

## Challenges of Authenticity in Representing an Increasingly Diverse “Pagan” Community

Don Frew, Claremont Pagan Studies, January 2018

Hello!<sup>1</sup>

As most of you know, my name is Don Frew and I’ve been representing modern Witchcraft, and of necessity NeoPaganism, to the public for over 35 years.

I am the High Priest of a Gardnerian Coven in Berkeley, California, that just celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, but I am also an Elder of the NROOGD Tradition (an SF Bay Area based tradition).

Autobiographical info – hopefully not too much – guides us through the material I’m presenting. I apologize if this all seems too much about me, but my experiences are the basis of my observations.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike most Witches of my generation, I was not raised in another religion.

My mother was the daughter of a lapsed Christian Scientist who stopped going to church after seeing a doctor for a broken leg. My father’s family had not had a religious affiliation as far back as I have been able to trace, and if *he* had any religion at all, it was a deep commitment to Capitalism. (Some have said that my brother’s involvement in environmental science, and mine in environmental religion, are our attempts to make up for his involvement in environmental depredation.<sup>3</sup>)

My parents felt that religion was something for my brother and me to decide for ourselves, but they always made information about any and all religions available to us, if we expressed interest.

The first book I read on my own was a children’s book of Egyptian myths, and from a very early age I was puzzled by the seemingly nonsensical distinction between the “myths” of the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Norse, and supposed “reality” of Bible Stories.

I first joined a Wiccan study group when I was twelve, back in 1972, but I didn’t get seriously involved in what was then called the Neopagan movement until coming to UC Berkeley in 1978, initially to study Anthropology and later Religious Studies.

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<sup>1</sup> This text was prepared to be read aloud, and I have preserved its original formatting. Some sentences that are clear when spoken may be less so when read. I invite you to try to hear my voice as you read.

<sup>2</sup> Many other people have been involved in representing the Covenant of the Goddess and the Craft right alongside me. However, they have not been a part of shaping the observations in this talk and would needlessly derail the train of argument if included in the text. Also, I would not want views ascribed to them that weren’t theirs. Accordingly, I have tried to include them in footnotes, to make sure credit is given where it is due.

<sup>3</sup> My father was an executive in the lumber, pulp, and paper industry, and was at least partly responsible for much of the cutting of old growth forest in the Northwest.

It was through a Religious Studies Hallowe'en party with "real" local Witches and Druids that I met up with local covens.

I joined a NROOGD coven – Coven Firestar, led by Isaac Bonewits among others – in 1983.

I quickly discovered that my lack of a religious background, combined with the financial independence I inherited from my family, put me in a special position to be able to talk about Craft to non-Witches in two critical respects:

1) Financial independence meant that I didn't have to worry about losing a job by being identified as a Witch.

This in turn meant that I could use my real, mundane name when dealing with the public at a time when most folks were hiding their identities behind names like "Capricorn Skywatcher". (If Capricorn is in the audience, I apologize for singling you out.)

This went a long way towards being taken seriously by journalists and public officials.

2) Not having been raised in another religion, I didn't have any buttons to push.

Many of my contemporaries, coming from bad experiences of religious conflict in their families, could easily become VERY<sup>4</sup> angry at insensitive words from a minister or rabbi.

I, on the other hand, would just take these as examples of ignorance and opportunities to educate.

In 1985, I was elected National Public Information Officer<sup>5</sup> for the Covenant of the Goddess<sup>6</sup>, the largest religious organization for Witches. As PIO, I was to serve as the primary outreach person and interface between CoG and the worlds of media, law enforcement, government, and the public in general.

At the time, CoG was the largest, most diverse religious organization for Witches on Earth (welcoming covens and solitary Witches of *all* Traditions as well as Eclectics). And at this time, Witches were the vast majority of Neopagans, so by default – and through no choice of my own – I became a spokesperson for an entire movement.

After all, no amount of "Well, many of us think this, but there are also many who think that." and "a popular view is this, but there are alternatives" and "Witches aren't the only kind of Neopagans, and Wiccans are a subset of Witches", etc. etc. would keep a listener or an audience from leaving with the view that "*All Pagans* think whatever that guy just said."

If the conversation was reduced to an "elevator speech" the problem was magnified dramatically.

Given this, the priority became making the best impression in the shortest amount of time.

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<sup>4</sup> CAPS were a reminder to me to emphasize a word in my delivery.

<sup>5</sup> I was CoG's second PIO after Pete Pathfinder of the Aquarian Tabernacle Church.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cog.org>

From the beginning, my job was a dance between authentically representing myself, accurately representing my community, and effectively communicating the truth in a way that ensured the maximum likelihood of true understanding.

As I said, at the time, modern Witchcraft represented by far the largest segment of the Neopagan movement, with Druids and Heathens making up almost all of the rest. EARLY Neopagan Druidism and Heathenry, at least on the West Coast, were made up almost entirely of folks who had once been Witches of some sort and they tended to bring elements of their earlier practices with them.

For this reason, speaking in general terms about Craft was still giving a RELATIVELY accurate portrayal of Druids and Heathens – at the time.

Boy, would things change.

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The first challenge I faced was one of gender.

I repeatedly heard, “Why is a *man* representing a women’s religion?”

This necessitated rattling off statistics – to the extent that we had them – about the ratio of men to women in the Craft, pointing out the many women authors on Neopaganism, addressing the importance of the Divine Feminine as a counterbalance to an overwhelmingly patriarchal society, while at the same time explaining that CoG includes groups that address a Goddess AND a God *as well as* groups that focus exclusively on a Goddess.

This was a lot of content to get out in what was often a very short conversation.

It also prompted me to ask the same question of myself at a deeper level... “Why WAS I in what was perceived as a ‘women’s religion?’”

At the time, men’s groups – inspired by Robert Bly – were all the rage and I was often being asked to participate. All I can say is that I never found my masculinity to be threatened by any of this and I didn’t need to ask “How did I know that I was a man?” beyond looking in my trousers.<sup>7</sup>

Seriously, I think that I didn’t have the same complex relationship between the father as God and God as the father – given my own family background – that many of my peers did. What I DID find was that the mother aspect of the Goddess was much more approachable, and that through Her I was able to connect with the God.

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<sup>7</sup> I do not mean to belittle *all* men’s groups, but there were many at the time that were being organized by men who had little idea what they were doing. I have since learned of many that were and are far more profound and of greater usefulness.

The progressive degree system of initiatory Craft was a big help in this.

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The next big challenge, in the later 1980s, was that of Satanism.

I don't know about you, but when I was growing up, one of the most popular shows on television was *Bewitched*. Sponsors fought over the opportunity to endorse this comedy about a good witch. Everyone I knew took it for granted that – at least in the world of fiction – there were good witches and bad witches... just like in *The Wizard of Oz*.

An early, half-serious question I would get was “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?”

Come the late '80s and early '90s and the usual question would become an accusation... “Aren't you a devil-worshipper?”

All the earlier popular acceptance of Witchcraft as part of the fascination with the Occult in the 1960s and '70s was out the window. Now we weren't just an amusing aspect of the counter-culture, we were part of a dangerously-criminal organized effort to violently destroy society, starting with its children.

The modern Satanic Hysteria began with the publication of *Michelle Remembers* in 1980. Told by Michelle's therapist<sup>8</sup> – Lawrence Pazder – it “exposed” an international Satanic criminal cult / conspiracy engaged in the systematic ritual abuse and murder of children.

An earlier book – Evangelist Mike Warnke's *The Satan Seller*, published in 1972 – had claimed to expose such a conspiracy, but without the abuse of children and never penetrated society much beyond the Evangelical community.

Michelle's story reached a popular readership that was just coming to terms with the idea of widespread sexual abuse of children in America.

Michelle, and the other promoters of the Satanic Hysteria that followed – and there were many – reassured readers that “No, you don't have to worry that Uncle Billy may be sexually abusing your kids at home. It's the evil Satanic Cult OUT THERE that's responsible!”

And of course, as far as Evangelical authors were concerned, Witches were just another kind of Satanist. If we looked nicer, that's just because we were putting on a nice face to lure people in.

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<sup>8</sup> And later, husband!

My answer to this was to get out in front of the problem in two ways: by engaging the Evangelical and Law-Enforcement communities.

At about this time I noticed that a local Evangelical group was announcing a conference called “Deception & Discernment: Exposing the Dangers of the Occult.” The conference was put on by the Spiritual Counterfeits Project<sup>9</sup>, a leading Christian research organization offering an Evangelical Christian response to cults and the occult.

I registered for the conference and got a name-tag with my name and listing “C.O.G.” as my organization. (Most attendees probably assumed that “C.O.G.” meant “Church of God.”) Again, the fact that I could use my mundane name made a difference.

I stayed quiet and took notes through most of the conference until one of the last speakers, Jack Roper, made a number of ridiculous statements about Witchcraft & Neopaganism.

Roper was seriously telling people that Witches worship unicorns. And that the role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons had been created by Witches as a recruitment tool, since it was “the best introduction to practicing real magic and casting real spells ever written.”

I had to stand up during the question and answer period and say something.

When I pointed out that Witches don’t worship unicorns, Roper retorted, “Well, then how come there’s a Wiccan group called ‘Grove of the Unicorn’?”

“There’s a Hillside Community Church up the street”, I said. “I don’t think they worship the hillside.” “As for the D&D manuals teaching teenagers how to cast real spells...”, I said. “I’d like to see *you* summon a lightning bolt by rolling a few dice. If it was that easy, we’d all be in real trouble.”

After I pointed out the many inaccuracies in his talk, Roper challenged me, asking why anyone should think I knew more about the subject than he.

“Well,” I said, “I DO serve on the board of directors of the largest Wiccan religious organization on Earth.”

All eyes turned towards me.

People sitting near me in the pews edged away.

During the break that followed, most conference attendees avoided me, several tried to convert me, and a few asked pointed questions. But one came up and introduced himself in a friendly way – Brooks Alexander, one of the founders of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project. Unlike every other presenter at that conference, Brooks’ talk had laid out Biblical arguments against Witchcraft without ever misrepresenting what modern Witches *actually* believe or do.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.scp-inc.org/>

This commitment to honesty on both our parts became the basis for further conversations and, eventually, a series of ten four-hour dialogues between members of the Covenant of the Goddess and the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, comparing and contrasting Wicca and Christianity on topics like prayer, nature, women, ritual, good and evil.<sup>10</sup> In the end, we made a commercial video together.

I have since found that a commitment to honesty can be the basis for fruitful dialogue between the most opposed ideologies.

That relationship was one of the most significant learning experiences in my Wiccan career.

While I stayed in occasional contact with some of the Christians who had been part of those dialogues, Brooks and I remained in closer communication over the years. When Brooks wrote a book on the modern Witchcraft movement for Evangelical Christians, I helped edit it. We have a program that we do together at various conferences called “Wiccan / Christian Dialogue: A 30-year Interfaith Friendship.”

While Evangelical Christians won’t trust a Witch, they WILL trust the SCP, Brooks Alexander, and the other Evangelical authors and speakers I’ve worked with. Those Evangelicals will tell them: “Yes, the Witches are probably damned and going to Hell, but no, they don’t eat babies or worship the Devil and they make perfectly fine neighbors.”

I call that a win.

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Unfortunately, while *Michelle Remembers* and the many copycat books that followed were stirring up the Evangelical community, they were also penetrating the Law Enforcement community.

A spate of high profile murders, each allegedly involving some aspect of “devil-worship”, were making headlines: Sean Sellers, Tommy Sullivan, Pete Roland, Ricky Kasso, Richard Ramirez (aka the Night Stalker), and later the West Memphis Three.

Police had no clue about this subject matter and there were paid Evangelical “experts” only too willing to step into that gap and tell the Police all about the Satanic Cults operating under their noses.

I knew that first impressions make a huge difference with the Police.

If you show up AFTER a crime to deny that it has anything to do with you, you are just another perp trying to cover up their crime. But if you go to the Police in advance – especially using

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<sup>10</sup> On our side, myself and Gus diZerega were in all the dialogues, with two other Witches selected for their expertise in each topic.

your mundane name and giving your home address – you can be a concerned citizen offering to help a beleaguered police force.

Accordingly, I contacted San Francisco police Inspector Sandi Gallant and offered my services as a consultant on the occult. This was much welcomed, and a professional relationship grew into a friendship.

I ended up working on the McMartin Preschool Trial, the Leonard Lake serial killings, the Matamoros murders, and others.

Once again, in order to reach a larger audience that might be skeptical of taking a Witch's word for something, I approached an intermediary group to act as the go-between.

I proposed that the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER) investigate the rising and widespread claims of "Satanic Ritual Abuse" or "SRA", since these claims were largely based on "expert" testimony provided by Evangelical Christians. CSER was horrified that tax-payer dollars were being spent on essentially religious advisors.

A two-year investigation followed, by members of CSER, Robert Hicks of the Justice Department, and Ken Lanning of the FBI, myself and others. The results were published as a report for Law Enforcement titled *Satanism in America: How the Devil Got Much More than his Due*.

This report, finding no evidence of organized criminal activity by Satanist groups, was credited by the FBI with turning the tide of law enforcement opinion against claims of widespread criminal activity by Satanic cults. It also influenced the rapid discrediting of a nascent Satanic Hysteria in the United Kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

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I served six terms as Public Information Officer for CoG, as well as two as First Officer (CoG's term for President). All along, a part of my remit had been to be a liaison with the interfaith community.

This started small, with the Berkeley Area Interfaith Council (BAIC). I joined BAIC in 1985. At the time, it was considered the most inclusive interfaith council in the country.

When folks would hear about our tremendous diversity – from Buddhists to Zoroastrians – they would just say: "Well, YOU can get away with that; you're Berkeley."

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<sup>11</sup> It's interesting that in the UK every incident of parents reporting widespread Satanic ritual abuse of children could be traced to one or more parent attending a meeting held by an American Evangelical preacher.

The BAIC folks were not at all fazed by a Witch showing up at their meeting, as COG member Glenn Turner had been a valued Council member in the 1970s, and she was well-remembered.<sup>12</sup> Thus, I did not have to deal with the Satanism suspicions that often kept Witches out of interfaith councils in other parts of the country.

I was elected to BAIC's Executive Committee in 1986. In 1987, I was appointed Executive Secretary, becoming the first Witch to serve as an officer on the Board of a local interfaith council in the United States.

The secret to advancement was a simple one:

Show up.

Most people who get involved in interfaith work are the ones who come when they are invited to speak on a panel.

The ones who come early to set up; who stay behind to clean up; and who volunteer to help with planning the next event are the ones who become known... especially when you help plan events that your own group will not be part of. Being there to help the interfaith effort as opposed to just doing "public relations" for your own group is what stands out.

One of my mottoes as PIO for CoG was: "We don't have the resources to educate the public, but we DO have the resources to educate the people who educate the public."

BAIC was a member of the North American Interfaith Network (NAIN)<sup>13</sup>, an association of interfaith councils of Canada and the US, and during my term as PIO the Covenant of the Goddess became the first Pagan organization listed in NAIN's Directory.

Also through my efforts, in 1993 the Covenant of the Goddess became one of four Neopagan organizations to co-sponsor the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions<sup>14</sup>, where over 8000 international attendees attended over 900 programs in the course of nine days.

I was one of a handful of Neopagans<sup>15</sup> invited to give a so-called "Major Presentation", titled "Pagans in Interfaith Dialogue".

By the end of the nine days, the academics attending the Parliament were saying "In 1893, America was introduced to the Buddhists and Hindus; in 1993, we met the Neopagans." One media person described the Parliament as "the coming-out party for the Neopagans."

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<sup>12</sup> I was also preceded at the BAIC by CoG-members M. Macha NightMare and Meredydd Harper, who had attended meetings.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.nain.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://parliamentofreligions.org/parliament/1993-chicago/chicago-1993>

<sup>15</sup> The others were: Andras Corban Arthen, Phyllis Curott, Dr. Michael York, and the Rev. Baroness Cara-Marguerite Drusilla.



I obviously can't take sole credit for this. CoG sent me and two other members – First Officer Phyllis Curott and co-PIO Michael Thorn – to represent CoG, but 40 other CoG members came at their own expense to help with presentations, staff a hospitality suite, provide logistical support, and more.

We couldn't have done it without them.

Two of the other three sponsors were also basically Wiccan organizations – Circle and EarthSpirit – and they had similar outpourings of support from their members. (The fourth was the Fellowship of Isis.)

In my opinion, 1993 is when the Craft community stopped looking inward – in terms of privacy and security – and started looking outwards in terms of “How can we be of service to the world?” We started to understand that interfaith work was not just about public relations – explaining who we are to a receptive audience – but about having an opportunity to work together with like-minded people to put our principles into action in the world in a way we could never do on our own.

After the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, interfaith work took over my life.

I continued to represent CoG at all of the subsequent Parliaments – Cape Town 1999, Barcelona 2004, Melbourne 2009, Salt Lake City 2015 – and was invited to be part of the Parliament's ongoing “Assembly of the World's Religious and Spiritual Leaders”.<sup>16</sup> (BTW, the next Parliament will be in Toronto in 2018.<sup>17</sup>)

Through these connections, I was invited to be part of the planning conferences at Stanford University in the late 1990s for the United Religions Initiative.<sup>18</sup>

Inaugurated in 2000, URI is now the largest grass-roots interfaith organization on Earth, with over almost 1000 local chapters – called “Cooperation Circles” or CCs – in over 100 countries, involving over three million people. I have served on URI's Board of Trustees since its beginning; the only Trustee to do so apart from the URI's founder, Bishop Bill Swing.

I have had tremendous success in the interfaith world:

- serving on the Board of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio<sup>19</sup>, a consortium of Bay Area interfaith councils and seminaries.

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<sup>16</sup> Due to a SNAFU in 1993, CoG, Circle, and EarthSpirit were left with ONE seat in the Assembly. Fortunately, there was someone attending in '93 who was an elder in all three groups – Deborah Ann Light. She graciously agreed to represent all of us and did a *superb* job! As 1999 approached, she told the organizers that it was too much work for her. She stepped back to just represent EarthSpirit and recommended me to represent CoG and Selena Fox to represent Circle.

<sup>17</sup> <https://parliamentofreligions.org/>

<sup>18</sup> Actually, Deborah was invited first, then I attended *with* her, then she stopped coming.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.interfaith-presidio.org/>

- founding the Lost & Endangered Religions Project<sup>20</sup>, an interfaith nonprofit service organization that works with marginalized religious communities to preserve religious traditions in danger of being lost forever;
- directing the International Interfaith Sacred Space Design Competition<sup>21</sup>, in which 160 design teams from 17 countries imagined what genuinely interfaith sacred space might look like;
- founding the Spirituality & the Earth Cooperation Circle (S&ECC)<sup>22</sup>, which host “People of the Earth” conferences at the Interfaith Center at the Presidio and arranges for English lessons, computer training, and video training for Latin American indigenous representatives involved in interfaith work;
- founding the URI’s 999<sup>th</sup> CC – the Wisdom & Vision (WAV) CC for former URI Trustees and Board Members.
- serving as Vice-President of *The Interfaith Observer*<sup>23</sup>, the preeminent online journal covering the interfaith movement.

This has all been possible because of big changes in the interfaith community over the last few decades – coinciding with big changes in the Pagan community.

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In 1993, the planners of the Parliament of the World’s Religions imagined the event as one where leaders and representatives of world religions would come to sit around a table and make big decisions. They had a plan for all the leaders to read and endorse a document called “The Global Ethic”.

As it turned out, when they put out the invitation, the world answered. Not only did 8,000 people show up, another 5,000 were turned away for lack of space!

The Parliament organizers managed to achieve their goals – sort of – by holding the smaller “Assembly of the World’s Religious and Spiritual Leaders” which approved, provisionally, a revised document called *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*<sup>24</sup>.

But the real news of the Parliament was the thousands who showed up wanting to engage in interfaith dialogue with everyone they met.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.religionsproject.org/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.interfaithdesign.org/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://uri.org/who-we-are/cooperation-circle/spirituality-earth-cc-linking-people-earth>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/>

<sup>24</sup> [https://parliamentofreligions.org/pwr\\_resources/\\_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf](https://parliamentofreligions.org/pwr_resources/_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf)

*Before* the 1993 Parliament, interfaith was all about official representatives of established religious organizations (predominately from the so-called “Big Five” religions of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism) getting together like diplomats to repeat their organizations’ party lines to each other.

*After* the 1993 Parliament, interfaith focused on the individual and their faith journeys and practices. People met and talked as individuals who may or may not be affiliated with an organization.

*Before* 1993, when you attended an interfaith conference, your name tag gave your name, your organization or faith tradition, and your official status within it.

*After* 1993, when you attended an interfaith conference, your name tag just gave your name.

This difference seems small, but it is significant.

A story that illustrates this...

In 2002, I was attending the URI’s first Global Assembly in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>25</sup>

A local Witch, who was at her first interfaith event, came up to me and told me about the very interesting Appreciative Interview she had just done with a guy named “Bill”. When I explained that that had been Bill Swing, an Episcopal Bishop and founder of the URI, she was stunned! She couldn’t imagine that someone of that standing would not be in full regalia and accompanied by an entourage, that he would just go by “Bill”, and that he would do a dialogue with just an ordinary Witch. When she learned that this was typical of the URI, she was hooked on interfaith and became committed to interfaith work in Rio.

In the pre-1993 approach, the person you talked to *at once* knew your faith tradition and then judged everything you said through the lens of their preconceptions about that faith tradition.

In the current situation, the person you talk to gets to know you as a person – often through a process called Appreciative Inquiry – and only later learns your organization or faith tradition, which they now judge through the lens of their impression of the person they’ve just gotten to know.

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<sup>25</sup> One night, at the 2002 Global Assembly, I suddenly found myself with a microphone stuck in my face and a TV reporter asking me, “Why do you do interfaith?” I thought a moment and said... “We all want to see changes in the world – an end to poverty, an end to environmental depredation, equal rites for women, and more. Well, the only REAL change comes about through changing peoples’ minds and nothing has the power to influence the way people think that religion has. Religions coming together to work collaboratively for the good of the planet and humanity has the potential to be the most powerful force for positive change that this planet has ever seen. As a person of faith, responsible for my community, how could I NOT be involved?” Little did I know that this was being recorded for CNN Latin America and I would be broadcast every half-hour for the next 24 hours. Everywhere I went, people would stop me and say, “You’re that guy from TV!” The CNN in the United States, of course, had no interest in covering an interfaith event. <sigh>

This shift from official representative to interested individuals has opened interfaith up to anyone and everyone and it's had two immediate effects on Neopagan involvement:

1) The fact that the whole interfaith movement is more focused on personal relationships than official representation means that event planners, when thinking of participants, do not think in terms of "Who's the representative from organization X?"; rather they think of "Who do we know from faith tradition X?"

I get invited to so many things because I have been around a long time and I know a lot of people. This keeps things personal, but also makes the interfaith something of a huge clique. It can be hard to penetrate from the outside.

Newer, smaller Neopagan (we'll get to that term in a moment) groups should not expect to receive an invitation to send someone to an event; rather they have to take the initiative, show up, and start the process of making personal connections.

This can also be subversive to the way we operate. I started my interfaith work as part of my job as National Public Information Officer for CoG – an elected position. As the interfaith movement changed it became clear that this would no longer work. It wouldn't matter who CoG elected to be PIO, *I* would be the person receiving the invitations because *I* was the person the interfaith folks knew. We had to create an appointed position for National Interfaith Representatives to accommodate this reality<sup>26</sup>, so that our interfaith representatives could serve indefinitely.

2) The amount of damage an individual can do has been minimized.

In the old days, we used to be very concerned about "loose canons" in our movement or, not to put to fine a point on it, "whackos" representing us at an interfaith event and making all the rest of us look bad.

The way the movement works now, everyone assumes that any person they meet is only speaking from the perspective of their own path and won't necessarily tar a whole group with what one person says.

It's important to understand these facts in terms of the overall development of interfaith as a process and as a movement.

Based on my observations over 30+ years in interfaith, groups and individuals seem to go through the same four phases:

### Phase 1: Identity

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<sup>26</sup> Deborah Ann Light and I were CoG's first National Interfaith Representatives. We added more as our interfaith work grew – M. Macha NightMare, Rachael Watcher, Catherine Starr, Rowan Fairgrove, and others. The criteria for appointment included that the person was *already* doing interfaith work at the national and/or global level, i.e. getting appointed did not magically grant access to such work, it just assisted the work you were already doing.

- \* General Motivation: “It’s better for us to be in communication than not.”
  - Mainstream Motivation: “If the other groups are doing something, we’d better keep an eye on it.”
  - Alternative Motivation: opportunity for P.R. work, gain credibility
  - Covert Agenda: seeking converts
- \* Group Members: official representatives, usually clergy
- \* Group Action: little, formal “dialogues” based on assertions of identity (e.g. “I am a Christian and Christ says...”)
- \* Interfaith Liturgy: none
- \* Challenges: getting groups to participate
- \* Risk: easily unbalanced by covert agendas, goes nowhere, falls apart

### Phase 2: Tolerance

- \* General Motivation: tolerance, working together for the community
  - Covert Agenda: assistance with pet social program
- \* Members: official representatives, often not clergy
- \* Group Action: social programs (local, community-based) and/or formal “dialogues” based on topics in common
- \* Interfaith Liturgy: inclusive language, careful not to offend
- \* Challenges: problem groups (i.e. “cults”), reaching the public
- \* Risk: early → theological division, later → syncretism (“melting pot”)

### Stage 3: Authenticity

- \* General Motivation: “Isn’t it wonderful that the Divine manifests in so many ways!”
- \* Members: individuals, some official representatives, some clergy
- \* Group Action: social engagement (regional & global), Appreciative Inquiry
- \* Interfaith Liturgy: focused on authenticity of each faith tradition
- \* Challenges: organizational design
- \* Risk: too far ahead of everyone else, disconnected from own faith communities

The interfaith movement *as a whole* is currently in Phase 3.

The focus on *authenticity* is refreshing and allows us to move beyond the things we have in common to look at the areas where we differ.

I now very much *prefer* that a Christian friend bless me in the name of Jesus Christ rather than use some “inclusive” language, because I learn more by him being authentic to his own faith tradition. *I* won’t take offense because I know that the person giving the blessing is not *giving* offense.

A Catholic priest who is a very dear friend once said at a planning meeting for a “Gathering of Blessing” event: “It’s easy for us to bless each other; the challenge is in accepting the blessings.” Neopagans attending such an event with no preparation are likely to be horribly offended by the

language they hear. They will most likely be at Phase 2 while the event planners were creating a Phase 3 event.

Problems arise when people who are new to the interfaith process attend events or groups where there is a disconnect between different phases. We still haven't figured out how to gracefully integrate people and organizations that are at these different levels.

It will take, time, communication, and understanding.

And Phase 4?

I was having dinner with some friends after an interfaith board meeting a few months back.

One is a Baptist minister, one is a Mormon, one is Jewish, and one is a Buddhist monk.

We talked and joked and told stories and dreamed a future for our interfaith organization, for our families, and for the world and at one point I stopped and said, "You know what? None of us have said anything about our faith traditions the whole time we've been here. In fact, they rarely come up in our conversations any more, unless one of us is telling a Faith Journey in a meeting or offering a blessing."

The Baptist minister, who happens to be my brother-in-law, said "Maybe this is Phase 4."

Individually motivated by our faith traditions, but coming together around our common humanity.

There have been overall trends in this process:

- \* top-down → grassroots
  - \* "power over" → "power from within"
  - \* local → global
  - \* hierarchical → "chaordic"
  - \* organizational members → individual members
  - \* social focus → spiritual focus
  - \* goal oriented → process oriented
  - \* closed, restricted membership → open, inclusive membership
  - \* similar faith traditions → embracing diversity
    - (Note: the seed of ecumenism can lead to a problematic syncretism)
  - \* council of churches (Christian groups) → interfaith council (Christian, Jewish, maybe Muslim)
    - multifaith, but traditionalist, group (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, a few others) → all "religions, spiritual expressions, & indigenous traditions"
-

While the interfaith movement has been growing and changing, the Neopagan movement has gone through its own changes.

When Brooks Alexander was asked to revise the last two chapters for a new edition of Jeffrey Burton Russell's classic *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans*, he complained to me that the main problem he was having was fitting the history of the modern Pagan movement into two chapters.

"You've gone through more religious change in your first 50 years," he said, "than the Christian church did in its first 250."

Yes, I just shifted from "Neopagan" to "modern Pagan" in a few sentences.

This has been another challenge in representing our movement.

We keep changing our names (plural).

### Witchcraft

The American Neopagan movement started out being predominantly Witches and Druids, with a few Heathens and Egyptian spiritualities as well.

We used "Witchcraft" as the name for the largest branch of Neopaganism, with "Wicca" as a subset referring to Witchcraft traditions from Britain.

We also used terms like "the Craft" (or even "Witchen") quite freely, expecting others to understand.

Then "Wicca" became synonymous with "Witchcraft", due in large part to folks preferring to use one "W-word" rather than another "W-word" when coming out to parents.

Then some started using "Wicca" to refer to a religious practice largely devoid of magic, unlike "Witchcraft" (inspired, as far as I can tell, by the TV show *Charmed*).

The folks that used to be known as "Wicca" started calling themselves "British Traditional Wicca" to once again refer to a certain subset of Witches.

Now, there's "Traditional Witchcraft" (about which I'll say more later) that is quite distinct from "Traditional Wicca".

### Pagan

As I said, Witchcraft started out as the largest – at least in America – branch of a movement called "Neopagan", but often shortened to just "Pagan". Initially, "Pagans" were folks who were unaffiliated with the larger groups like Witches, Druids, and Heathens, exemplified by the

Church of All Worlds. Some even used “Pagans” to refer to not-yet-initiated or Outer Court Witches.

As we moved more into the interfaith sphere and made common cause with other groups, “Pagan” became more problematic.

At one interfaith conference, I organized a lunch meeting of many groups that were outside of “the Big Five”, but felt kinship with each other.<sup>27</sup> Our lunch included Witches; indigenous people from Africa, Latina America, and the South Pacific; practitioners of Shinto; Taoists; Hindus; and, to our surprise, a few biological and environmental scientists attending the event who said that they felt more at home with us than anywhere else.

We were surprised when we realized that we 15% of the delegate at the conference and, by sitting out on the lawn, were very visible. Other people were surprised at our numbers, as well.

It quickly became apparent that, rather than being a number of small disparate groups stuck on around the edges, we were a *way* of being religious. This went a long way towards establishing our identity and enhancing our legitimacy in the eyes of the Big Five, but we weren’t sure how to describe ourselves.

When I reported back to the general meeting about our lunch, I explained that:

- \* We are *indigenous*, but many of us live far from the land of our ancestors.
- \* We are *tribal*, but many of us no longer live in tribes.
- \* We are *Nature-based*, but many of us live in cities.
- \* We are *Earth-centered*, but many of us look to the stars and beyond as well.
- \* We are *polytheistic*, but many of us do not relate to “gods”, but to spirits and ancestors, instead or as well.
- \* We are *Pagan*, but many of us had not heard the term before today.

So, just as the URI ended up using the long, but inclusive phrase “religions, spiritual expressions, and indigenous traditions” to describe who we are as an organization, our little lunch ended up deciding were practitioners of “indigenous, tribal, Nature-based, Earth-centered, polytheistic, and/or Pagan spiritualities”.

It came to be called “the Pagan lunch” for short, but it exemplified the problems we were having with terminology.

### Heathens

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<sup>27</sup> Deborah Ann Light organized this lunch with me.



As the Heathen community developed, many did not want to be included under the “Pagan” label since:

- 1) they felt that “Pagan” had become too identified with “Wiccan”, and
- 2) they felt that “*paganus*”<sup>28</sup> was a Latin word, and they wanted something more Northern.

On top of this, Pagan academics have argued about what we *should* be called, as if any of us really have any great power over the words used by others.

All of this is fine, but as it has happened over a relatively short time there has been no way we could expect outsiders to keep up.

I am often torn between being true to the groups I represent – whether officially or because, as so often happens, I’m the only Pagan in the room – and being understood in a conversation that doesn’t include enough time to explain all of the internal controversies we have over naming.

I’m reminded of wise words I learned from a marriage counselor in my first marriage: “What’s important is not to make sure that you say what YOU think is the right thing. What’s important is to make sure that you are *understood*.”

These days I call myself a “Witch”, I practice “Wicca, also called modern Witchcraft”, and I use “Wiccan” when I need an adjective.

I use both “Pagan” and “Neopagan” to refer to the broader movement, including Witches, Druids, Heathens, Reconstructionists, and others.

I do my best to make sure that my listener is coming away with the best general impression in the short time I have, knowing that they won’t remember details of terminology anyway.

If they go away with a warm, fuzzy feeling that we are a benign spiritual movement that is very different from the Abrahamic faiths and has some connection to ancient gods and to the Earth, I’m happy.

That’s enough to lead to further conversations where I can explain more.

<sup>28</sup> In Roman antiquity, a *paganus* was someone who lived on a *pagus* – a piece of land in the country. It distinguished someone who was settled – connected to a particular place – from someone who moved around, like a merchant or soldier. Over time, it came to have the connotation of “hick”, like a “country bumpkin” as opposed to an urbane city-dweller. With the coming of Christianity and its initial successes in the cities, it came to be connected with those who kept the “old ways.” The only name classical Pagans had for *themselves* was “Hellenes”, used by the urban elites to refer to keeping the old ways in the sense of holding on to Greek philosophy, literature, religion, and the classical Gods. However, using the name “Hellenes” would be even more confusing today. (It is used today by some Hellenic Reconstructionists who have a more direct claim to the name.

I recently experienced an extreme example of this when I attended a URI Global Council meeting in Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina. On the way home, I found myself waiting in an airport lounge for a couple of hours for a flight with another URI Trustee, Rev. David Limo Pajar. David is an Anglican Priest and an indigenous person. We've known each other for several years, but always spoken through a translator. On this occasion, we were on our own and David wanted to ask me about Wicca. In a conversation in which *every sentence* was partially in English and partially in Spanish, there was no opportunity to explain differences between different forms of Neopaganism and yet I felt the conversation was both important and successful for the reasons given above.

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Explaining more has become yet more difficult in recent years with a new wave of change sweeping through our community.

In the early days of Craft, we were what is called an “oppositional religion”; we defined ourselves more by *not being Christian* than by being *Pagan* or *Wiccan*.

Over time, we matured and developed more of a sense of identity of ourselves *as ourselves*.

It strikes me that we are in the midst of an explosion of new “Pagan” groups – many of which do not want to be called “Pagan” – that are oppositional to THEIR dominant religious over-culture, i.e. modern Witchcraft.

It seems to me that one way of looking at these new groups is in how they are focusing-in on one of the basic aspects of Craft culture, emphasizing it, and downplaying or even denying the importance of the rest (and, unfortunately, often dumping on Craft in the process):

\* Traditional Witchcraft – For this group, it's all about MAGIC. Wicca goes wrong in bringing in a religious emphasis.

\* Secular Paganism – For this group, it's all about HUMANITY. Wicca goes wrong in bringing in belief in the paranormal, i.e. magic and gods.

\* Devotional Polytheism – For this group, it's all about the GODS. Wicca goes wrong 1) in being an “Earth religion”, i.e. focused on the Earth, rather than the Gods, and 2) in mashing all the Gods and Goddesses together into THE God and THE Goddess, denying their individuality and uniqueness.<sup>29</sup> These groups developed out of the early Celtic and Egyptian (now called “Kemetic”) Reconstructionists.

\* Fundamentalist Paganism – For this group, it's all about the MYTHIC HISTORY. If you don't believe that we are practicing a tradition that goes straight back to a matriarchal, stone age religion then you don't belong. Anthropologist Sabina Magliocco has written about this.

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<sup>29</sup> There's an argument to be had about the accuracy and validity of this criticism, but not here.

\* Gaia-focused Spirituality – For them, it’s all about the EARTH. If the environment is not at the center of all you do, then you are woefully misguided. Who cares about Craft?

Each of these paths focuses on what has traditionally been a component of Wicca – Magic, Humanity, the Gods, mythic history, and the Earth. (I’m sure there’s some clever way to relate each of these to the 5 elements and the points of a pentacle.)

If Craft has changed at an accelerated pace, as Brooks observed, then these groups are developing even faster. I have seen many of them go through a golden age of first discovery of their paths, to defining and describing themselves in an oppositional way, to seeing internal dissention and factionalism produce significant tensions, to growth and development of new systems to deal with these tensions and the beginnings of defining themselves AS themselves (rather than being “not Craft”).

All in about fifteen years.

Many of these groups not only reject the label “Pagan”, but don’t want to be lumped in with the rest of us at all.

I went through a very difficult and very public discussion of this – in which more was said *about* me than *to* me – a few years ago, when some Devotional Polytheists took great exception to an article I had written in *The Interfaith Observer*.

Titled “The Rudiments of Neopagan Practice”, it described my own way of practicing in a way that many objected to in a hue and cry on their own blogs and websites – not in the comments to the article – so I only heard about it after the wave of objection was already underway.

The people most upset did not know that:

- 1) the article had been intended for an earlier issue in which several religious people were asked about their own way of addressing the concept of “Prayer, but my article had been bumped;
- 2) everyone understood that I was speaking only for myself, as everyone in interfaith does; and
- 3) the title had not been mine. (It has since been changed on the TIO website to “The Rudiments of MY Neopagan Practice”.)

Even so, there was enough upset for me to schedule a discussion at the following PantheaCon where folks could air their grievances and discuss the matter calmly, face-to-face, instead of in the usual Internet shouting match.

Increasingly, when talking to outsiders, it is very difficult to talk about our movement *as A* movement or community

ARE we still a community?

I would have to argue “Yes.”

Much as such disparate groups felt called to attend “the Pagan lunch” at the URI, as long as we all still come to PantheaCon (among others) and feel that somehow THAT is the place to come and present our views and discuss them with others, then there is SOMETHING still holding us together.

I will continue to call that something “Paganism” (or “Neopaganism”) until a better term comes along.

Until then, the fact of the matter is that the many arguments and discussions we have about terminology are just too much of an insider issue to make sense to others, especially in an elevator speech.

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### Final Thoughts

There are those who have objected to my representing any group other than my own Covenant of the Goddess and any tradition other than those of which I am a member in the interfaith work that I do.

I understand this.

But for the time being, until more traditions get involved in interfaith, I too often find myself in meetings – on the order of a couple of times a week – that are full of priest & ministers, a few rabbis & imams, maybe a Buddhist or two, and me.

Decisions are made that will affect the interfaith movement and its relations with the broader religious public for years to come.

When I am the only one in the room who is neither Abrahamic nor Dharmic I feel an ethical obligation to speak up when I know that the discussion is going in a direction that will trample on the rights or practices of anyone else who is not of neither of those categories.

That doesn’t mean that I claim to represent all of these groups, but it does mean that I can point out when broader religious input is needed.

But just as any Witch or Pagan will be taken as speaking for ALL Witches and Pagans – just by human nature – so am I often taken as speaking for ALL who are not Abrahamic or Dharmic.

This issue become especially sensitive when relating to indigenous traditions.

For good or ill, I am too often taken to be an indigenous voice that knows how to speak the language of Western corporate and administrative cultures. Fortunately, my indigenous friends have not yet had a problem with this.

This leads into an aside about Pagans and indigenous traditions...

At one of those planning meetings for the URI held at Stanford, I was in a small meeting when Rosalia Gutierrez – an indigenous Kolla from Argentina – objected strenuously, through her translator, to the use of the phrase “sacred space” and to the use of the word “sacred” at all.

I knew that this concept shouldn’t be a problem, so during a break, I took her aside to try to understand her objections better. After some discussion, it became clear that the phrase “sacred space” translated into her vernacular as meaning “church” and “sacred” meant “things you find in a church”.

Her objections were certainly understandable. I explained that this was NOT what we meant and we managed to work things out.

After that, the indigenous people in the URI would often come to me to speak for them in difficult discussions or negotiations. I was soon joined by CoG-member Rachael Watcher, whose Spanish skills would prove invaluable.

We were always clear to them that we saw ourselves as practicing an indigenous spirituality, while not being an indigenous person.<sup>30</sup> We have always made it clear that we had no expectation of being included in indigenous meetings or ceremonies. As a result, we have always been included, and work with indigenous people from Latin America has dominated my interfaith work.

Doing ceremony together makes all the difference.

At one point, during a trip through the Sacred Valley of the Urubamba after an indigenous planning meeting in Cuzco, Peru, the rest of the attendees surprised us by asking Rachael and me to do a Wiccan ceremony for them at an Incan sacred site at Ollantaytambo. Some who were on the fence about “just what this Wicca was” accepted us as their brother and sister after sharing this experience.

After one such meeting, Alejandrino Mejia Quispe – an indigenous Quechua from Ayacucho, Peru – told us that he “would go home and tell his children that the Wicca are people just like us.”

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As our Pagan community grows and changes – stretching the boundaries of what it means to still be *A* community – it will be harder and harder for those of us who speak to the public or do interfaith work to represent that community.

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<sup>30</sup> Phyllis Curott came up with this way of explaining ourselves at the 1993 Parliament and it has been very useful.

At the same time, until there is more representation by the varied groups *to* the public and its many institutions – media, interfaith, law enforcement, government – I believe that those of us who have the ear of those institutions *must* continue to speak on behalf of our brothers and sisters when it is needed and when the alternative is for them to have no voice at all.

As always, but more so, it will always be a delicate dance between authentically representing ourselves, accurately representing our community, and effectively communicating the truth in a way that ensures the maximum likelihood of true understanding.

All we can do is our best. Thank you.

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