

Don't Scare the Horses:

Political Content in Pagan Liturgy

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UU Pagans who are introducing Paganism to a UU congregation unfamiliar with it, will of course be dealing with Pagan acceptance issues among UUs. But they may also find themselves at cross-currents with other common structural and social issues among UUs; if they are Pagans just coming to UUism, they may even be unaware of those issues. Hence, this note.

The Political UU

Several issues revolve around political content in Pagan liturgy. Yes, UUs are political, or at least have that image and self-expectation. However, keep the following points in mind:

Worship as Reminder, Worship as Respite

For some UUs, worship is an occasion to *remind* themselves of the reasons they are called to do what they do in the world, and to get a fresh charge from the liturgy. For others, it is an occasion of *respite* from all that, a chance to be along with themselves and the like-spirited and whatever Other they may invoke on these occasions; that is how *they* re-charge.

This produces some very different ideas of what worship is about, and that in turn, some different ideas of what the church is all about. When I was president of a UU congregation in the 1970s, those differences were rife in the congregation. I took it as my task to summarize them respectfully in my Annual Report – that one view was of the church as an *instrument* of social *action*, and the other as an *incubator* of social *activists*. My suggestion was that different times demand different approaches, and that we should retain both as options in case the demands of the times changed. The differences of opinion remained but ceased to be a source of division in the congregation.

Now, neither the respite nor the reminder model of worship is more UU or more Pagan than the other. But if there are people in the congregation who are uncertain about UU Paganism, *and* they are also of the "respite" persuasion, then Pagan liturgy of the "reminder" format will not only make them bridle, but reinforce their fears that Paganism is a vehicle for stuff they don't want in their church. This gives them one more reason to be skeptical of UU Paganism, and makes the job of Pagan acceptance harder.

Guilt Trips

Being political is indeed part of the UU bag, but not all UUs are really as political as they think they are supposed to be. Explicitly political Pagan liturgy may confront them with an uncomfortable reminder of the gap between aspiration and reality, and they may feel they are being guilt tripped.

Why should they feel this way? Dirty little secret: A *lot* of intramural UU exhortations to political action are overt or covert guilt trips. Some are quite obvious and some are impressively subtle, but they are part of the constant background.

So, to a person skeptical of UU Paganism *and* harboring modest persistent guilt about not being as political as s/he feels s/he ought to be, explicitly political Pagan content is going to seem – through projection – like one more effort at guilt tripping. And will evoke a reaction of, "I don't have to take that from *these* people!" Again, this sets back the goal of Pagan acceptance.

Inadequacies

UUs like to feel on top of things. Asking them to participate in liturgy that includes a list of topics dear to Pagan hearts, but about which most UUs are clueless, is going to make many of them feel inadequate. Any who are already skeptical of UU Paganism will find this one more emotional reason to remain skeptical.

I've seen one popular liturgy that includes names of native peoples around the Americas and the Arctic. For some the pronunciation is far from obvious. Just laying it on the UUs is going to generate more feelings of inadequacy and, in some, reaction formation against UU Paganism.

"Start where the people are at ..."

So, should explicit political content be avoided?

My personal inspiration in institutional change is Saul Alinsky (1909-1972), godfather of neighborhood organization. Like any true inspiration, he left us completely contradictory advice for real-life situations; in this case: "Start where the people are at" and "Read their own rules back to them".

"Start where the people are at" is for helping people who think they lack power, helping them organize the power that they don't know they have.

"Read their own rules back to them" is for confronting those who keep the people unaware of their power.

What you are about is not *giving* them UU Paganism, but *evoking* Earth centered spirituality from UUs who are just coming to awareness that they have something like that in themselves. It is very much a circumstance of people not knowing they have power, and helping them learn to recognize and exercise it. Thus, an occasion for starting where the people are at.

Therefore, if you have a nifty political liturgy all ready for a seasonal service the UU church has decided to let the Pagans perform, and one of the UUs helping organize it shows up with a copy of *Earth Prayers*, keep your nifty liturgy in your pocket and find out if s/he wants to include something out of *Earth Prayers* in the service.

Specifics of content aside, one strong UU preference is for congregational polity – each congregation developing its own governance, worship cycle and pulpit content. One UU Pagan email list reported the plight of a recently-UU Pagan who showed up with something that a lot of Pagans in the region wanted to do as a coordinated spell at one seasonal ceremony, and ran into a buzz saw with the UUs. Part of that, I suspect, was resistance to being streamed into someone else's worship cycle.

A lot of UUs come from some other denomination that they walked out on. One common UU sentiment, consequently, is a determination not to be the person their old Sunday School – and the church it was part of – tried to turn them into. Many of those have lectionaries: a set cycle of service topics, Sunday by Sunday, for all churches in the denomination. UUism does not, and anything that resembles a lectionary is going to raise the hackles of UUs who came out of churches that have one.

Again, the particular problem for the UU Pagan pioneer is that the inherent UU issue becomes a premise for those already skeptical of UU Paganism to become more so.

Trip-up Points

Here are some additional, very particular trip-up points:

Vocabulary

A Pagan-naive UU who said a ceremony needed some kind of closing, was not mollified when told that "opening the circle" was already part of the script. This is almost certainly a vocabulary problem: He asked for closing and the reply was something called opening. Clearly no-one clued him that, in this context, opening a circle, not closing it, is the opposite of casting one.

Quality

If the UU Pagan pioneers show up with pre-composed liturgy, the quality of that liturgy will be essential. Even people who are not learned in the points of liturgical quality will be put off, without knowing why, when the quality is lacking.

In one instance cited above, the pre-composed liturgy had some klinkers in it. Part of it was a list of peoples in jeopardy from "development", some of which were admirably succinct and specific, i.e., a group threatened by a drilling operation. But some were not: "Hippies in Cazadero" conveyed nothing about what the Cazadero hippies are confronting, and "the Fey" did not even make clear who is referred to.

On the same list, sandwiched between tribal name entries, was a reference to peoples and places threatened by transportation construction. This causes a disorienting snap from specifics to a generalization, and then back to specifics in the next line.

Both of these are bumpy, liturgically. And, once again, a predisposition to skepticism about UU Paganism can be reinforced by a bad experience with liturgical bumps.

None of this might be nearly as bumpy to Pagans who know the references cold. The trick is to find out what it's like to UUs unacquainted with the references.

Ask for help

If you're lucky, your congregation has a liturgy wonk. Be alert for the party who knows the Hymnal and can come up with an appropriate hymn or reading on any topic; or who's always grumbling about this or that in the worship service. Ask that party to review any pre-composed liturgy as liturgy, never minding content, and heed what s/he says. (If s/he is underutilized in creating the church's worship cycle, this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.)

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