



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

**“Coming Out of the Broom Closet” #PaganPride**

**The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg**

6 September 2015

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Last week in a sermon about the ways religions influence one another, we explored the impact of Paganism’s encounter with Christianity: from the choice to celebrate Jesus’s birthday near Winter Solstice to **Christmas retaining many pagan holiday trappings** — from yule logs to feasting to decorating evergreen trees, traditions that pre-date the historical Jesus by millennia. Similarly, we saw the ways **the word Easter comes from the fertility goddess *Oestre***; hence, the carried-over pagan practice of decorating eggs and having children take pictures with oversized bunnies (both fertility symbols) on the occasion of remembering the stories of Jesus’s resurrection.

And although the Pagan influence on Christianity continues to today, as Christianity became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire, **the complex relationship between Christianity and Paganism was increasingly covered-up**. As often happens with competing groups, the leaders of one group (in this case, Christian leaders) began to define themselves in opposition to another group (in this case, pagans). The result is a classic case of ‘other-ing’: creating an “us vs. them” dynamic, exaggerating differences between two groups, and building solidarity within one group through scapegoating another.

Fast forward two thousand years: and when many people in the Christian-influenced West encounter the word “pagan,” common associations include ungodly, irreligious, infidel, and idolatrous. Those stereotypes reflect not an impartial reality, but rather **the ways self-appointed**

**enemies of Paganism tried to define Paganism. In contrast, pagans would describe themselves very differently.** To turn the tables, many people associate words like “hypocritical,” “bigoted against homosexuality,” “sheltered,” and “judgmental” with the word Christian, which is different both from how many Christians would describe themselves, and from how Christians, at their best, have stood on the side of love, forgiveness, and mercy. So what does “Paganism” or “Christianity” mean? It depends both on *whom* you ask and *when*.

There have been significant shifts in the meaning of the words “Christian” and “Pagan,” starting in particular with the Roman Emperor Constantine’s strategic (some would say *cynical*) political choice to support Christianity in the early fourth century — but that’s almost three hundred years *after* the life of the historical Jesus. As historians have shown — such as Edward Watts in his book The Final Pagan Generation (University of California Press, 2015) — for thousands of years before Jesus and even for centuries after Jesus, the people who have come to be viewed in retrospect as ‘pagans’

had no name for themselves in [that] period and did not conceive of themselves as any sort of unified confession.... Pagans had a tremendous diversity of beliefs and practices. Not all pagans were polytheists, they had no common creed, and they observed or ignored gods, rituals, and festivals according to their own individual inclinations.... [That being said,] **‘pagans,’ however imprecise the term, is preferable to a longer phrase along the lines of ‘non-Jewish devotees of traditional Mediterranean gods.’** (221, fn 2)

Historically speaking, as James J. O’Donnell has shown in his book Pagans: The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity (Ecco, 2015), even for *centuries* after the life of the historical Jesus, **the Latin word *paganus*, simply meant ‘peasant’:** “A *pagus* was a country district, a *paganus* someone who lived there...” (160). **Likewise, the word heathen originally meant someone from the “heath,”** someone who lived in the country, not the city. As with the word “pagan,” it was only later that the word heathen acquired negative connotations such as infidel, idolater, or heretic.

A major reason that the country-dwelling pagans and heathens came to be pejoratives was that **Christianity for the most part was an *urban* phenomenon.** The rate of people converting

to Christianity was much higher in the cities of the Roman world than in the country. So those *pagani*, who remained in the heath and continued to celebrate their traditional local gods, became increasingly grouped together as a stigmatized, *non-Christian* other.

And, as strange as it may seem to us today, historians invite us to see that **“pagans didn’t exist” until well after the life of the historical Jesus. The word *paganus* did exist, meaning “peasant,” but it didn’t have anything like the meanings it has come to have over time.**

Before the meaning of the word ‘pagan’ shifted, classicists such as O’Donnell tell us that:

There were people who lived here and there, people who spoke this or that language, people who were rich or poor, people who attended this or that festival because they enjoyed it, and people who were so tired and poor and ill that they just got through the day as best they could. It was the Christian who came along and called all those people by one name.... Centuries at least would pass still before anybody firmly outside the Christian community ever used the word to describe [her or] himself. Even more time would pass before anybody would not only use the word but accept it and take a little pride in it” (162-163).

Another way of thinking about this dynamic is that **if you were able to travel by time machine, meet Julius Caesar, and ask him what it was like to be a pagan/*paganus*, “He wouldn’t have understood what you could possibly mean.... No one else would have understood either”** (163).

And while this historical shift can seem strange; it is not altogether uncommon. To give a parallel example, scholars have shown that, **“The name ‘Hinduism’ that we now use is of recent and European construction.”** Similar to the way that Christians imposed the word Paganism on a diverse group of people, Hinduism is a term that European colonialists imposed on the wide diversity of cultural groups living in and around the Indus River. And whereas the European colonialists sought to group these people by religion, these same people living around the Indus River tended to divide themselves not by religion, but “on the basis of locality, language, caste, occupation, and sect.” But to confuse the matter further, Hindu has become “the word that most Hindus do use now to refer to themselves.”

Returning to the present day, I'm grateful to John for sharing with us about his journey to Paganism — in his words, “The Call of the Old Paths.” A common theme when people describe what draws them to Paganism is **gender egalitarianism**: a strong tradition of *both male and female* aspects of the divine in gods and goddesses, as opposed to the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which have a strong patriarchal bias of seeing the divine as masculine. Another common theme is the **transformation many people experience through participatory pagan ritual**: singing, dancing, creating altars and other sacred spaces and rites. Yet another common theme, and the one that resonates with me most strongly, is the emphasis in Paganism on **connection to the Earth and the turning of the seasons**, known as the Wheel of the Year.

If you imagine a year as a circle, most of us are familiar with the four major quadrants: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. Paganism adds the additional nuance of cross-quarter days, which further divides the year into a total of *eight* turning points in the cycle of seasons:

- In between Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox is **Imbolc**, an opportunity to celebrate the lengthening daylight. (This pagan holiday has been secularized in our society as “Groundhog’s Day.”)
- In between Spring Equinox and Summer Solstice is **Beltane**, most famous for the tradition of dancing around a May Pole. (Another pagan holiday that has been secularized — in this case as “May Day.”)
- In between Summer Solstice and Fall Equinox is **Lammas**. On the opposite side of the wheel from Imbolc, Lammas is an opportunity to ritually commemorate the days growing darker.
- In between Fall Equinox and Winter Solstice, is **Samhain** (also known as All Hallows’ Eve or Halloween), a time in particular, for remembering your ancestors.

In our technology-filled world of 24/7 connection and almost continually-available artificial light, the eight points on the Wheel of the Year offer a way of redirecting our attention back to the cycle of the seasons and how they affect us. The value of this Earth-centered way of being in the world was recognized officially by the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1995, when a Sixth Source was added to our Living Tradition: “Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions

which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

So now, in 2015, we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Paganism and other Indigenous Religions being explicitly added as our “Sixth Source.” It is particularly auspicious that this year is also the first time our growing Covenant of UU Pagans group here at UUCF is hosting a “**Pagan Pride Day**.” Pagans are “Coming Out of the Broom Closet!”

Modern Pagan Pride events began in the early 1990s and have grown to include tens of thousands of people annually. The price of admission is traditionally not money, but rather a contribution for a local food bank. According to the website of the **Pagan Pride Project**:

In 2013, there were 98 Pagan Pride events across the USA, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Rome and Austria. 2013 event attendance was 65,717: an increase in attendance by over 20,000 when compared to 2012. The events collected a total of 39,962 pounds of nonperishable food.... For decades Pagans have been wrongly accused of practicing devil-worship and performing “black magic.” In reality most Pagans enjoy a religion emphasizing respect for nature, humanity, and oneself. Modern Paganism, or Neo-Paganism, is a growing religious movement based on combinations of ancient polytheism, modern eco-spirituality, and reverence for the Divine as both masculine and feminine.

If you are curious to learn more about the various workshops, events, musicians, and vendors that will contribute to our Pagan Pride Day on Saturday here at UUCF, you can visit

**FrederickPaganPride.com**. If not, that’s fine too. As a UU congregation, we are a big tent. As I said last week, the beauty and challenge of our pluralistic community is that here at UUCF, you can be a Christian *or* Pagan, a Christian *and* a Pagan, or none of the above.

For now, as you continue to reflect on what wisdom there might be for you from the Sixth Source of our UU tradition, I invite you to remain seated as you turn in your hymnals to number **1069, “Ancient Mother.”** The ancient archetypes speak of “Father Sky” and “Mother Earth.” Today, modern science tells us that this one planet is in grave danger from our overconsumption. At the intersection of ancient wisdom and modern science, I invite us to sing together this song

of connection, challenge, and lament that is also a call to action. We'll sing it through three times in unison.