

Walking the Path

Having just completed a twelve-week intensive Clinical Pastoral internship at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, my personal views on theology and how it coexists in ministerial contexts has changed drastically. When I enrolled in seminary in 2012 my ultimate goal was to become one of the first Pagan chaplains in uniform. While that personal goal has changed in light of life experiences, my passion for cultivating true religious pluralism instead of what I view as merely ‘religious tolerance’ grows stronger every day. This passion is also coupled with a desire to educate and interact with other faith traditions in order to present a positive and functional understanding of Paganism as a faith tradition—one that deserves both recognition and legitimacy in ministerial settings.

Paganism for me is a broad term that encompasses many earth-based and nature-based spiritualities. It is a term that I find empowering in today’s diverse religious theater despite many previous negative meanings. Paganism as a concept meets my personal criteria of decentralized orthodoxy and orthopraxis and allows the individual to determine what best meets their spiritual needs for their journey. My personal theology stems from a belief in the imminent nature of divinity, and the way it manifests in everyone and everything we encounter. To me, we are all reflections of the divine Mother and Father, and the way we realize our true divine nature is through loving kindness to ourselves and others. (This can also be observed through the Wiccan rede—“An ye harm none, do as thou wilt”) when visiting patients this manifests as meeting them where they are and supporting them in their journey without judgment. When interacting with other Pagans and even members of other faith traditions this

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manifests as understanding each person's individual understanding of the divine and validating their beliefs without judgment.

This is the direction I see my theology—and therefore my ministry taking shape. The prompt for this essay asked for a description of Pagan theology and role of ministering to Pagans in a religious context. But I see my role as much larger than that. I have and continue to minister to Pagans in whatever context is needed. I served as the Director of Military Affairs for the Sacred Well congregation for over two years. In this role I assisted Distinctive Faith Group Leaders in the administration of their duties and leadership of their circles while simultaneously interfacing with Chaplains and military leadership at all levels across the Department of Defense. I am currently in my second year of training with Circle Sanctuary's Ministerial Training Program offering grief counseling and crisis action management in various settings to Pagan groups. I have taught workshops, helped organize conventions, and participated in many Pagan Pride celebrations. These are ways I try to support my Pagan community, but I see humanity as a whole as our spiritual community. Those of us who have been called to do this work have a duty to uphold the dignity and beauty of the human spirit regardless of which religion it prescribes to. I saw first-hand how this concept worked in the halls and rooms of Johns Hopkins this summer. I would like to share two separate stories on this theme that will forever remain with me:

I had been called to the room of a family that had just received a crushing diagnosis. The mother was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and was being discharged that day because there was nothing more the hospital could do for her as an inpatient. The nurse was concerned about the emotional state of the family since it felt as if the hospital was just letting them go. I spent some time talking to the mother

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and the older son who I noticed was wearing a pentacle necklace around his neck. He was the first “openly” Pagan person I had met in my time there, and I made a mention of his necklace and how it matched my own. His mother smiled and acknowledged that our necklaces were similar, and she asked what it meant and if it had anything to do with herbalism. I let her know that herbalism was a very important part of revering nature and what it can help us with, and that her son was doing a great thing by studying herbs and their medicinal qualities. After my visit the son caught me in the hallway and thanked me for my words. He had been trying to find a way to explain to his parents his spiritual path but was afraid of how they would take it considering all of the misinformation that is very prevalent.

My second story involves a Catholic couple who had opted for a procedure that terminated the mother’s pregnancy at twenty-two weeks because of developmental problems with the baby and the health concerns for the mother. The parents were distraught about their decision to terminate even though they felt it was for the best. I sat with them, cried with them, and let them know they were supported and loved regardless of their choice. I also baptized the child to bring closure for them and to provide a certificate for their church.

I have countless other memories of helping patients discern the nature of God and whether or not they were being punished or abandoned or what love looks like. In all of these cases I see my primary role as a companion on the path and a reminder of the human connection to the divine. This October I have been invited to speak on a diversity panel for Johns Hopkins as they work to understand how to better serve the diverse spiritual populations that enter their doors. For me my Pagan identity both informs my theology and provides a platform with which to explore the multitude of

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facets that the divine embodies. I look forward to this opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue, but more importantly I see my path as one traveled with all of my brothers and sisters, Pagan or otherwise.