

My Neopagan pen pal

By [Robert Cornwall](#)

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I thought that interfaith dialogue had its limits—until I started talking with a Wiccan.

For

many, paganism generally and Wicca in particular are synonymous with the occult, even Satanism. The presence of Wiccans at the groundbreaking for an interfaith chapel at a Disciples of Christ-related university brought streams of protests and a flurry of questions from the faithful. People asked/demanded: Why were they present?

This was the same sort of worry that led some Christians to raise concerns about the Harry Potter books and movies. They denounced the series because they feared that exposing children to magic—as if Disney movies hadn't already done that a generation earlier—might lead them into witchcraft. The concern was that Harry made witchcraft look too good.

While Neopaganism and Wicca have exploded onto the religious scene in recent years—bookstores have shelves of books on these new-old religions—their popularity seems to derive not from an embrace of evil but from their noninstitutionalized character. They're also popular for an emphasis on communing with nature, in a time when we face the prospects of global warming, overpopulation, urban sprawl and pollution. (Critics of environmentalism have thus equated that movement with the occult.)

I had never seriously considered engaging in conversation with a Neopagan or Wiccan until I wrote about Harry Potter in the local paper and received e-mails from Wiccans and Neopagans who thanked me for offering kind words about Harry Potter. My article was posted on Wiccan sites,

where respondents expressed surprise that a Christian pastor could have an open mind and compassionate spirit toward Wiccans. Many said they've experienced persecution and discrimination from Christians. They feel that their religion has been mischaracterized.

In series of e-mails with a Neopagan, I got to know a man who is married, has adult children, a job and endeavors to live in peace with his neighbors. I think he's fairly representative—although he admitted that, like anything else, Neopaganism has its oddballs.

One e-mail from my pen pal raised the issue of the Veteran's Administration's refusal to allow Wiccans to use the pentacle on VA-sponsored memorials. (The VA doesn't recognize Wicca as a religion.) I don't understand why we would allow someone to die serving his country but not recognize his or her religious affiliation.

Of course, people of other religions experience similar discrimination. In Tennessee the candidate for lieutenant governor has suggested that Muslims don't deserve to be covered by the constitutional provisions of religious freedom, because in his mind, Islam isn't a religion.

Those of us who are members of the religious majority have a responsibility to speak up for those whose religious identities are mischaracterized and smeared. If we had a few more conversations with those who are different from us, life would be better for all of us.