

There is a vast illusion sweeping through society. The illusion is that of the growing polarization of society – left versus right. But is this a mere media-created myth or a self-fulfilling prophecy? I think the best way to illustrate the power of illusion is by citing example from the current relations between Christianity and other religions such as Neo-Paganism. (This is a topic which certainly hits home for this writer.)

The fact is that a lot of Christians today are concerned with the decline of the Christian religion in society. At the same time, a lot of non-Christians are concerned with the increasing Christianization of society. They can't both be right. So where is this discrepancy coming from? I believe that it's coming from three things:

First, there's the fact that point of view changes according to comparisons. Here's fun experiment to try. Fill three bowls of water. Fill the first with hot water, leave the second at room temperature, and fill the third with cold water. Next, stick one hand in the hot water, and the other hand in the cold. Count to ten. Then, stick both hands in the middle bowl at the same time. You'll feel one of your hands being frozen and the other one nearly scalded by the same bowl of water!

Likewise, people adjust to their childhoods, then use childhood as a comparison for how we view adulthood. Unfortunately, when we're children, we don't know that much about the world. Partly, it's because our parents shelter us from things they deem inappropriate. But mostly, it's because at that young an age, we simply haven't had time to see everything yet. So, what's commonplace for one person, seems completely new to the other, and vice-versa. The world looks like it's changing, but it's really not.

The second reason for these public misconceptions is the fact that people are influenced by the media, and the media just LOVES a controversy. Let's look at where new controversies come from. Once in a while, a controversy forms over something that is a legitimate concern for all parties involved, such as a disagreement over whether or not to go to war or what changes can be made to improve the economy. But more often than not, a controversy starts because somebody just wanted to make trouble.

Troublemaker-A decides he's going to get his name in the paper, and so he announces to the world, "I'm sick and tired of all these people who think that the Piña Colada song should be the National Anthem!" Unfortunately, there are six billion people in the world, so the odds are that someone is going to take the opposing stance, assuming that someone hadn't had the idea already. Idiot-A uses a public forum, such as an internet message board or a radio or newspaper call-in number, and responds, "I support the idea of changing the National Anthem to the Piña Colada song." Media-Person-A asks for anyone with any opinions to call in. Smart-Persons-A-through-Z think it's a non-issue, so they don't bother to call in. Idiots-B-through-J call in expressing opinions for both sides. Troublemaker-B has been thinking for years about bringing down some institution or another, so he decides to seize his opportunity by merging someone else's issue with his own. He calls in, "The reason people want to change the National Anthem is because the Piña Colada song was written after the end of slavery, while the original National Anthem was written while slavery was still around. Not changing it is racism!"

Troublemaker-C happens to be a racist and will support any idea which is even remotely perceived to be arbitrarily attached racism. He calls in, "All these people who want to change the Nation Anthem to the Piña Colada song are bleeding hearts who are destroying the white race!" Now Idiots-K-through-Y are calling in angry about the subject. This raises the level of controversy to the point where Media-Persons-B-through-Z feel compelled to cover the debate. Finally, Troublemaker-D strikes the final blow which will make the controversy never-ending. He announces to the world, "I am a Republican, and I support changing the National Anthem to the Piña Colada song!" Why a Republican? Because he called first. Idiot-Z is a Democrat, and therefore feels obligated to take the opposite position. He rallies the people, saying, "This Piña Colada thing is a vast right-wing conspiracy, and the Democrats will not stand for it, just like we will not stand for the War on Terror or the rising oil prices or the..." and he throws in about twenty other completely unrelated topics. Consequently, some random non-issue has become a line of demarcation between liberals and conservatives, and is being passionately fought over by people who – had it not been for this issue – would have found something else to fight over. By now, Smart-Person-Q has called in and asked what difference any of this makes, but by now, everyone's mind is made up on the issue, so they no longer need to listen while anyone talks. They don't want new perspectives. They just want to know "whose side you're on." Smart-Person-Q gives up and joins Apathetic-People A through Z, who will probably hear about the issue for the first time in a year or so, and make a small mental note in the back of their minds that there's some other new issue out there.

This is the life cycle of a trumped-up controversy. The result is that all of us as spectators turn on the news, see only the idiots and troublemakers (because the smart people and the apathetics stayed out of it from the start), and it looks to us as if the whole world is tearing itself apart over something stupid. In truth, an overwhelming majority of the world population isn't involved, doesn't care, and for the most part, wasn't even watching the news that much anyway, and the few individuals who actually are involved are only using the issue as a pretense to draw support for their own respective agendas. The whole debacle is an organically-formed public illusion.

The third reason for the discrepancy in perspective is simply a matter of what people take for granted. Christians run the world. Pagans are kept repressed. But is that true? Surely, no one is stopping Pagans from practicing their religion. Where does this insecurity come from? I know for a fact that it's not a matter of being a minority. Just look at fat people. Many fat people are terribly insecure about their appearances, and they are definitely not in the minority. Only in a state of culturally-induced mild paranoia, can a fat person walk outside, stand next to about thirty other fat people, and still feel like an outcast. So where does Pagan insecurity come from. The answer is from the Pagan community itself.

The White House celebrates every Easter with an egg hunt. The fact that many Christians celebrate this custom has led many people to regard it as a Christian tradition. Many Pagans feel that watching a public institution practice a Pagan custom is somehow a further example of a Christian-dominated society. If coloring eggs were not common,

I'm sure these same Pagans would feel that the public would never accept a painted egg. Conversely, if the President of the United States were sworn in using an athame, these same Pagans would be concerned about yet another Christian tradition stolen from the Pagans. (In this case, Troublemaker-A happens to be a Pagan.)

But let's look at the national religious spectrum objectively. The Christian Easter traditions include a mass on Sunday, a moment of silent prayer on Friday, placing ashes on the forehead at the beginning of Lent, and of course, painting the eggs. All but one are based in Christianity. The last one is a Pagan custom. The White House does nothing for Ash Wednesday or Good Friday, but it most definitely celebrates the part involving the eggs. Paganism is accepted into the mainstream, and Christianity is a respected but not publicly endorsed personal choice, and any totally unbiased person would see that immediately. (Unfortunately, no one has ever met a totally unbiased person.)

How many courthouses display the Ten Commandments? About a handful. How many courthouses display a statue of Themis, the Greek goddess of justice? Nearly all of them. The façade of the Supreme Court building is an exact replica of the Temple of Artemis. The American flag is decorated with five-pointed stars, not crosses (though the origin of this symbol on the flag originated from a cloth-cutting demonstration by Betsy Ross, but that's beside the point). The Capitol dome is topped with a woman in a traditional Iroquois headdress. The Statue of Liberty bears a torch and a crown inspired by the Colossus at Rhodes – a statue of the titan Helios. Valentine's Day decorations depict Cupid, not St. Valentine. The tree placed in Rockefeller Center every year is the subject of much debate. Is it a Christmas tree? A holiday tree? A Yule tree? A Hanukkah bush? All I know is that that's no nativity scene at the base of the tree. It's a golden statue of Prometheus. Our coins may say "In God We Trust," but as far as I know, the only specific god to ever appear on an American coin was Mercury. Our public buildings are filled with artwork depicting Greek and Roman mythology, but they never depict Christian legends. Yet, not one Christian has ever felt threatened by these displays. There are cars named after gods like Saturn, Mercury and Mazda, but there's no Jesus car. Christian imagery is more or less limited to the Christians themselves who have every right to display crosses and such on their homes or persons, just as Pagans have every right to do the same. So why then, do we feel that we are being bombarded with Christianity and seeing no Paganism? Because it's what we've learned to take for granted.

By now some readers are probably asking, what about the Bibles in hotel rooms? What about the Congressional chaplain? What about the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance? And what about the lack of an optional pentacle for the headstones of Pagan veterans? What about the number of Churches openly flaunting Christian symbolism? What about the Jehovah's Witnesses knocking on doors? And what about the Ku Klux Klan? Those are all very easy to answer, and I'll do so in order. The Bibles are a courtesy. The chaplain is multi-denominational, which makes him rather pointless in my opinion, but he's a convenient compromise. The words "under God" were added as a deliberate slap in the face of Communism, and never intended to be denominational (the

fact that it implies monotheism was accidental). The lack of a pentacle headstone is an oversight, not a conspiracy, and I'm sure that a pentacle headstone is right around the corner as soon as somebody stops whining about it and starts to actually push through the red tape. The Churches are numerous because Christians are numerous and have many denominations. It's not by design. And why do they flaunt their symbols of faith? A better question should be why don't we? The Jehovah's Witnesses are entitled to practice their faith which includes evangelization. The KKK is nearly extinct and practically everyone disapproves of the few who are left. In fact, most people hate the Klan (not that I condone hatred of any kind). But all of these aspects of society put together, their respective backgrounds notwithstanding, what negative effect does this have on the modern Pagan? Not much, as far as I can tell.

We're all so concerned when a judge refuses to remove the Ten Commandments, or when another judge rules that Wiccans are unfit parents, or a PTA member tries to ban the Harry Potter books from schools. But take a step back. That first judge got fired, that other ruling was overturned, and those particular PTA members are not taken seriously by anyone on a school board. How are we being repressed by people who have no real power?

The United States is by far, and always has been, a secular nation. Yet, in today's day and age, the word "secular" has been attached to the words "politically correct," and the P.C. crowd is generally so disliked what with their incessant civil complaints and lawsuits, that the phrase "politically correct" has itself become politically incorrect.

True, that there are many P.C. types who are on a personal crusade to destroy, for example, Christmas. But these individuals are few and far between and in no way represent the Pagans, the Jews, the Muslims or even the Atheists for that matter. They give non-Christians a bad name by representing the agenda of – you guessed it – Troublemaker-A! Political correctness in regards to religion is really just (as I mentioned in a previous article) a form of forced agnosticism.

Now, some individuals and pundits may be saying, "But hasn't there been a recent surge in the non-Judeo-Christian population? Wasn't this a largely Judeo-Christian nation until fairly recently? Wasn't this the basis for the religious beliefs of the Founding Fathers?" Let me answer that by saying... No.

First of all, there's no such thing as a Judeo-Christian. There's Jews and there's Christians. Both are subcategories of a family of religions descended from the worshipers of the God of Abraham. This includes Jews, Protestant Christians, Catholics, Muslims, Satanists, Mormons, Pagan worshipers of the old Canaanite or Phoenician gods, and on some levels, Santarians. The word "Judeo-Christian" is merely a suck-up phrase designed to appeal to the largest percentages of the American population – in other words, the Christians and the Jews individually. Incidentally, most of the Jews in the United States immigrated later on in American history, which hardly makes them an integral part of the nation's origins.

As for the Founding Fathers, it's true that some of them were Christians. (Patrick Henry even campaigned to have Jesus' name put into the Constitution.) But for as many of the Founding Fathers who were born into Protestant families, nearly all of them were Deists. Deism – the philosophy of disregarding religion in favor of logic and reason – was the belief system held by most of the Freemasons, many of whom were Founding Fathers (Ben Franklin and George Washington, for example). James Madison spoke out strongly against organized religion. John Adams categorically denied that the new government would be based in any way on Christianity, and even cited this disassociation in the Treaty of Tripoli. Thomas Jefferson believed in nothing beyond the physical world, and saw religion as superstition thrust upon society in order to maintain elitism. (Although Jefferson did follow the teaching of Jesus in terms of charity and forgiveness, he did not believe that there was anything supernatural about him, and went so far as to write a new Bible for his own personal use without all that stuff about pregnant virgins and walking on water.) John Quincy Adams was a Unitarian. And Thomas Paine, whose writings did much to inspire the American Revolution, hated the concept of religion just as much as he hated the concept of royalty.

Remember, the First Amendment does not say “separation of Church and State.” It says that “Congress shall make no law respecting establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Article One of the Constitution gives all legislative power to Congress, therefore such laws and policies cannot be made by any other branch of Federal Government, and the Tenth Amendment clearly states that the state and local levels of government cannot contradict the self-prohibitive policies at the Federal level. In other words, religion is religion and politics is politics, and never the twain shall meet. (Incidentally, the quote “separation of church and state” is taken from a letter written by Jefferson in response to inquiries made by Baptist organizations regarding the long-term interpretations on the First Amendment.)

But where were the Pagans at this time? Not just the alternative philosophies to Christianity, of which there were many, but the actual worshipers of other gods? Well, frankly, there were a lot of them. For starters, there were the Native Americans. These people were not persecuted because of their ways as some modern P.C. thinkers would go great lengths to imply. They were simply persecuted because they had lots and lots of real estate and insufficient means to protect it from hostile takeovers. Prior to the existence of the United States, this is simply how territory changed hands. To the Europeans, this was considered fair. To everyone else, it was considered to really suck. Next, there were the practitioners of Voodoo, who brought their traditions over from Africa (not willingly, mind you). At no point did their old gods show any signs of fading into the background, particularly in Louisiana and the Caribbean (though some regions incorporated elements of Catholicism to form Santarianism). Then, of course, there were the various cults and secret societies which popped up here and there. Some were neo-Pagans, forming their own communal cult practices no different from neo-Christian groups such as the Mormons or the Amish. Other Pagans had been practicing secretly for generations before coming to America to find religious freedom. Nobody bothered them.

During the 1900's, occultism and spiritualism became all the rage. Members of high society flocked to fortune-tellers, had séances at parties, and studied witchcraft in all its forms. Societies like the Order of the Golden Dawn and the Brotherhood of the Ram were getting tons of positive attention, and Aleister Crowley, although a controversial figure, was definitely making headlines. By the middle of the twentieth century, Gardnerian Wicca was rapidly taking on members, and has quickly become one of the most popular denominations of Paganism today. So remind me again... How is all this Pagan stuff a new thing?

It must be the result of youthful stupidity – the ones who “discover” a new religious philosophy while surfing the internet. The idea must be, “If it’s new to me, it’s new.”

Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, Pagans are still on about things that happened four hundred years ago. This is pointless. The Salem witch trials were short-lived and directed at their own people – not real witches. The Spanish Inquisition went after everyone, Pagans, Jews, Muslims, Protestants and even Catholics falsely accused of crimes for some personal agenda or another. And during the Middle Ages – the infamous “Burning Times” – witchcraft was not typically a crime. Only the alleged use of magick for the purposes of harming others was punishable by death, and accusations of such were nearly always directed at those rich enough to have something worth confiscating. (In truth, the Vatican sanctioned the use of witchcraft in the form of white magick as a necessary defense against black magick.)

And yet, Pagans still feel awkward about being themselves. Why? Slavery existed half as long ago, and black people aren't going around hiding their faces and trying to “fit in” with white people. No one is after you. Relax. Christians aren't trying to convert you – at least not most of them. They're only panicking because they think you're trying to convert them. Two peoples who can't relate to each other even though they are doing the exact same thing – hiding from a media-manufactured imaginary enemy.

So why do we let ourselves get suckered in by all the hype? What is it that makes us so willing to accept the notion that we're all being repressed by the other guy? I think it's because deep down, we all want to be the underdogs. People love to root for the underdog. Politicians will argue over whose background was more humble. Heroes in movies and books and video games are always average Joes, while the villain (at least, in the beginning of the story) has all the power. Naturally, we all have the desire to play the role of the unlikely hero facing evil and oppression, but sometimes it seems like we take this desire to the extreme. Just look at protests. People hold protest rallies not to change the world, but to make themselves feel like they're resisting the powers that be. Unfortunately, the guys in suits inside the buildings see the roles as reversed. They are standing firm their ground against hostile sociopolitical movements which threaten to destroy them. Nobody looks in the mirror and says, “I'm the bad guy,” nobody wants to look in the mirror and say, “I'm the Man,” and everyone's afraid to look in the mirror and say, “I am totally free.”

Sadly, for most of us, the only way we can feel that we're somebody important is to pretend that some invisible someone else hates us. It's much more satisfying to be hated than to be ignored, which I'm sorry to say, a whopping 99.999999% of the world is doing to each and every one of you.

So here we are, a nation of underdogs, with everyone being repressed and no one doing the repressing. Maybe this means we have no king to overthrow, but at least we can pretend that somewhere, there is this anonymous "them" who are freaking out every time we exercise some small measure of the enormous amount of freedom that we tend to forget that we still have. Personally, I think I'll just take advantage of living in a free society and do what I want, worship how I want, and believe what I want. And if anybody's got a problem with it, I'll tell him where to get off. But to be honest, I'm sick of waiting for somebody to actually have a problem with it.

-- Shawn McGhee