

Recovering Christian: A 'Born-Again' Pagan Perspective

by Michael L. Anderson

"It's exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorientating and painful." — Adrienne Rich

At first impression, my title may sound a little defensive or even reactionary. I cannot refute either. There is probably a little truth in both. However, the main implication within this title is an affirmation of who I am, of my faith, my path as a Pagan. It contains the acknowledgement of the struggle, that after all these years, I am now at peace with. It speaks of the personal inner battle with my Christian roots and living with a basically Pagan ignorant to intolerant Christian society and family members. In this arena I am not alone. This internal and external struggle I share with many of my

fellow Pagan sisters and brothers. We who have been raised Christian find ourselves not only at odds with society at large but with our own families. Therein lies the basis of this article.

It is my assertion that a common modern day experience for us Pagans is the feeling of alienation at the least to discrimination and victimization at the worst. Some will balk of the use of such extreme words to describe their experience. Victim may be too strong to describe their experience, especially if they were born into a non-religious home or raised in a more tolerant religious atmosphere such as Unitarian Universalism. However, for many of us who have been raised in Christian homes and schools, these words capture an important part of our experience. For us, we have dared to leave the fold of 'true believers' and cross the other side to the forbidden land of the 'damned.' That of course is not without its consequences.

Although it is true that in 21st century America we are no longer burned at the stake as in Salem, we are affronted by an array of hostilities, fear and ignorance from various circles that include family, friends or co-workers. Discrimination or victimization may be too strong of terms to describe all Pagans' experience, yet, I propose for many our experience has been one of being misunderstood, excluded or forgotten. This is also the history of the Pagans who have gone before us through the centuries. This past and current reality can not be ignored, nor should it be sugar coated. We can not remain silent on

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A Flower Power Solstice

CUUPS General Assembly Ritual 2002 - Norbert Capek meets the Tahono O'odham people of Arizona. A combination flower communion and flower pelting ritual for celebrating the solstice.

I learned the Tahono O'odham ceremony last year from Sr. Jose Hobday. Basically, when showing great gratitude for someone, the people would shower the honoree with beauty by pelting the person with flower petals. I imagine this whole thing as a very lively, dancing, chanting moving kind of thing.

So — imagine a large room with a big circle of people in it. In the middle, we have a table with chalice, 4 candles (for the directions), my brass singing bowl, and a big bunch of paper bags full of flower petals (which we will need to buy in Quebec somewhere)

Flower Power: A celebration of gratitude for the Solstice

Prelude - Drumming or boom box

Welcome - a brief bit of explanation of what will occur. Teach basic chants and body prayer movements.

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that which we are or the intolerance and discrimination we confront.

Two vivid recent examples of the ignorance and even fear of Paganism are the horrific events of September 11, 2001 and the record-selling movie Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. What could these two dissimilar events have possibly in common? The first being a terrorist attack against America's civilians where thousands died and our country entered a state of war, to the latter, an apparently harmless children's fantasy movie. In the wake of September 11, two national Christian fundamentalist leaders, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, on the Rev. Pat Robertson's television station, blamed the terrorist bombings on an act of God. According to Falwell it was divine justice against a fallen America because of the Pagans, homosexuals, feminists, and a host of other groups that he and other fundamentalists have long preached against. Robertson concurred. True, Rev. Falwell later apologized, but didn't he already show us where his true heart lies? From the mouths of major Christian spokespersons to say such an appalling statement, while thousands of Americans were mourning the loss of their loved ones, exposes the intolerance behind their narrow religious/political agenda.

I told my devout Catholic mother if these Christian ministers were representing the Christian God, that I would have left the church much earlier than I did. These sentiments were offensive to many (I would like to believe most) Americans, Pagans or not, and must not be forgotten. Remember this same line of religious reasoning was applied by Christian fundamentalists to the AIDS epidemic when it first hit. Among Christian fundamentalists was the verdict that their view of the bible was vilified. The AIDS epidemic was sent by God to punish the sinful homosexuals. This way of believing was scary back then and still is. As it has been said, history if we forget it tends to repeat itself.

The other example, the backlash against the Harry Potter movie and books, speaks of the Christian paranoia against anything that smacks of the occult, witchcraft, new age, paranormal, etc. We are taking our children this afternoon with a group of our children's friends and parents to see the movie. Whereas, a relative who is a non-church going Christian, as far as I know, voiced concern about exposing her children to the sorcery aspects. The cries of "evil" and "satanic" from Christians go as far as ministers conducting book burnings and engaging in protests. What are they actually afraid of? Isn't this fantasy series not much different than the classics of magic which older generations grew up with, such as Peter Pan or The Chronicles of Narnia, by C.S. Lewis, a very religious Christian who created a world with talking animals, wonders to amaze us and magic beyond belief. Are they afraid their children might start getting mail delivered by an owl or somehow learn a Cheering Charm? Perhaps they're petrified by the thought of America's youth actually thinking for themselves. In our old age, when we turn the reigns of power over to this generation, I would much

prefer to have the inspired, intelligent, well-read Potter fans running this country rather than closed-minded, barely literate, religious zealots.

Let me be clear that this article is not an assault against Christianity nor is its purpose to extol the virtues of Paganism at the expense of Christianity. This would be contrary to who we are. Pagans do not have the need to proselytize. We are not under the obligation to convert others to our 'true' way. What this article is about may be

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analogous to getting out of a bad marriage. Sometimes with a break up of a bad marriage people need to get together and talk about their painful relationships with others of like experience. They have a need to talk of the lies and deceptions, not out of malice, but just because it helps. They wish their ex-spouse no ill will coming to an acceptance of their differences and knowing that what is best for them is not what is best for the other. As much as they tried and tried to make it work, they knew all the while that it was not a fit. So it is with our recovery from the Christian indoctrination we experience. As Pagans, we wish our Christian brethren no ill will. We accept their path for them. Yet, we must talk and process some of the pain we felt in our spiritual struggle. Freeing ourselves from the bondage of our fundamentalist or doctrinal upbringing takes years for some, decades for others.

Like the majority of us, I was born into a Christian home. My upbringing was not only Christian, but under my mother's guidance, a devout Christian home. My experience was also Roman Catholic and included ten years of Catholic schools and thus daily religious instruction. For those of you raised Catholic or who have studied Catholicism, know that I have struggled with a 'double-whammy' so-to-speak. Plus, I wasn't just Catholic, but really Catholic. I had a "calling to the priesthood" from 1st to 7th grades which was explained to me was from God. As a boy, I visited a seminary, corresponded with an African missionary and was an altar boy. Where many parents fight with their children to attend Sunday

church services, I attended weekly mass in the summers on my own. I kept a prayer diary of my nightly prayers. In 9th grade I read the New Testament cover to cover and have read it numerous times since. How many 9th grade boys, or adults for that matter, have read the New Testament? To further illustrate the seriousness of my Christian journey, in my 30's I pursued my early vocation to the Christian ministry and attended a Protestant seminary out of state. This entailed leaving my job, going into debt and living below poverty level with my new wife. Lastly, as part of my faith journey, I have since written a biblical study of peace and social justice for which I am currently seeking a publisher.

It's interesting to realize that for some it is harder to deal with me now as a professing Pagan than when I was an Agnostic. Why is that? I think it has something to do with Agnosticism being perceived to not be nearly as challenging to Christian's beliefs as Paganism. First of all, an Agnostic doesn't have a 'belief system' in the common sense of term. An Agnostic is one who neither believes nor disbelieves in a God or of a divine reality. It is admitting that one can not prove nor disprove the existence of God. In one sense it can be viewed as a neutral stance. How threatening is that to a Christian? Some Christians view agnostics as merely poor lost souls adrift in their unbelief. Maybe it is easier to co-exist with someone who basically believes "I don't know" or "I don't care" than with one who believes in something which is perceived to be in opposition to what you hold 'true.'

Whereas, with us Pagans it is different. We are perceived as a challenge to Christians though this mindset is foreign to our Pagan worldview. In contrast to the Agnostic or Atheist, we have something to hang around our necks in place of the crucifix, be it the pentagram, moon Goddess, or our many other religious symbols. As I wear my faith symbols in public, home or work, in contrast to Christians who may freely wear theirs without a second thought, I am accused of "drawing attention to myself" or "throwing my beliefs up in the face." We Pagans have a faith, beliefs in the Gods, Goddesses and Powers which we live by, pray by and conduct ritual by.

The Christian mindset of their "one, true faith...the way" excludes us and puts us in opposition with them. They labor under believing that theirs is a monopoly of ultimate spiritual truth. We are seen as actively worshipping and serving (their) Satan in our bizarre rituals and beliefs. The Christian's exclusive, dogmatic, static religion is markedly different than the inclusive, non-dogmatic, evolving spirituality of Paganism that I have come to embrace. In the words of Gus diZerega, "dominant religions have all claimed universal superiority on their part. Pagan religion today is uniquely equipped to appreciate spiritual diversity and our common humanity." These words explain in part why I found my spiritual home on the ancient paths.

What of the alienation we feel from the dominant society and acceptable faiths? Being Pagan is analogous with being homosexual. Christian fundamentalist gener-

ally believe that the only 'true' sexual orientation is heterosexual and that any other sexual expression is abnormal, wrong or a sin. Any show of affection between two gay lovers, such as holding hands or kissing in public as any heterosexual couple, is perceived like a flagrant display of 'throwing it up in our face.' Gays are relegated to second-class citizenship, as a love which "dares not speak its name" be it around family, friends or work. So is it with many of us Pagans. We can be tolerated as long as the Christians don't have to be reminded of who we are. Just remain mute and invisible is the message we receive.

Why refer to myself as a "recovering Christian?" I am recovering from the years of questions and doubts. It is not that I am healed as I am in the process of healing. Maybe there will never be an end point when I can say "recovered." This is O.K. for it is a realization that my belief system and all that I am is a journey. It is in this sense that I am "born-again" and again and again. As a Pagan I am ever mindful that my background, my family, many of my friends and the majority of my society are Christian. While many live in ignorance of who we are, others live with fear. I am ever cognizant of this religious paranoia. As Pagans, as seekers of truth and of Divine harmony, we can not ignore this reality. This is especially true for those of us who live with this tension intimately when it involves our spouse, significant other or parents.

Similar to the experience of gay people, we should not have to live in a 'closet' or be something we are not. Yet, for many of us this has been or continues to be our experience. When we do reveal our Paganism to our family, friends or co-workers, what then? 'Coming out', as with gay people, can be emotionally draining. Each time, we take the risk of either losing someone we considered a friend or alienating a relationship. Our spouse, parents, siblings, etc. may turn us away while they say, "Why have you turned your back on us?" or "Why have you turned your back on God?" Some may hear, "You're not the same person I married, I raised, I whatever..." We realize that it hurts being rejected and misunderstood. That's why some Pagans go through a long period of secrecy hiding what they read or how they pray or 'worship.' We come to hide our spiritual path and who we are. Instead of hoping on our brooms and soaring with the witches, we remain in our acceptable broom closets.

When the word is out, what then? We must be prepared for some people to leave us. Some will be afraid of us being viewed as in the very clutches of (their) Satan. They may even want to keep their children away from us. We may hear some say, "You're going to hell." Others may say, "Well, you are just going through another phase" or "you're come to your senses. You'll out grow it" You may have to affirm that your faith is not a quirk, a phase or passing whim. It is your path that you must walk. We realize that our beliefs are as legitimate as theirs. Our religious history is as viable as theirs. In fact, our history is thousands of years older than Christianity's and spans multitudes of cultures and continents. Ours is and remains truly a worldwide faith perspective for all men

and women-kind for all times. Where the fundamentalist Christian's is about exclusiveness, proselytizing and rejection of other faiths, our beliefs are about spiritual diversity, inclusiveness and acceptance of other paths.

The best way to handle this onslaught of questions from the sincere to the ridiculous is to be prepared. We must do our homework. As Pagans we must be prepared to be accused of any absurd thing the imagination or Christian theology can muster. Be prepared to respond. In so doing you may hear, "All you read is that Pagan stuff." However, it may be impossible to explain why you read, especially in the beginning, with such zealousness. For me finding my path within Paganism was like finally coming home. It is like, as a fellow member of my Pagan group said in one of our first meetings, "putting on an old comfortable shoe." It's just knowing. This coming home feeling was, and still is, remarkable. In this I rejoice. Yet, I still can not share my joy, my thoughts, my path with my spouse or family members. But share it I must! This is where my fellow Pagan sisters and brothers fill a most welcomed and necessary place in my life.

So where do we find our support and strength? There are two basic areas. The first is our personal faith and the second is in community. As with any believing person, we cannot separate our faith from who we are. Our personal religious experience differs from the Christian's in some fundamental ways. Our religion is experiential. Our cathedrals or places of worship are always around us. The sacred is to be found wherever we are. Also, Pagan paths to truth are not bound within one written text of someone else's words of over 2000 years ago. We have no bible. Instead, we believe God and the Divine are immanent, ever present, ever revealing their nature and truth directly to us. We need no intermediaries, no priests, and no theologians to decipher the truth. Ours is indeed a living faith. When I conduct ritual alone in my backyard around the sacred fire, or pray wherever I am, I am sensing a growing spiritual connectedness. The Divine presence is more vivid to me now than in all those years I practiced and struggled with my Christian faith. I am at last home. In this, I can truly rejoice and be glad, for indeed, this is a new day which the Great Mystery, Powers to Be, 'the Lord' has made.

Besides our personal devotions and walking our daily path, we may find strength in community. We need not face the religious intolerance alone. Confronting the widespread ignorance with the support of a Pagan community is indeed a Godsend, or Goddess-send, if you will. Yet, for some modern day Pagans, community is a hard or almost foreign concept to embrace. Often Pagans will find it easier or even necessary to withdrawal from an intolerant society and walk a solitary path. We feel alone. We do not know where to find others like us. When we find the websites, study groups, organizations, covens and churches, we emerge from our cocoon and find community. In community we share our common spiritual journey and struggle. For me it is my local CUUPS, Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, group which we begun this

last year. CUUPS has become my spiritual home within the larger Unitarian Universalist congregation. Whereas the UU church members are like my extended family, my Pagan brothers and sisters are like my immediate family. In the Christian sense, they are my "fellowship" of believers, my church.

My path, or faith journey, involves letting-go the pain of many years of personal internal struggle. It is in this sense that I am "recovering." This breaking free of my Christian upbringing while being able to appreciate and re-incorporate some of the Christian traditions and beliefs within my path is a peaceful place to be. A tangible example of this was my recent purchase of a St. Francis statue for which I built a shrine in our front yard. Another is the water font at the entrance of the lodge I built in our back yard where I conduct ritual. My lodge is my chapel, a consecrated place. The symbolism of the water is similar to the Catholic holy water font at the entrances to their churches. Now as a Pagan I can enter Catholic churches and bless myself with the holy water once again. It will not be with the same belief of how the water got 'holy' but I will conduct my own ritual in reverence.

My spiritual path as a "born again and again" Pagan affirms a process of achieving ever a deeper spiritual harmony receptive to the ever present and divergent Divine truths. "In the final analysis, the value of a spiritual practice is determined by how well it brings us into a better relationship with what is Highest and most Sacred."* At the same time, I am growing in my willingness to confront the ongoing indifference and religious intolerance around me. As Pagans, I believe we must, not only for our own spiritual, emotional and intellectual integrity, but also for our children and the young people struggling, as we have had to do. Let us, as elders, work for a world where those who come after us may find more tolerance and understanding. I believe each in our own way must accept this task, but we need not do so alone. In community we may find strength and support to walk our divergent spiritual paths on our roads which may be indeed, less traveled, but no less beautiful.

Blessed Be!

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CUUPS and Community

by Mary Gelfand, CUUPS Co-President

Greetings Dear Friends,

Last month I spent a week in sacred space at one of the week long witch camps sponsored by the Reclaiming Community. It was quite a magical experience and I returned home with a glow of love and compassion for the entire world—a heartfelt desire to embrace the planet in my loving arms and heal all our wounds. A week spent in sacred space allowed me to reconnect with the divine that lives within me—to feel at a more visceral level the certainty that I am a child of the goddess. I am reminded of the need we all have to recharge our spiritual batteries from time to time, especially after the emotional battering we have experienced this year with the post-September 11th stressors of both war and economic uncertainty. I encourage all of you to give yourselves some time this summer or fall to recharge your own batteries with some solid sacred time.

My camp experiences turned my mind to thoughts of community—the importance of community in all our lives, and how we go about creating the communities we need. And I began to wonder what kind of community we are creating within CUUPS. We are a group of people living across this nation, tied together by the loose bonds of shared belief, but in many ways, not really a community—or at least not a connected community. Some of our members are solitaires—the only pagan in their entire UU congregation—and others meet regularly with an on-going CUUPS group. I began to wonder how we could work to create a greater sense of community among the disparate members of CUUPS, and among the chapters. So let me toss this question out to all of you. How can the denominational CUUPS organization work with local groups to create a greater sense of a continental CUUPS community? Think about this. Discuss it in your chapters, and send me your thoughts: MaryCUUPS@aol.com.

In the meantime, keep your eyes open this fall for your official CUUPS ballot. Yes, it is once again time to elect new board members. The Nominating Committee has produced a slate of candidates for the four board positions that we need to fill, in addition to nominations for the Nominating Committee. Please return your ballot in a timely fashion—it is one of the privileges and joys of membership.

In recent months, a handful of people have sent me pagan-themed children's stories they have written for use with their own children or Sunday school classes. I have truly enjoyed reading these stories. Some have been

upbeat introductions to what it means to be a pagan, and others have focused on the tragedies of life and how our choice of spiritual path determines how we deal with such issues. I would like to collect several such stories into a publication of some kind which CUUPS could make available to members and friends, and perhaps to the broader pagan community. If you have written such a story, please send it along to the e-mail address above.

Last week, I lead the CUUPS worship service at my home church. I spoke on what I consider to be three of

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the principle beliefs of Wicca: love is the law, all life is sacred, and our relationship with the divine. It was great fun planning the program with my fellow UU pagans and I enjoyed helping people begin to see the philosophical connections between Unitarian Universalism and paganism. Coffee hour featured a number of lively discussions between CUUPS members and the rest of the congregation, and several new people expressed an interest in coming to CUUPS events. We were very pleased.

As I continue my work with the CUUPS national board, I am trying to learn more about CUUPS at the local level as well. Each chapter functions differently, with different organizational structures and different levels and types of interaction with the home congregation. I would love to visit every chapter in person—to meet the people involved and learn about the many ways in which CUUPS is manifest in the greater UU world. Unfortunately, we do not have money to fund such work by our co-presidents. However, I am available to visit any chapters which can gather enough money pay my airfare from New Orleans. I would be happy to preach on a pagan theme at the Sunday morning worship service, and meet with your local group to trouble-shoot growing pains, to assist in starting a new chapter (I'm excellent with Boards of Trustees and ministers), to celebrate milestones, or just enjoy the pleasures of being in community. Should this appeal to your chapter, please contact me at the e-mail address listed above.

Well, now that I have invited all of you to clog my CUUPS e-mail address with your stories, ideas about community, and invitations to visit, I had better sign off. I wish you all the blessings of high summer. Stay safe, stay healthy, and renew yourself.

A time of changes ... and beginnings

by Rev. Joan Van Becelaere, CUUPS Co-President

Friends,

I don't need to emphasize that this has been a difficult year for CUUPS and for everyone else - difficult emotionally, organizationally, fiscally, and spiritually.

This past year started for CUUPS, like for most of us, in the midst of financial good times and great hope. We had a magazine that was beginning to actually yield a good advertising profit. We had a paid part-time office

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administrator, chapters and membership were at an all time high. We thought we would break the 800 member mark easily by January 2002. This upward trend lasted through the summer and into the early fall.

The fall and winter, however, were times of great organizational uncertainty which no doubt mirrored the great uncertainty and anguish of the society... Despite a very successful Convocation in Boulder, Colorado, which was attended by over 100 people and featured a wonderful array of speakers and workshops, and despite our well-received fall and winter issues of Connections magazine, finances suddenly became tight. Magazine advertising income fell off as small business found they no longer had the budget for ads. Our usual stream of donations ceased despite expressions of continued support from the membership. Old-time members wrote us, saying that they couldn't afford to renew their memberships this year. Membership dropped below 500 for the first time in three years. Our Membership Services Coordinator gave up his part-time salary in September and has not been paid since even though he has continued the work of informational mailings, record keeping, deposit recording, and on and on. He has kept things running throughout.

As the societal economic news worsened so did CUUPS' fiscal situation. Printing prices and postage went up and we could not afford to print the spring issues of the magazine. We had to restructure the magazine into a newsletter. And then we found we couldn't really afford a mass mailing of the newsletter, either, and decided to publish it online to save money and nat-

ural resources. Of course, we mailed out hard copies to those who requested it, but most of our members simply read it online.

Then came the late spring/early summer and things began to clear. As the economy grew better, so did CUUPS' fiscal situation. While there has been no dramatic shift yet, there are signs of hope. We currently have \$1869 in the bank, according to the treasurer, Shannon Cocheo. We have no debt. Membership is slowly rising again and we stand at 610 voting members as of June 2002. We have a new and energetic Chapter Coordinator, Christy Constable. She reports that we are back up to 105 chapters listed, including three in current formation in June.

We are working on a new summer newsletter and the second edition of Sacred Cosmos is nearing

its final edit. We are also planning an election of four new Board members, a new Nominating Committee and Polling Committee. Things keep moving forward despite the set-backs of the past year.

At the same time that we were undergoing the fiscal roller coaster of 2001, we found that chapter/congregation relations seemed to be better than ever. Of course, there were occasional misunderstands and there were still needs for the Board's Chapter Relations Committee to help with education and some mediation when called upon. But the frequency and severity of calls for assistance continues to decline even as the number of chapters continues to grow. This is one of the most hopeful signs I've seen in the past five years of my association with CUUPS. Earth-centered spirituality is truly part of Unitarian Universalism. There are roots deep in our UU historical past that link with and support modern expressions of paganism and other Earth-centered paths. We are renewing those historical linkages even as we move forward with our search for ways of nurturing our spirits that truly speak to the needs of our day and age.

I know I speak for both Dr. Mary Gelfand, CUUPS' other co-president, and myself in saying that we are very proud of CUUPS' work within the UUA and the work of many of our chapters in their local congregations. I will step down from the Board this year confident that the new Board members can move ever onward and upward in the very best meaning of those terms.

I wish to offer you all my blessings and my prayers for renewal/transformation in 2002-2003.

News

Witchcraft Laws Repeal

Victoria's State parliament redundant legislation sub-committee has recommended that a 1966 law that bans the practice of Witchcraft be repealed because it is archaic and rarely used.

Christian leaders are opposing the repeal because they believe that Witchcraft may be harmful to young people.

The Reverend Monsignor Peter J. Elliot, the Catholic Archdiocese's episcopal vicar for religious education, said "I'd be appalled if this implies some sort of approval of this. I think it reflects the collapse of values and sanity in our society that this mishmash of superstition and fraud is to be recognized, it's not harmless and there's no such thing as white magic. That's a nonsense."

Census figures show there are 2091 witches in Victoria, and another 3007 worshippers of "nature" religions including pagans, druids, animists and pantheists.

news.com.au.

Witchcraft is the fastest-growing religion in Australia

Census figures show an increasing number of worshippers are looking towards the earth, rather than the heavens, in search of God.

There are now nearly 9000 witches in Australia, up from fewer than 2000 in 1996, while the number of pagans more than doubled to 10,632.

Druids, animists and pantheists, considered to be pagan traditions, also increased their ranks between 1996-2001.

"I wouldn't say there's been a mad stampede, but over the past few years there's been a steady stream of inquiries," said Galen, a Victorian Pagan Alliance coordinator.

Religious experts said the shift towards nature religions was consistent with a growing emphasis on the esoteric beliefs in Australia.

While Witchcraft has been the fastest growing religion in Australia, most of the major Christian denominations lost followers during the past six years.

News.com.au.

Paddling for Allegiance

A federal appeals court heard arguments Friday on whether an Alabama school system had the right to discipline a student who stood silently with his fist raised rather than recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Michael Holloman, a high school senior who has since graduated, was spanked three times with a wooden paddle and given a written reprimand.

The case was argued before the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta only days after another

federal appeals court ruled that the pledge is unconstitutional because of the words "under God."

AP

Bush caught in 'euphuism'

When President George Bush was asked about [the Environmental Protection Agency's report] last week, he dismissively remarked: 'I read the report put out by the bureaucracy.'

The next day White House press secretary Ari Fleischer admitted that President Bush didn't actually read that 268-page Environmental Protection Agency report on climate change.

Fleischer was asked Monday at his daily White House briefing about Bush's comments that he'd read the report. "Whenever presidents say they read it, you can read that to be he was briefed," Fleischer said.

AP

A profane lawsuit

In two federal civil rights lawsuit filed today, the American Civil Liberties Union of Greater Pittsburgh said that police violated the rights of a retired Army officer and two college students who were arrested for using profanity in public.

"The ACLU intends to use these lawsuits, and others that are likely to follow, to teach Western Pennsylvania police officers that they are not Miss Manners and they cannot send people to jail simply for using naughty language," said Witold Walczak, Executive Director of the Pittsburgh ACLU. "Understandably, many people don't like to hear profanity, but under our Constitution it is not, and cannot be, a crime."

ACLU

Pagan challenges signs

A woman has filed a complaint with a North Carolina school system that takes issue with signs reading "God Bless America" on school grounds.

"It's illegal and they know it," said Ginger Strivelli, who says she represents 200 pagans in the region as the leading priestess with the Appalachian Pagan Alliance. "This is not Afghanistan. We don't have a state religion, but that's what they're trying to do, make Christianity the state religion."

She has asked Buncombe County School Superintendent Cliff Dodson to remove or replace the signs with a "more diversely tolerant phrase." She asked that signs read, "May All Gods Bless America" or "Bless America."

Appalachian Pagan Alliance

Bush Lauds Southern Baptist Convention After Leader calls Muhammad a pedophile

The Rev. Jerry Vines, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, told several thousand convention delegates that: "They would have us believe that Islam is just as good as Christianity. Christianity was founded by the virgin-born son of God, Jesus Christ. Islam was founded by Muhammad, a demon-possessed pedophile who had 12 wives, the last one of which was a 9-year-old girl. I will tell you Allah is not Jehovah either. Jehovah's not going to turn you into a terrorist that'll try to bomb people and take the lives of thousands and thousands of people."

Newly elected SBC President Rev. Jack Graham called Vines' comments "an accurate statement." Outgoing SBC President Dr. James Merritt also backed Vines, saying, "historically, he is on solid ground."

The next day President Bush told convention delegates that "Baptists have had an extraordinary influence on American history. They were among the earliest champions of religious tolerance and freedom."

PFW

US Donation to Help Restore Religious Temple

The United States has donated US \$25,000 to restore one of Ethiopia's most important religious temples. Yeha Temple - in the first ever capital of Ethiopia, Yeha, - is more than two thousand years old and the birthplace of the country's earliest civilization.

US Ambassador Tibor Nagy said that restoring the sandstone shrine to its former glory might lead to a boost in tourism for the area. The pre-Christian temple, which dates back to 5th century BC, is now in ruins, but is the only remains of the former capital, which is close to Axum - Ethiopia's holiest city.

The money is part of a special scheme set up by the US State Department last year to help preserve the cultural heritage of developing countries. Nagy announced the donation during a recent tour of the northern Ethiopian Tigray region.

During his tour, the ambassador visited Ethiopian determining teams in Zalambessa who were trained and funded to the tune of US \$2.7 million by the American government.

Zalambessa was hard hit by the fighting in the two-year border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Nagy's visit came as the UN peacekeeping mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea urged the international community to provide more funds for determining in both countries.

African News Service

Public schools can't require flag pledge with 'under God' in it, federal court rules

Congress violated the constitutional separation of church and state when it passed a law adding the words "under God" to the Pledge to the Flag, and public school officials cannot pressure students to recite it, a federal appellate court has ruled.

The U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals held today that the 1954 congressional action incorporating religious language into the Pledge was an "impermissible endorsement of religion."

"A profession that we are a nation 'under God' is identical...to a profession that we are a nation 'under Jesus,' a nation 'under Vishnu,' a nation 'under Zeus,' or a nation 'under no god,' because none of these professions can be neutral with respect of religion," observed the court.

Added the court, "The coercive effect of this policy is particularly pronounced in the school setting given the age and impressionability of schoolchildren, and their understanding that they are required to adhere to the norms set by their school, their teacher and their fellow students."

"This decision shows respect for freedom of conscience," said the Rev. Barry Lynn executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "You can be a patriotic American regardless of your religious belief or lack of religion. Our government should never coerce school children -- or anyone else -- to make a profession of religious belief.

"America is an incredibly diverse country with some 2,000 different religions and denominations, as well as millions of Americans who profess no religion at all," continued Lynn. "Government actions should respect that diversity."

Lynn noted that the Pledge of Allegiance was originally secular. Written in 1892 by a Baptist minister, the Pledge was recited for several decades without any religious references.

"Today's ruling simply says that schools should return to the original Pledge," Lynn said. "There wasn't anything wrong with it before 1954. In fact, America survived the Great Depression and won two World Wars with a completely secular Pledge.

"Members of Congress made a mistake when they added religious language to the flag pledge," concluded Lynn. "It changed an appropriate patriotic exercise into a religious ritual in which many Americans cannot in good conscience participate."

The challenge to religious language in the pledge was brought by Michael A. Newdow, a California atheist who objected to the pledge recitation at his daughter's elementary school in the Elk Grove Unified School District.

Judge Alfred T. Goodwin, who wrote today's Newdow v. U.S. Congress decision, was appointed to the federal court by President Richard Nixon.

...flower power continued from page 1

Gathered Here
Rise Up O Flame
From You I Receive, To You I Give.
Together we share, & from this we live.
Thank You.

Ring bowl.

Establishing the Circle - Gathered Here (with body prayer motions)

Call to Worship: 4 Directions and 4 Directional Candles
— Responsive reading

O Great Spirit of the East,
Radiance of the rising Sun,
Spirit of new beginnings,
O Grandfather Fire,
Great nuclear fire-of the Sun.
Power of life-energy, vital spark,
Power to see far, and to
Imagine with boldness.
Power to purify our senses,
Our hearts and our minds.
(Light Yellow Candle)

**We pray that we may be aligned with You,
So that your powers may flow through us,
For the good of this planet Earth,
And all living beings upon it.**

O Great Spirit of the West,
Spirit of the Great Waters,
Of rain, rivers, lakes and springs.
O Grandmother Ocean,
Deep matrix, womb of all life.
Power to dissolve boundaries,
To release holdings,
Power to taste and to feel,
To cleanse and to heal,
Great blissful darkness of peace.
(Light Blue Candle)

**We pray that we may be aligned with You,
So that your powers may flow through us,
For the good of this planet Earth,
And all living beings on it.**

O Great Spirit of the North,
Invisible Spirit of the Air,
And of the fresh, cool winds,
O vast and boundless Grandfather Sky,
Your living breath animates all life.
Yours is the power of clarity and strength,
Power to hear the inner sounds,
To sweep out the old patterns,
And to bring change and challenge,
The ecstasy of movement and the dance.
(Light Green Candle)

**We pray that we may be aligned with You,
So that your powers may flow through us,
For the good of this planet Earth,
And all living beings on it.**

O Great Spirit of the South,
Protector of the fruitful land,
And of all green and growing things,
The noble trees and grasses,
Grandmother Earth, Soul of Nature.
Great power of the receptive,
Of nurturance and endurance,
Power to grow and bring forth
Flowers 'of the field,
Fruits of the garden.
(Light Red Candle)

**We pray that we may be aligned with You,
So that your powers may flow through us,
For the good of this planet Earth,
And all living beings upon it.**

Ralph Metzner

Chalice Lighting

Remember, remember the circle of the sky
the stars and the brown eagle
the supernatural winds
breathing night and day
from the four directions

Remember, remember the great life of the sun
breathing on the earth
it lies upon the earth
to bring out life upon the earth
life covering the earth

...continued on next page

Remember, remember the sacredness of things
running streams and dwellings
the young within the nest
a hearth for sacred fire
the holy flame of fire

Pawnee/Osage/Omaha Indian Song

Chant - Rise Up O Flame (body prayer)

Explanation — Tahono O'odham ceremony and flower communion explained.

(ask them to sit for meditation in a minute)

Spoken Meditation - Gratitude to Mother Earth

Gratitude to Mother Earth, sailing through night and day-

and to her soil: rich, rare, and sweet

in our minds so be it

(use this as the congregational response)

Gratitude to Plants, the sun-facing light-changing leaf and fine root-hairs; standing still through wind and rain; their dance is in the flowing spiral grain in our minds so be it

Gratitude to Air, bearing the soaring Swift and the silent Owl at dawn. Breath of our song clear spirit breeze in our minds so be it

Gratitude to Wild Beings, our brothers, teaching secrets, freedoms, and ways; who share with us their milki self-complete, brave, and aware in our minds so be it

Gratitude to Water: clouds, lakes, rivers, glaciers holding or releasing streaming through all our bodies salty seas in our minds so be it

Gratitude to the Sun: blinding pulsing light through trunks of trees, through mists, warming caves where bears and snakes sleep-he who wakes us- in our minds so be it

Gratitude to the Great Sky who holds billions of stars-and goes yet beyond that-beyond all powers, and thoughts and yet is within us- Grandfather Space. so be it.

Gary Snyder (After A Mohawk Prayer)

Silent Meditation

Reading: New Psalms by Jill Ann B-Bush

Believe in the world and
praise it!
Praise the sky, the soil,

the rocks.
Praise the creatures of
the land
and the creatures of the sea.

Believe in the cosmos and
praise it!
Praise the stars, suns,
comets, moons, and vast
unending spaces.

Believe in yourself and
praise you!
Praise the atoms, molecules,
cells and muscles.
Praise the streams of
life that flow within.
Praise the joy
of sight and sound,
of smell and touch.
Praise the gift of
knowing self and
others.

Believe in others and
praise them!
Praise the joy and praise
the grief. Praise the
living and the dying.
Praise the cycles
and believe in them.

Chant and Circle Dance - From You I Receive, To You I Give

Two concentric circles facing each other, dances of universal peace movements

At end of song, people face into the circle for the prayer.

Prayer For the Flowers by N. Capek (revised)

In the name of Providence, which implants in the seed the future of the flower and in our hearts the longing for people to live in harmony.

In the name of the highest, in whom we move and who makes the mother and father, the brother and sister, lover and loner what they are.

In the name of sages and great religious leaders, who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of the age of mutual respect.

Let us renew our resolution - sincerely to be real brothers and sisters regardless of any kind of bar which estranges us from each other.

In this holy resolve may we be strengthened knowing that we are God's family, that one sprit, the spirit of love, unites us; and endeavor for a more perfect and more joyful and more grateful life.
So be it.

Aztec Flower Song

Here the song of the flowers from the ancient Aztec peoples: (For multiple voices!)
I offer flowers. I sow flower seeds.
I plant flowers. I assemble flowers.
I pick flowers. I pick different flowers.
I remove flowers. I seek flowers.
I offer flowers. I arrange flowers.
I thread a flower. I string flowers.
I make flowers. I form them to be extending, uneven, rounded, round bouquets of flowers.
I make a flower necklace, a flower garland, a paper of flowers, a bouquet, a flower shield, hand flowers.
I thread them. I string them.
I provide them with grass. I provide them with leaves.
I make a pendant of them. I smell something.
I smell them. I cause one to smell something.
I cause him to smell. I offer flowers to one.
I offer him flowers. I provide him with flowers.
I provide one with flowers. I provide one with a flower necklace.
I provide him with a flower necklace. I place a garland on one.
I provide him with a garland. I clothe one in flowers.
I cover him in flowers. I love him with flowers

Flower Showering

Two concentric circles facing each other.
Everyone or every two will have a bag with flower petals

Singing "Thank you, thank you" to tune of "Amen"
With each repetition of tune, move one to the left and put some petals on head of person directly across from you. Hugs all around at the end if so moved.

Dismissal and Benediction

Deep peace of the running wave to you. (blue candle)
Deep peace of the shining stars to you (red candle)
Deep peace of the flowing air to you. (yellow candle)
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. (green candle)

(Group Benediction)

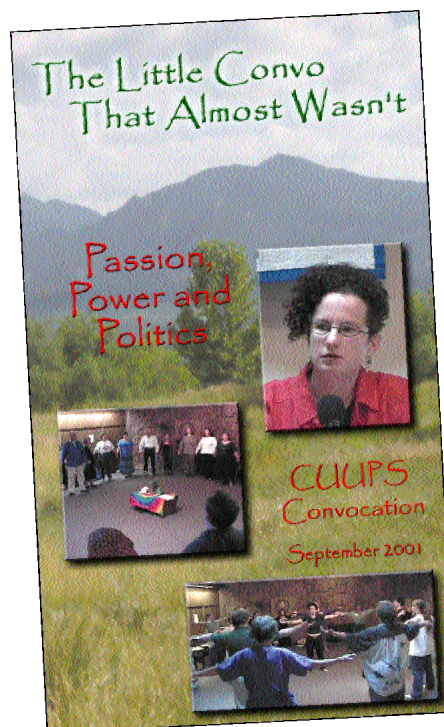
Please repeat words and motions after me.
Peace to the right of me
Peace to the left of me

Peace before me
Peace behind me
Peace above me
Peace below me
Peace within me
Peace be with us.

Ring bowl.

Drumming if there are drummers.

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Chapter News

Reno, NV - Northern Nevada CUUPS - in formation

In our ongoing endeavor to create a Northern Nevada Chapter of CUUPS in association with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern NV (UUFNN), we are now setting up monthly meetings on the UUFNN calendar. Currently, we are slotted for the 4th Friday of each month at 6:30 p.m. The UUFNN is located at 780 Del Monte Lane, Reno, NV 89511, just West of the 395 freeway at the Del Monte exit.

On the 4th Friday of July, the 26th, we had a Get Acquainted Pot Luck Dinner to meet and get better acquainted with each other and let the UUs meet and get better acquainted with us. The feedback that I have been getting from local Pagans who have been going to meetings on Sunday at the UUFNN has been very positive. They say how amazed they are by the friendly reception and open-mindedness of the UUs.

Akron OH - Akron CUUPS
WE ALL FLEW LIKE EAGLES

This year's Eastern Great Lakes Leadership School for the UUA of the U.S. and Canadian Unitarian Council was held at Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada from July 7th through the 13th. Of the fifty attendees, two CUUPS members were selected by their Church Boards to attend; Rebekah Benner, Facilitator of Akron CUUPS, from the Unitarian Universalist Church of Akron, and Lauren Foster-MacLeod, Assistant DRE of the First Unitarian Church of Ottawa. EAGLES is an intensive week-long learning community providing training in leadership and learning styles, group dynamics, communication, and conflict management skills. It presents information about Unitarian Universalist history, religious heritage, and values and opportunities to network with other UU leaders.

Of the fifty attendees and staff many expressed interest in finding out about CUUPS and more about our Sixth Source of Spirituality. Participants were divided into teams, one goal being to provide one of the twice-daily worship services. Lauren is Editor of the Pagan family magazine "The Blessed Bee". She had copies on hand for everyone, (and also thrilled the group with her singing many nights.) On Friday evening Rebekah was asked to hold a special Wiccan ritual. With help from Lauren and others, they held Circle with the community, and included the symbolic Great Rite and sharing of Cakes and Ale. This was the first time some had ever been involved in Wiccan ritual.

In October, Rebekah will be leading Drum Circle worship services for the First Unitarian Congregation of Waterloo, Ontario on October 6th at 7pm, and a morning service with the Guelph Unitarian Fellowship, Ontario, on October 7th at 10 am. If you are in Canada, come and join us!! terra_amma@hotmail.com

Jacksonville, FL - Northeast Florida CUUPS

The NE FL CUUPS chapter meets on the 1st and 3rd Mondays of each month at 6pm at UUCJ (Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville). Our Lammas ritual is being hosted by Warrior Feather and will be held at UUCJ on Aug 3rd at 6:30pm. Potluck to follow!

Fort Lauderdale, FL - MoonPath CUUPS

MoonPath CUUPS in Fort Lauderdale celebrated Litha a week early. We celebrated Litha in a Norse Tradition as rain poured in South Florida but avoided our ritual site.

Lammas will be celebrated in an Egyptian Tradition on Sunday, August 4. The First Harvest and HPS Sophia will invoke the Goddess Sekhmet. The traditional red, non-alcoholic, beer will be included in the ceremony.

See <http://geocities.com/sophialinus/LammasRitual.html>

On Saturday, September 21, Full Moon, we celebrate Mabon and Pagan Pride Day along with fellow pagans around the country. We will start with crafty workshops and conclude with a ritual for the fall Equinox. See <http://geocities.com/sophialinus/PaganPrideDay.html>

On Saturday, October 26, we hold our fourth Annual Witches Ball. There will be music, dancing, vendors, readers and multiple rituals. See <http://uucfl.org/cuups/wball.htm>

In between, we run our weekly Thursday evening Study Group. At each session one of us or a guest presents on a different craft-related topic. See <http://uucfl.org/cuups/sgroup.htm>

Augusta, Georgia - UU Church of Augusta Pagans.

This proto-group in Augusta, Georgia has had several well-received meetings and celebrated its first-ever group ritual for Summer Solstice on Saturday June 22nd. Volunteers have been found to coordinate events up to Winter Solstice. If you would like to know more, please email AlanDBrad@aol.com

Everyone is invited to join a visioning workshop on Sunday, July 28 from 3-6. We will be discussing the possibility and implications of forming a chapter of the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans (CUUPS) at UUCA. Pagan minister Rev. Patrick Price of the Columbia UU Fellowship has been invited to facilitate. All members and friends are welcome to share concerns, information and ideas. A potluck supper will follow at 6:00. Childcare will be provided from 3-6.

You are invited to join a celebration of Lughnasadh, sponsored by the UUCA Pagans group, on Wednesday, July 31 at 6:30 in the UUCA Sanctuary. Ritual will begin promptly at 7:00, led by Alan "Greenbear" Feeman. Childcare will be provided. Contributions of bread, vegetables and fruit to share in celebration of

the harvest are welcome.

Several of us will be attending EARTH DANCE at the Hard Labor Creek State Park August 16,17,18. Come on out and say "Howdy." More Info on Earth Dance is at www.earth-dancing.com

Chattanooga, TN

The Scenic City CUUPS proto-group has been meeting every Sunday at 5:00 PM at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. (UUCU). On Sunday, June 23, we discussed our problems with low attendance and decided to move our meeting dates and time. Beginning July 2, we will be meeting on Tuesdays at 7:00 PM.

Also at the June 23 meeting, we welcomed a new interested person from the local Pagan community who is a Pagan interfaith minister (ULC). Our Chair pro-tem is also a ULC-ordained interfaith minister, and the two came up with some tentative ideas to coordinate an interfaith effort in Chattanooga using the CUUPS group as a common base. Also discussed were possible future community service activities that would help with local positive awareness of CUUPS and Paganism in general. A brief discussion about Midsummer Pagan practices was held as well.

On the night of Monday, June 3, our Chair pro-tem had the back window smashed out of his car as it sat outside his home. The car has numerous Pagan bumper stickers and had a Clergy sticker with a pentagram in the window itself. No other vehicles in the neighborhood were damaged, and nothing was stolen out of the car. Earlier that day, an unknown man had shouted "You ain't gonna get nowhere with that kinda religion!" at him at a local gas station, but was ignored. It is possible that our Chair was followed home. The vandalism was reported to the FBI as a Hate Crime. No suspects have been found and, as there is little evidence, no resolution is expected.

Cincinnati, Ohio - EarthSpirit, (affiliated with St. John's UU Church)

EarthSpirit is actively involved in an outreach project called "Snakes Rising." We had our premiere performance at the Pagan Community Council of Ohio's "EarthSong," a musical event in Oberlin, Ohio on June 8-9. Snakes Rising performs at St. John's for the Summer Solstice. Our ministry is one of education, ritual, and entertainment.

"Snakes Rising" is a music and dance troupe that incorporates world rhythms with belly and snake dancing, and poetry. We want to raise consciousness about the very important roles of the serpent in Goddess mythology! Our live Python, Monty, is so in love with his mistress that he is openly affectionate and it is a true amazement to see them dance!

We combine our music and dance with the spoken word, explaining through poetry, chant and song the nature of serpent worship around the world while at the same time drawing on drum rhythms from the cultures of the Mid-East, Far-East, Native America, Egypt, and more!

It was indeed interesting to find that "St. John the Evangelist" (we have no idea as to whether this is the St. John our church was named after) is part of a myth involving a snake and a chalice. In the story, St. John was offered a chalice of poisoned wine, he blessed it and the poison departed in the form of a snake. Apparently there are many Catholic churches that still celebrate St. John with a wine blessing on his feast day, Dec. 27th. The feast falls at the same time of year as the Roman feast of Dionysus!

In other news, EarthSpirit has a busy summer schedule. We're just finishing up a Deep Ecology course provided by the Northwest Earth Institute (<http://www.nwei.org/pages/deepecolology.html>). On July 26-28 some of the members of "Snakes Rising" will be at PCCO's DrumSpirit doing a Middle East drum workshop; on August 3rd EarthSpirit sponsors an Ecstatic Dance Workshop at St. John's; on August 30-Sept. 3 Susan Hergert of EarthSpirit joins with Sandra Kirchner of Hopedale UU church in Oxford to present "Pagan Parenting 202: Religious Education for Pagan Families" at PCCO's Summerset.

Charleston, SC - Solstice CUUPS,

The Solstice CUUPS chapter in Charleston, SC continues to meet on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays of the month at the UU Church in Charleston. Solstice celebrates all the major holidays and holds specials events. We welcome you to join us! Please visit our web page at <http://solsticecharleston.org> for a current schedule of events.

Minneapolis-St. Paul - Twin Cities CUUPS,

Twin Cities has numerous open events for adults and children. For more information please visit their web site at http://www.paganinstitute.org/e-zene_TOC.html for details or contact Christa Landon at CHLandon@aol.com.