

## MEM Takes a Look at *Some Versions of the Wiccan Rede*

The word "Rede" derives from Middle English, meaning "advice" or "counsel." The Wiccan Rede, full and complete, is this:

**An ye harm none, do as ye will.**

The original, which we have from one of Doreen Valiente's speeches, as quoted in 1964, was slightly longer:

**Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill,**

**An it harm none do what ye will.**

In 1974, *Earth Religion News* published it as, "An ye harm none, do what ye will." In 1975, *The Green Egg* published it this way: "An it harm none, do what ye wilt." There are a few other variations, substituting "it" for "ye," "wilt" for "will," and even "thou" or "you" for "ye." ("An" means "if.")

An eight-line version is also popular, though no one seems to know or remember who wrote it, or when (though it must've been after 1964). It includes a reference to the Three-fold Law, which Wiccans accept as true.

**Bide the Wiccan Law ye must,**

**In perfect love, in perfect trust,**

**Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill:**

**And ye harm none, do what ye will.**

**What ye sends forth comes back to thee,**

**And ever mind the Rule of Three**

**Follow this with mind and heart,**

**And merry ye meet and merry ye part.**

### The Origins of the Rede

In 1904, in *The Book of the Law*, Aleister Crowley used a similar phrase: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" – but in his work, that's half of a call and response, the response being "Love is the law, love under will"

But it's older than that. We know that Crowley took the line from François Rabelais, a French writer and scholar. In 1534, Rabelais wrote, "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."

In the 1789, John Stewart Mill, an English philosopher, wrote in *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* that "Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights." Like Wicca, the Rede has many sources, including the arts. In 1901, a character in Pierre Louÿs' play, "The Adventures of King Pausole," had this motto: "Do what you like as long as you harm no one."

So, it's an old concept. But how should we, as Wiccans, interpret it? "Harm" is certainly a wider concept than the penal code embodies. "None" includes ourselves as well as people we know, people we don't know, and other forms of life and eco-systems. And to be spiritually meaningful, "will" must mean something more than what we feel like doing, or even what we're good at. Many of us understand it to mean our true purpose in life – which can be difficult to figure out.

Although in most mundane situations we can satisfy the Rede by following the Golden Rule it resembles, it has meaning beyond that. As Wiccans, we recognize kinship with all of Earth's creatures and features. That means that if what we're doing gets in the way of anyone else's well-being - or the planet's - it's *not* our true will.

Yes, some "harm" is inevitable. Just for instance, no matter what we eat, it was alive once. Recognizing that "life feeds on life," most of us believe we won't be karmically punished for keeping ourselves alive and healthy. But, we must take care not to ruin whole species, whole eco-systems ... and we must acknowledge our responsibility to do as little harm as possible, and to nurture the life that remains.

### The "Long Version" of the Rede

We've had lots of questions about the so-called "long version," and the short answer is that there isn't one. The reason so many people are confused about it is that in 1974, a twenty-six line poem called "The Wiccan Rede" was published in *Earth Religion News*. Not long after, another poem, called "Rede of the Wicca," and submitted by Lady Gwen Thompson, was published in *The Green Egg*.

Lady Gwen said her grandmother, Adriana Porter, wrote it; she said the first poem (in *ERN*) was changed from the original. Now that poem is well-known as "the Long Rede." There are several reasons to doubt that it's really old. The main one is that the poem refers to concepts that weren't known in Grandmother Porter's time, much less any earlier than the mid-1800s when she was born. Some claim that Lady Gwen wrote the whole thing, and some claim that it was taken from Valiente's writings. Whoever wrote it, it's a poem *about* the Rede, and not the Rede itself. That's why MEM doesn't distribute copies of it.

