed them, they would attune themselves to a harmony with the universe. Therefore spelling out the implications of doing harm was not necessary. Even if this is the case, this does NOT mean that the Rede and the Law of Thelema is the same thing or hold the same meaning. Gardner could have been inspired by the Law and then took it in his own direction, creating a new entity. Worse yet, I've seen the Law of Thelema labeled as the Witches Rede. Crowley was neither a witch nor a Wiccan, and I very much doubt he'd appreciate his Law being relabeled, regardless of who may or may not have borrowed it.

Lilith McLelland offers another interesting parallel to the Rede. "*Dilige, et quod vis fac,*" or "Love, and do what you will." The author was Saint Augustine, writing in the 4th century C.E.6

Study, read, and explore the meanings and where they came from to truly understand the meanings. Don't take my word for it; explore.

Doreen Valiente. *An ABC of Witchcraft Past & Present*, 1973,

Gerald Gardner, *the Meaning to Witchcraft*

Lilith McLelland. *Out of the Shadows: Myths and Truths of Modern Wicca*

John J. Coughlin, <http://www.waningmoon.com/ethics/rede3.shtml>,

Valiente published The Witches Creed in "Witchcraft for Tomorrow