
Pagans and Dialogue: Pagans in Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue

Prudence Jones¹

Abstract: Pagans have been involved in interreligious dialogue with other faiths and beliefs for nearly four decades but have had considerable difficulty in being recognised formally as participants beyond the local level. This paper, in three main sections, examines the experience of gaining this recognition and speculates (with evidence) as to the reasons for its difficulty. First it proposes a working definition of modern Paganism and consider what the latter's unique outlook brings to the process of interfaith dialogue. The next section traces the process of Pagan involvement at local, regional and national levels, mostly in the UK; and finally, it discusses the patterns of engagement, the tacit assumptions and the practical solutions that have emerged during this process.

Keywords: Pagan, Polytheism, Religious Prejudice, Nature Religion, Religious Politics, Interfaith

Introduction

Pagans in Britain have been involved in interfaith dialogue since at least the late 1980s. In what follows, I shall be writing particularly of the experiences of Pagan Federation members, as a systematic survey of this wide and constantly shifting field would be a much larger undertaking. Much of what follows will therefore be a memoir rather than a survey, though I have endeavoured to give references for my recollections and observations. Where the reference is to an unpublished letter or e-mail, I have semi-anonymised it thus: 'JM to PJ, 3/11/1994'. I have given few proper

¹ Prudence Jones, MA (Cantab.), ACIL, FRSA is the Interfaith Liaison Officer of the Pagan Federation (f.1971), the national representative body for Pagan (polytheistic, nature-venerating) faith communities, of which she was President from 1979 to 1991 and 2000-2. From 2002 to 2021, she chaired the East of England Faiths Agency, and is a former trustee of the Inter Faith Network UK, a member of the Council for Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education (2009-17) and was on the committee of the Cambridge Interfaith Group from 2002-15. Beginning as an academic philosopher specialising in ancient and mediaeval logic, Prudence taught at Cambridge and at the University of Alberta. She is now a writer and commentator on the Pagan traditions of Europe and associated spiritual systems. A History of Pagan Europe (co-written with Nigel Pennick, Routledge 1995) and various articles on the history of ancient religion followed. She has also trained as a humanistic psychotherapist and has many years' experiences working with individuals and groups.

names here, in order not to compromise the situation of our allies in what is still a delicate field, nor to personalise any criticism of our opponents.

The Pagan Federation (PF) was founded (as Pagan Front) in 1970-1, with its inaugural meeting held on 1 May 1971, the Celtic feast of Beltane (The Wiccan 1970a, 1; 1971, 1). Its aim was 'to relate in practical and effective fashion to the Administration, public bodies, institutions, and the general public, etc., in presenting the Pagan case and views within the framework of legitimate aspirations' (The Wiccan 1970b, 1), and so the stage was set for constant engagement with non-Pagan bodies. Other Pagan organisations, such as The Druid Network (TDN, f. 2003) and smaller independent groups, will also feature in this account. The Scottish Pagan Federation (PFS) and Pagan Federation International (PFI) became autonomous but affiliated bodies in 2006 and will be referred to separately as appropriate.

As a practising Pagan for some 50 years, since falling in love with an idealised version of ancient Greek religion at university, I originally shared the convert's zeal for dismissal of other faiths, especially the religions of the Book. But my generation also sat at the feet of Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi teachers and learned something about spiritual practice from them, and so a broader understanding of religious and spiritual practice soon emerged. I concluded that different practices and outlooks grow up in different places and approach the Divine in different ways, each religion emphasising a different facet of this relationship. At a more practical level, I had been brought up as a post-war secular agnostic, earlier generations of whose family had been, as used to be said, Chapel rather than Church of England. I therefore had almost no personal experience of the Church hierarchy, much less of the latter's embeddedness in the structures of English government – let alone, of what seem to me, it must be said, its extremely oblique ways of doing things.

Paganism

In this paper, by *Paganism* I understand, as on the Pagan Federation website, a *polytheistic or pantheistic Nature-worshipping religion*, particularly those centred on sites in Europe and continuing or adapting what is known of ancient European beliefs and practices. This description also includes the ancient religions of Europe themselves, a contentious matter in both academic and interfaith circles. Originating among Roman soldiers as a contemptuous term for the 'locals' (inhabitants of the *pagus* or locality) among whom they were posted, the term *Pagan* was adopted by the early Christian 'soldiers of Christ' to refer to non-Christians. Among contemporary Christians it often carries overtones of uncouthness, lack of civilisation, or devil-worship, which can lead to misunderstandings in interfaith dialogue. However, in what Pagans still gratefully think of as the Renaissance, the reintroduction of

ideas and art styles from the ancient world into mainstream European thought, the name was applied to the sophisticated civilisations of Greece, Rome, and Egypt and so extended its connotation. Later, as adopted by the Nature-loving radicals of the Romantic movement, the idea of the *pagus* was interpreted as that of the countryside, or of Nature in general, and the centrality of Nature-worship to modern Paganism was born (summarised in Hutton 2019, 4).

Unpacking the resulting misconceptions about the name forms a significant part of interfaith dialogue. It is significant that those Pagans who (are and) call themselves *Druids* have a much more congenial image in the public mind than those who are simply Pagans. Life would perhaps be easier if we called ourselves (as suggested once by a Christian interlocutor) *indigenous religionists* or similar, but the name *Pagan* is shorter, has an appropriate history, and in any case is now established.

Whatever name we use, the Pagan outlook brings several advantages to constructive dialogue. Polytheism accepts a multiplicity of deities and of religions, so the idea of different communities following different faiths is not offensive to these Pagans but rather to be expected and accepted as valid. The Nature-venerating outlook of both polytheists and pantheists, the view that the natural world is the manifestation of divinity, and that divinity is the process of Nature (*natura naturans*, in Spinoza's felicitous rewording (*Ethics* 2.1) of Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* 2.2) has put Pagans well ahead of many other faiths in our alertness to ecological matters and the incorporation of ecological values in our worship. A third feature of modern Paganism is the recognition of goddesses and the important role of priestesses in Pagan rituals. The ease that Pagans exhibit with female divinity and female celebrants, none of which are modelled on the male pattern, can be an encouragement to members of other faiths who are attempting to introduce a stronger female presence into their own iconography and practice.

The lack of canonical sacred texts in Paganism is seen as a problem by the religions of the Book, but ancient Pagan ritual was based on the *mos maiorum*, the practice of the ancestors, modernised as appropriate (e.g., the prohibition of human sacrifice in Rome in 97 BCE), and in any case there are many philosophical and theological texts from antiquity which debate the ethical interpretation of custom and the ontological assumptions which underlie this. Paganism is a living practice, drawing on both ancestral custom and present-day pragmatism, but nowadays adhering to Cicero's dictum: 'to live in accordance with Nature is the greatest good' (*de finibus* IV.14).

Pagans in Interfaith Dialogue

The earliest involvement of the Pagan Federation in interfaith dialogue was at the multifaith environmental event held by the World Wildlife Fund and the British

Council of Churches at Canterbury in September 1989. We wrote offering to perform a ceremony there in honour of the Earth. We were offered a place, not in the Cathedral precinct but in a local park, where PF Secretary Vivianne Crowley led a rite attended (from memory) by some 20 people to which the BBC sent a camera crew. This was a performative approach to dialogue: by demonstrating Pagan practice in action, we communicated the nature of modern Paganism, and by interacting with non-Pagan participants, we verbally and non-verbally absorbed their response to it.

I am not aware of any Pagan individuals or organisations involved in dialogue in the UK before then. Twentieth-century UK groups such as the various Druid orders and the Odinic Rite (f. 1973) did not, to my knowledge, take part in dialogue, although the Druids were from time to time interviewed by journalists; and Wicca (illegal until 1951 under the Witchcraft Act 1735) vacillated between being a closed initiatory group and seeking media publicity as the Old Religion. During the 1970s the Pagan Front was resolutely anti-Christian, seeing organised Christianity as a repressive, anti-life death cult, but after its rebranding in 1981 as the Pagan Federation, I and other Pagans took part in lively media debates with Church leaders and other Establishment representatives, generally rebutting accusations of devil-worship and human sacrifice but also opening the way to more open-ended and exploratory dialogue, where common ground was often revealed.

Hard on the heels of the 1989 ceremony in Canterbury, the Pagan Federation became involved in multifaith civic activities, beginning with prison chaplaincy. In the early 1990s ecological protests against roadbuilding brought self-declared Pagans before the courts and into prison. These people asserted their right to spiritual care, so HM Prison Service contacted the Pagan Federation. Soon Pagan chaplains were part of prison chaplaincy teams; and hospital chaplaincy soon followed. The UK government seems to have been pushing for multifaith provision, for in 1995, at the inaugural launch of my local hospital multifaith team, a hospital official came across to me and hissed: 'We had to have you people on board, or we wouldn't have got our funding!' I smiled affably and said how delighted I was to be there. Whether the official's hostility was due to prejudice against Pagans in particular or simply to a feeling that only the large, well-established, bureaucratically structured faiths should be taken seriously, I have no idea.

The experience of Pagans in the UK, then, raises questions about the overlap between interfaith dialogue, multifaith dialogue and practice (including chaplaincy and political representation), and multiculturalism. This overlap is much debated in any case, but the common factor from the Pagan point of view is the admission or not of Pagans to participation in these activities. I will have to allude to these other

interactions in what follows but will always return to the practice and experience of dialogue.

The account that follows is roughly chronological and is not exhaustive but is listed by organisations for ease of reference.

Inter Faith Network (I)

The IFN was founded in 1987

to advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the teachings, traditions, and practices of the different faith communities in Britain including an awareness both of their distinctive features and their common ground and to promote good relations between people of different faiths in this country. (interfaith.gov.uk)

As it was always chaired by a bishop of the established Church of England and its administration was directed for the first 20 years by the same retired civil servant, this organisation provided a degree of public recognition to those faiths which were members of it: the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Baha'i, Buddhist and later Zoroastrian religions. Given the Pagan Federation's explicit intention to present the legitimate aspirations of Pagans to public bodies in the UK, an approach to the IFN was a given.

In October 1993, Vivianne Crowley, then Inter-Faith Liaison Officer, wrote to the then IFN Director, enquiring about a meeting 'to promote dialogue and understanding between ourselves and other religious paths and...to play a role in the Inter-Faith Network' (VC (for PF) to IFN, letter 9/10/1993). A meeting was arranged, and later that month Vivianne and I went along to IFN offices. We explained that we were a little-known religion with a bad public image and that we would like to be in dialogue with other religions in order to make ourselves better known and to play a greater part in public life. The meeting, as I remember, was polite but non-committal, which was what we expected, given Paganism's then public profile. We were, however, advised to become active in local groups so as to make ourselves better known to other faiths, and so at the Pagan Federation conference that year, Vivianne and I duly encouraged our members to do exactly that.

This experiment was remarkably successful in bringing Paganism to the awareness of members of other faiths. We were able to explain our outlook and activities calmly and patiently to others in local groups and to dispel misconceptions. It was helpful that interfaith groups contain practitioners of non-European religions who do not share the Christian reflex of 'Pagan = Antichrist.' The atmosphere of open-minded

enquiry this engendered may have reassured the more nervous members, or it may be simply that people who engage in interfaith dialogue already come from the liberal and open-minded end of their faith community. By the 2000s Pagans were active as participants and officeholders on the committees of a substantial minority of local and regional interfaith groups. Nevertheless, there were problems. Outright hostility remained here and there:

The biggest challenge we had at the time [early 2000s in Lampeter] was the bad feeling between the pagans of the area and the local Christian union, we would often find our small grove vandalised, and there would be a lot of hateful words exchanged between the two groups. I first witnessed the power of dialogue after we organised a joint event where we managed to get everyone talking about our similarities rather than our differences. (SA to PJ, 15/9/2022, e-mail)

Some local groups refused to have Pagans as members, or to include them in public events, or to include Pagan festivals in their calendar, quoting the restrictions on IFN national membership as the reason (e.g., CD to PJ *re* Kirklees Faiths Forum's calendar, e-mail 12/12/2012), although the IFN reiterated that groups were free to accept whichever faiths they chose quite independently of the national membership. For the sake of local groups, in addition to its stated aim of obtaining national membership of the IFN, the PF continued to enquire about the latter but was always politely dissuaded from submitting a formal application. The reasons given were various: the application would not gain the members' vote at an AGM; certain large and influential faith communities (unnamed), which the IFN could not afford to do without, would leave if Pagans were allowed to join; undesirable, semi-criminal pseudo-faiths would be let in by the same criteria that allowed Pagans in; Pagans were mostly tree-hugging anarchists rather than the sober-suited spokespeople who spoke to the IFN; and finally, among local groups, that (variously) the government or the IFN required limitation of local membership to the nine national member organisations. There were also assumptions, seldom stated openly, that Pagans were really right-wing Nazis, left-wing anarchists, or atheists masquerading as a religion in order to gain some material advantage. The misconception that *Pagan* meant irreligious also surfaced from time to time. Nobody, it seemed, could be bothered to read the explanatory literature we sent them.

In fact, the first two of these justifications turned out to be accurate. A motion passed at the AGM of 1995 had decided that for the time being the IFN would restrict its national membership to the existing nine faiths. (See IFN 2005 §7, confirmed in IFN 2006, §8 of Interim Report to Item 6.) A change in the constitution would have been needed for Pagans, or any of the other smaller or newer faiths who

were not members to join, and it seemed that there was no enthusiasm among the IFN officers to facilitate this change. In addition, Roman Catholic and Church of England officials do not engage in 'formal' dialogue with Pagans (Churchofengland.org). But none of this was communicated to Pagans at the time. However, if it had been, the Pagan Federation would have continued to lobby for a change in policy. What is striking is that these specific reasons for refusal were not made clear, or perhaps were taken as so self-evident in those closed circles that it was assumed they were known by outsiders.

Enquiries about membership were submitted in 1999, 2002, 2004, and 2008 but were politely turned down for the variety of reasons above. The UK religious landscape changed after 2001 because of the introduction of an optional religious affiliation question in the decennial Census. For the first time Pagans could estimate their numbers in the UK, and so hard data were available to bolster the arguments from justice and goodwill that had been used before. For this reason, I will pick up the second part of the IFN narrative below.

Meeting in the Presence

Meanwhile, a welcome invitation had arrived. An Anglo-Catholic layman, Michael de Ward, convened a Pagan-Christian dialogue at a campsite in Wiltshire on the first weekend of October 1994. This event, the first of six, attracted a great deal of media publicity, much of it jocular (e.g., *Daily Telegraph* editorial, 1 October 1994), some thoughtful (e.g., *Times*, 24 September 1994, *Sunday Telegraph*, 2 October 1994) and some downright hostile, of which more below.

Five further meetings took place, ended only by Michael's death after the 1999 event. The meetings aimed at mutual understanding and recognition of the common factors as well as the differences in the two religions, in addition to friendly relations between the people involved. Michael told me that his son had become involved in Paganism and as a committed Christian he himself felt the duty to find out more about it: 'I first met pagans when host to a camp at Midsummer 1991... In my 60s I feel I have enough psi to tell something of the moral character of those I meet, and I knew very well that they were decent people and not under satanic influence' (MdW to PJ, letter 27/10/1994).

These meetings were not only motivated by a desire to reach out to other human beings, but by Michael's opinion that at the mystical level the two religions had very much in common.

Hence the second meeting, in June 1995, was planned to include not only dialogue and workshops but a shared ritual which celebrated the symbolism of the Grail, un-

derstood differently by Christians and Pagans as the vessel of transcendent love. The original *agape* (Beth, R. et al. 1995) was replaced by a more performative communion ceremony (Jayran, S. et al. 1995), which proved too much for the media and for many Church people. ‘Witchcraft row over Anglican priest in Pagan sex rite’ thundered the Sunday Telegraph. ‘[T]hey will embrace, kiss and perform an act of ritual, symbolic sex involving the insertion of a wand into a cup.’ The officiating Christian priest was warned that he would be in breach of canon law if he took part (Telegraph, The Sunday, 1995). The newspapers had a fine old time with all of this, but when at the camp it was pointed out to journalists that the Christian communion itself involves an act of symbolic cannibalism, the symbolic sex looked less problematic. Sometimes dialogue brings understanding through a witting or unwitting act of shock. In the end, however, the joint ritual was abandoned as causing too many difficulties for the Christian participants.

In all this coverage, dialogue between Pagans and Christians seemed a straightforward binary, by contrast with our present multifaith society, or indeed by contrast with the IFN’s founding membership of people from a worldwide background. There was a sense that Paganism was a resistance against Christianity, or perhaps, as the self-styled ‘Old Religion’, a challenge to the latter as a revival of an earlier established religion. In 1995 the Church of England’s director of communications said ‘[Pagan-Christian dialogue] seems to me to be putting the clock back centuries, to pre-Christian times’ (Telegraph, The Sunday, 1995). The Pagan Front’s earlier anti-Christian stance and Wicca’s foundation myth of the victims of the early modern witch hunts as the underground priesthood of the pre-Christian Old Religion (e.g., Gardner 1954, 35–6) took this opposition for granted. The Pagan Federation had broadened its constituency in 1981 to include practitioners of all European forms of Paganism, as in the definition above, but public understanding lagged far behind this, seeing Pagans as satanic witches. Nevertheless, a discussion with a single other religion, Christianity, was indubitably interfaith dialogue and was most welcome.

The background to these talks should also be recognised as a follow-on from the ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse Myth’ of a few years earlier, a step in the rehabilitation of Paganism as a religious tradition, rather than, at least in the public imagination and despite the open-mindedness of their convenor, a dialogue between two faiths. Newspaper coverage of the 1994 meeting mentions that Pagans had kept a low profile following ‘persecution from fundamentalists since 1986’ (Telegraph 1994), and in February 1995 Michael de Ward was falsely accused on local radio of trying to suppress evidence of a Satanic coven in Milton Keynes (MdeW to PJ, letter 27/2/1995). Local evangelicals had produced this ‘evidence’ to oppose the leasing of Council land for a Pagan nature reserve and ceremonial site, a lease which did in fact go ahead. As late as 1996 the St Gargoyles cartoon in the *Church Times* showed a

man being sacrificed on an altar with a smirking Devil figure behind, captioned: 'Inter-faith dialogue, reflected Michael, had been the thin end of the wedge.' Amusing, but reflective of continuing anxiety. Shân Jayran's observation in her useful guide for Pagans in interfaith dialogue, 'You're going to face hostility and "outsider" status on some level even if it's not obvious... Don't forget we scare them' (Jayran 1995, 1) retained its validity. Pagans might have been turned into lovable eccentrics for some, but we were still not a serious religion. More remained to be done.

Derby University Multi-Faith Centre

In October 2001 the Pagan Federation was invited to attend the opening of the new Multi-Faith Centre at Derby University. We were welcomed warmly as members of the multifaith landscape of the contemporary UK and invited to contribute to its new multi-faith directory, a reference work for religious studies, theology, and, of course, interfaith researchers, an invitation we were delighted to accept. Pagans had already taken part in the Centre's research on religious discrimination in the U.K. (Weller et al. 2001) and the directory was a natural continuation of our involvement. The Multi-Faith Centre was working in conjunction with the Inter Faith Network on this project, so here again was an opportunity for those attending from the IFN to observe Pagans participating in a relatively formal, albeit welcoming and non-judgemental, milieu.

I had already spoken at Derby at an earlier conference, on dialogue between Christians and Pagans in the Roman Empire, detailing with a certain amount of glee with how the upstart outsider new religious movement of Christianity had been ridiculed from a lofty height by the Pagan Establishment of the time. The serious point of this was to show that any new religion has to respond to challenges by established ones and must learn from these, while there is nothing immutable about the established (or indeed the outsider) status of a given faith. The religious Establishment changes and adapts with the times. My contact at Derby, David Hart, had been a fellow member of the Cambridge Interfaith Group, thereby exemplifying the IFN Director's advice to Pagans to become active in local groups so as to be able to participate in a wider context.

EEFA and EEFC

Two very different models of interfaith engagement came into being in the early 2000s in the East of England. The eight English Regional Assemblies created in 1998 as a new tier of local government were expected to arrange a channel of communication with faith groups in their Region. In response to a request from the Community and Voluntary Forum for the Eastern Region (COVER), the East of

England Faiths Agency was founded on 13 June 2001. This was a new model of interfaith engagement and faith representation, linking grassroots communities locally with the Assembly rather than faith 'leaders' who spoke for their various communities. In February 2002 EEFA received an additional request and funding from COVER to

create and maintain a regional network of faiths and inter-faith groups, to facilitate consultations with and between these groups, to disseminate information about the proposals issuing from the East of England Development Agency and the East of England Assembly to these groups, to identify matters of particular and or common concern to these groups and to communicate these concerns and any other recommendations to the East of England Development Agency and the East of England Assembly. (Capey 2002)

EEFA also intended (and went on) to foster the growth and facilitate the establishment of local interfaith groups, and to support these bodies in their work with local education and health bodies, social services, police and other statutory bodies, as well as supporting refugees and asylum seekers in the Eastern Region.² It went on to publish books, including *Pagan Pieces* by Suffolk member Robin Herne, as well as the proceedings of its many conferences. It provided visiting lecturers from the different faiths for schools and universities, it trained firefighters, social workers, police, and probation officers in diversity awareness, and it held an annual conference most years in the region about the faiths' attitudes to controversial topics such as the environment, gambling, and sexuality. It arranged university teaching by Pagans about faiths including Paganism. EEFA thus saw interfaith dialogue moving outwards into activity and demonstration, into education and training, and into faiths representation to the regional government.

EEFA's model was strictly grassroots, engaging with individual faith communities rather than with faith hierarchies. Such hierarchies and networks, it observed, did not exist in every faith, so it offered membership to any faith group in the region which obeyed the law of the land and subscribed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The East of England government office seemed particularly keen on an inclusive, egalitarian, and diverse approach to faiths representation. In February 2002, the chief executive of COVER wrote to EEFA: 'Your faiths agency proposal sounded exactly like the approach we are trying to develop inclusive, offering equality and diversity' (AC to DC, e-mail 7/2/2002), and that April the Director for

² EEFA's Website. Available at <http://www.eefa.net/eefa%20homepage.htm>. Accessed on 23 June 2002. No longer visible.

Community Safety and Regeneration, Government Office for the East of England, wrote similarly (Tam, Dr. H., in EEFA 2002).

This inclusiveness also meant that Pagans were welcome, and the present author became a member of the original steering committee and then Chair of EEFA from 2004–21. EEFA's outreach in the Region included all the minority faiths plus the Humanists. Although a resource for the Assembly to consult on issues affecting the faith communities, EEFA decided not to take the available seat which conferred voting and debating rights there, since it was thought impossible to speak with one voice for all of them. EEFA gave Pagans in particular experience in interacting with other faiths at governance level, at local organisation level, and in discussing and debating with other faiths in the usual interfaith context. In this way it established Paganism as one faith among many in the East of England, in the same way that some other interfaith groups had already done at the local level, and its founders, David and Cynthia Capey, remained doughty champions of Paganism to the IFN and other interfaith bodies.

A very different model of engagement was adopted by a regional faiths body founded the following year by the East of England Churches Network (EECN): the East of England Faiths Council (EEFC). This began with a meeting on 24 April 2002 of *'leaders of major faith groups active in the East of England to discuss issues relating to development of the region that may affect us...for example, regional cultural strategy or the designation of development areas'* (my italics). It was observed that the Regional Assembly was seeking 'some clear points of contact' (Huntingdon 2002). Clearly, this overlapped with EEFA's existing work and brought competition for funding, a point which was raised several times at the meeting and subsequently at length. EEFC involved only major faith groups which already had identifiably influential spokespeople at regional level. Needless to say, Pagans were not to be members, and although the foregoing two characteristics might retrospectively explain why this was, it was never made explicit. Once again Pagans assumed that the regional faiths council was an extension of interfaith dialogue, but as with the IFN, something other than dialogue was involved, including the acceptance of a seat on the Regional Assembly. Meetings included addresses by government, Eastern Office and diocesan spokespeople, and subjects touched on ritual slaughter (17/9/2003), migrant workers (15/1/2004), asylum seekers (1/6/2004), burial rights (30/9/2004) and so on. Research projects were undertaken with university departments, an online faiths calendar was produced (though not including Pagan festivals), and its tenth birthday was celebrated in 2012 with a party in the Bishop of Ely's residence. This was a Church-led body.

EEFC had been brought into being by the Churches apparently in defiance of the pre-existence of a body already set up by the regional government office to carry out the same functions on a model approved by it. After many confrontations and mutual adaptations, EEFC eventually settled down to a rather prickly *modus vivendi* with EEFA until its demise in 2013 following the abolition of regional government in 2010. Its foundation by the Churches as a matter of right was, however, the third character which distinguished EEFC from EEFA. Who held the authority to authorise a regional faith forum, the Church or the government? As the EECN meeting of 24 April 2002 noted, regional government seemed unwilling to engage with faiths except on an ‘all faiths’ basis, so that the meeting, convened by Church leaders and open only to the major faiths of the region, did not attract funding. The national government, furthermore, ‘seems very keen to involve faith groups in decision-making processes’, but once again this was expected to include all groups on an equal basis. Clearly, there was a tension between the government’s secular agenda, treating all faiths and belief systems on an equal footing in a non-theocratic polity, and the Church’s apparently opposite assumption. This tension eventually came to a head nationally in the passing of the 2010 Equality Act, but in 2002 each pole of this disagreement appears simply to have been taken as self-evident by each party.

This raises a practical point about the role of the *established* Church, in a very real sense the official faith of the UK. Its bishops, the ‘lords spiritual’, automatically have political representation through their seats in the House of Lords. Could they also justifiably expect representation in the new regional assemblies? The Church of England has duties regarding public ceremonies such as state funerals, it owes a duty of spiritual care to all parishioners, and thus is likely to see itself as the host to religious communities which originate from countries with different established or majority religions – hence, presumably, what was experienced by non-members as an arrogant sense of entitlement to step into the regional space already occupied by EEFA and in justification to disseminate inaccurate claims about the latter’s role which had apparently not been properly checked before being acted on (EEFC 2002, 2–3). Hence also the apparent assumption, regionally and nationally, that non-Anglican faiths and convictions without any national political base overseas were in some sense irrelevant to the religious composition of the United Kingdom. They would be tolerated but expected to remain politely on the sidelines. As already noted, Pagan-Christian dialogue seemed to some to be ‘putting the clock back centuries, to pre-Christian times’ (Telegraph, The Sunday, 1995), and such attitudes may have lain not too far beneath the surface in some people’s minds.

There may also be an assumption that nationality goes along with faith and the two concepts can be used interchangeably. Interfaith dialogue then becomes an aspect of race relations, with the result that non-Christian worshippers of white UK origin are

overlooked or excluded in interfaith organisations. Interfaith dialogue thus becomes primarily a political activity, to bring harmony between disparate ethnic communities, rather than a civic one in which faith communities dialogue with secular government. Useful, indeed essential, as the race relations approach is, it is manifestly not the main or the only function of interfaith dialogue, and it was not the one assumed by the Pagan Federation.

Scottish Inter Faith Council/Interfaith Scotland

From 1994–2013, this was a harbinger of the later IFN interaction, and the full account will be published elsewhere.

Inter Faith Network (2)

Change began eventually in the Inter Faith Network UK. In 1999 the PF's Interfaith Manager had applied formally for membership as a faith community representative body. The application reached the Executive Committee, which advised that it should not be put before the membership as the latter would not vote in favour. The 1995 decision to restrict membership to the existing nine faiths was not given as an explanation, however. At the AGM of 1999 or shortly earlier, a delegate enquired from the floor why membership had not been offered to the Pagan Federation. One of the co-chairmen exploded in rage and declared that Pagans were Nazis, earning a rebuke from another delegate for the insult (DC to PJ June 2022, pers. comm.). The misconception about Nazis remained current for some thirteen years, despite repeated enquiries about membership, information about Paganism sent to the central office, and good relations between Pagans and other faiths in local groups.

However, in 2001 the introduction of a religious affiliation question in the Census changed the basis of the argument. By amalgamating the various Pagan denominations – including Druidism, Pantheism, Wicca – the PF was able to identify over 42,000 Pagans in England and Wales and 1,930 in Scotland. This made Pagans the seventh-largest faith group in the UK, a number not to be trifled with. At the 2007 AGM, attending as a delegate of my local interfaith group, I read out a statement from the Leeds Concord group expressing disappointment that the IFN UK was still unwilling to offer Council membership to 'the only native religion in this country... Pagans, the seventh largest faith community in the country.' There were some dismissive comments from the Chair about this, but eventually the Director agreed that the comment would be minuted (IFN 2007, §19 ff.). Afterwards, to my surprise, I was surrounded by grateful members of other smaller faiths such as the Mormons and the Unitarians, who were delighted that someone had spoken up and stood her ground of behalf of one of these smaller communities. Clearly, resentment

about the rules for membership had been growing for some time and Pagans were not alone.

In fact, the IFN had recently completed a further review of patterns of membership, prompted partly by the September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and the July 2005 London bombings, leading to the creation of governmental liaison bodies such as the Faith Communities Consultative Council. The focus of the Network had moved towards 'the implications for the shared life together in Britain of different faith communities within a religiously diverse society' (IFN 2006, §11 of Interim Report to Item 6). The 2006 minutes also record:

From time to time it is suggested that the Network should bring into direct membership a broader range of religious groups. At first sight, it might seem desirable, in principle, to be more inclusive in this way... On the other hand... [i]f there is no general consensus in favour... it would be undesirable to have divisive arguments about the admission of controversial groups. (IFN 2006, §8 of Interim Report to Item 6)

Which meant there were still no Pagans among the national interfaith organisations. However, the UK government's concern about the alienation of potentially troublesome faith communities was leading it to strengthen existing legislation in the passing of the Equality Act 2006 and the creation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). As in Scotland, Pagans in England and Wales knew that the civil administration was willing to uphold their freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as per the UDHR and so, with skill and patience, one of the founding aims of the Pagan Federation was within sight of being achieved.

A change of Director in late 2007 gave the opportunity for change in IFN policy without entailing a climbdown, and the co-Chair who had remained convinced that Pagans were Nazis also retired two years later. The AGM in 2008 noted the 'changing patterns of inter faith engagement' with the need to include both non-Abrahamic faiths and non-religious belief groups in dialogue and in government consultation (IFN 2008: 27), and a Strategic Review, exploring 'changing patterns of inter faith engagement', was later voted in at the 2010 AGM. It is possible to see a cautious expression of goodwill behind the bureaucratic language; nevertheless, the process was not straightforward.

An earlier meeting between the PF and the IFN in May 2008, in which the new Director was shadowed by the outgoing Director, had proved bitterly disappointing. Very little dialogue took place, but the IFN explained its position at length. The 2007 AGM's restriction of faith community membership to the existing nine meant that the meeting could not be about a formal application for membership as origin-

ally arranged. It was suggested that the name 'Pagan' itself was a problem to followers of the Abrahamic religions. It had been hinted privately that it was Muslims who were unwilling to enter dialogue with Pagans, but both at local and national level Pagans found this not to be the case – prominent national and academic Muslim spokespeople had insisted that frank discussion and debate were very much part of Islam (MAB to PJ 25/4/08 in person; TW to PJ 4/2/08 e-mail). It was in 2009 that we discovered that our opponents included the Church of England! A page on the Church of England website³ explained that Pagans were not a faith but a new religious movement and therefore not eligible for interfaith dialogue. Later, in 2011, our second opponents turned out to be the Roman Catholic Church. A presentation by Sr Isobel Smythe in workshop 6 of the National Meeting in Birmingham revealed that Catholic interfaith participants were not free to make their own decisions but had to follow a decision made in the Vatican which prohibited interfaith dialogue with Pagans.

These two discoveries explained much. The PF had been busy, as instructed, building good relationships at local and regional level, only to find that these had nothing whatever to do with decisions already made at the top of these two influential faith hierarchies. We did, however, have friends among the central IFN staff and other faith representatives, and hindsight does reveal coded signs of rapprochement.

Meanwhile, anticipation of the 2010 Equality Act set in motion a fundamental re-think of the IFN's memorandum and articles. The 2008 financial crash also removed a great deal of government funding and restructured the interfaith landscape. The 2008 AGM explored 'changing patterns of inter faith engagement' and the 2010 AGM at last agreed to investigate 'dialogue and inter religious engagement of traditions going beyond those in direct membership of IFN' (IFN 2010 §4).

In 2009 there were less formal discussions about the possibility of a second-order or affiliated membership for Pagans and other marginalised groups, as in Scotland. The IFN's legal advice indicated that a group could exclude members whose presence would interfere with its constitutional aims, for instance, by making core members leave, and the IFN was relying on that advice to continue excluding Pagans. It was, however, possible for excluded groups to continue dialogue through affiliated status. Meanwhile, the Religious Education Council opened its membership on an equal basis to all faiths, and so the Pagan Federation joined and continues to shape the national curriculum. As in Scotland, Pagans were becoming fully integrated in all multifaith organisations except the IFN.

3 Church of England's website. Available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/work-other-faiths>. Accessed on June, 2009. Since removed.

But a more direct challenge was building. In 2010 one of the PF's London members joined Camden Faith Communities Partnership, a group which was very keen to progress the full inclusion of all faith communities in the UK. The secretary of the group, an Islamic scholar-jurist, was determined to wrench the IFN free of what he saw as the power and financial influence of the Church of England, in order to open it to all faith groups on an equal basis (MaH to MS 19/5/10 e-mail). Nevertheless, when CFCP and the PF defiantly proposed a joint ritual for Inter Faith Week that year, the Director wrote back suggesting that the Pagan Federation itself should be the lead body for this, so as to have the event listed on the national calendar. As with PF Scotland the following year, the Pagan community was receiving signals of potential inclusion.

But could these overtures be trusted? CFCP continued its challenging approach, and at the 2011 AGM it proposed two resolutions: the first to prevent the Christian co-chair position from being filled exclusively by Anglicans; and the second a requirement to publish in detail the source of all financial contributions, to prevent covert financial control by any faith body or individual. After some heated discussion, both these proposals were defeated, then followed by an overwhelming vote in favour of a new bylaw, proposed by the Executive Committee, restricting any future proposals of resolutions by member bodies (IFN 2011 §10–§13). Clearly, most IFN delegates did not want any say in the running of their organisation. There was anger and mutual incomprehension on each side, from two very different styles of running a membership organisation. Following this, opinions differed on the Pagan side about whether to pursue the 'softly softly' approach of informal dialogue with people of goodwill, which might waste another 20 years of Pagan time and energy, or the full-frontal assault calling out the absurdities of the system, which might cost a lot in legal fees. The Druid Network (TDN) decided to pursue the direct approach. The 2011 Census figures showed Pagans numbering 79,467 in England and Wales and 5,194 in Scotland: considerably more than some other full members of IFN. Why were Pagans being kept out?

TDN had been a registered religious charity since 2010 and therefore demonstrably entitled to protection from religious discrimination under the new equalities law. Ten member groups were required to support its application for membership at the 2012 AGM. These were obtained, and when the application was voted on, it was very narrowly defeated by five votes. This sent a message: the meeting recognised that the vote and the debate leading up to it had 'raised important issues about the future of IFN, how faith is handled in the public square and who needs to be "round the table"' (IFN 2012 §79). The general meeting on the morning of that AGM, including an address by the chair of a local interfaith group who was himself a Druid, had been on the subject of 'the changing face of inter faith engagement'. This recog-

nised the need for the organisation to adapt, and during that AGM the delegates voted for a 'strategic review' to examine 'what kind of networks were needed for inter faith engagement and cooperation' (IFN 2012 §15). The IFN invited the Pagan Federation and other non-member bodies to contribute, and in September it invited Pagans and Druids to arrange a familiarisation meeting with members of the Executive Committee. Further IFN events included Pagans and Druids in prominent facilitation positions, as had happened in Scotland two years earlier. So signs of change were clearly in the air.

Meanwhile, the direct approach was also moving ahead. Camden Faith Communities Partnership had engaged lawyers to advise on the legality of the IFN's refusal to admit the Druid Network. The lawyers considered that this was illegal and published their findings (Bindman's 2012). The CFCP Secretary decided to turn the heat up in order to focus the minds of the IFN on change and arranged a meeting in the House of Lords on 26 November to launch the document. Chaired by the Reverend Peter Owen-Jones, a television presenter as well as a Church of England clergyman, and filmed for release on YouTube, it was addressed by delegates from Liberty, from Lancaster University, and by John Halford of Bindman's, the author of the document. The committee room was packed, including three of us from the Pagan Federation as friendly observers and several from the Druid Network, which was backing the event. It was followed by newspaper coverage (Church Times 2012, Times 2012), and ended with a demand for formal mediation between TDN and the IFN.

However, the Strategic Review was already in progress, reconsidering the IFN's membership and patterns of engagement and consultation (IFN 2013a, contents page). The meeting of PF and TDN representatives with IFN Executive Committee members also took place in April 2013, and what a change it was from the meeting of May 2008. An agenda was agreed and generally followed. It was noted that any points from the meeting could be considered by the Strategic Review, which would potentially shape its attitude to faiths outside the then-current nine. The perennial problems about Pagans being Nazis and the varied understandings of the name 'Pagan' (IFN 2008a §8) were cleared up and minuted (IFN 2013b). A very full description of Pagan features and outlook was given, and it was recognised that terms such as 'worship' and 'divinity' now needed reappraising. The Review group noted that it had 'been encouraged by the positive character of that meeting and the possibilities it opens up for future engagement' (IFN 2013c, 12). At an EGM in May 2014 the new, wider eligibility for membership was approved, and at the AGM the Pagan Federation and the Druid Network were duly voted in as national faith representative bodies.

But not all was finished. The constitution had to be updated to accommodate the effects of this expanded membership. The present author, in her role as chair of the fully inclusive East of England Faiths Agency, was voted onto the governing executive committee and for the next two years was a member of the governance review working group which updated the constitution. This produced a different solution from that of Interfaith Scotland, with its full and associate members. The census totals were taken as a guide, giving the six largest faith communities in the UK one place each on the new governing Board of Trustees, with four seats, held in rotation, for the group of smaller faith communities including the Pagans (IFN 2016, §1.3, §2.1, §2.5). This was thought to be the best compliance with equalities law, although it left some of the former nine faith communities without a permanent place. The reshaped Faith Communities Forum, a discussion body, gave a seat to each national faith member body of whatever size. Full membership of the national body had been achieved, and, interestingly, neither the Church of England nor the Roman Catholic Church resigned from it despite the arrival of the two Pagan organisations.

Could this have been brought about without the dual threats of the new Equality Act and of CFCP's legal challenge? Would mutual courtesy and good personal relationships have been enough to outflank the entrenched opposition? The IFN's ritual of successive surveys followed by voting leading to consensus certainly allowed it to maintain control over the process of change, even if the outcome of this was to a large extent determined by external forces. It also resulted in good working relationships in the aftermath of this fiercely contested alteration.

Conclusion

Interfaith dialogue, especially in the twenty-first century, has expanded to include two meanings or applications: (1) dialogue between members of different faiths, aiming at mutual understanding and better relationships; (2) dialogue between faith communities and the administration, whether national, regional or local government, for the purpose of mutual consultation and dissemination of information. Much of the discussion above has been to do with the second area of activity, the interaction between Pagans and the regional or national organisations which co-ordinate interfaith dialogue and faiths representation. Disbelief on both sides – that Pagans should even seek membership, and that any genuine, coherent faith should be refused – required a thoroughgoing excavation of each party's tacit assumptions about what they were engaged in, assuming there was good will. Where there was no good will, as in the 'Nazis' slur at the IFN, the winning tactic seemed to be to stand one's ground and patiently explain the facts as they appeared to Pagans, building the support of other sympathetic people, and trusting that familiarity would eventually make our exclusion appear absurd. However, other excluded faiths had already

waited patiently for decades in the national organisation, and it may be that direct challenge, through legislation and litigation, was necessary to push the process forwards. Challenge also forced Pagans to justify their own assumptions and self-image as well as to communicate these to our interlocutors; and remembering to listen to and respect the very different processes of other organisations, even while challenging their conclusions, proved decisive in some cases.

The first, original, area of interfaith dialogue, what the then-IFN Director called 'a better acquaintanceship on the theological and philosophical dimensions of diverse religions' (IFN 2006), has also expanded into public lecturing, training, multifaith ceremonies and chaplaincy, as in EEFA, demonstrating the contexts in which the very different faiths are compatible, as well as illuminating those in which they are not. Organised religion has rules such as fast days, holidays, types of ceremony, and so on. which provide objective boundaries to participation, although the extent to which these are binding is sometimes open to discussion, as at the Meeting in the Presence. Pagan participants report discoveries such as the similarity of the duties of clergy in all faiths encountered (RH to PJ 13/9/22), or 'that practically every faith... had different factions, and some were very disparaging of their fellow-travellers' (CD to PJ 15/9/22). My own learning process came through ceasing to demonise monotheists but relating to them as sincere fellow-travellers cultivating a different aspect of the Divine. Local groups, as already mentioned, were often eager to welcome and learn about Pagans, and our organisational skills, built up through running small local groves, hearths, and so on., seemed to be welcome in local interfaith groups, as evidenced by our apparently frequent appointment to committees.

Pagans have become a fixture now in interfaith circles, not only at local level but nationally also. This is due to the courage of organised interfaith bodies in finding a way to adapt to the changing landscape of faith communities and the changing outlook of their members, as well as to the skill and patience of Pagan activists and their allies from other faiths in instigating and carrying through this hard-fought change.

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