

REPORT

The Plight of Pagans in the Military

By Jennifer Willis | June 20, 2012

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(Alex Brandon/AP Photo)

Stefani Barner likes to say she is married to the military. She lives in Eastpointe, Michigan, 10 miles from Selfridge Air National Guard Base, where her husband Robert is an aircraft mechanic. The Barners are also practicing Pagans—a faith often ill at ease with military culture. Robert’s co-workers have “jokingly” suggested the couple worships the devil. While serving two tours in Iraq, he was subjected to attempts at Christian evangelism from other troops. Once, a Commissary worker even asked the Barners if they sacrificed goats. But for Stefani, the most

Her experiences with religious intolerance in the military resulted in her book, *Faith and Magick in the Armed Forces: A Handbook for Pagans in the Military*. Though far from the witch-hunts of the past, Pagan stereotypes continue to be problematic, but perhaps even more so within the U.S. Armed Forces. Though there are now military chaplains for many minority religions—Buddhism and Hinduism included—Pagan military chaplaincy can't seem to get off the ground, and until recently Pagan veterans could not have the pentacle—the symbol of their faith—inscribed on their tombstones in military cemeteries. But with increased accommodation of minority religions and a push for greater religious tolerance in the ranks, life could be changing for Pagans in uniform. “Things have improved,” Stefani says. “I think that we still have a long way to go, but that’s true for many, many minority faiths.”

Pagans—also, Neo-Pagans or sometimes Witches—practice contemporary forms of earth-based spirituality. There are multiple forms of Paganism, including Wicca, Druidism, Shamanism, Asatru and Heathenism, all of which remain fast-growing faith groups in the United States. From 2001 to 2008, the American Wiccan population increased more than two-fold (from 134,000 to 342,000), and the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey estimated there were nearly 700,000 Pagans and Wiccans in the United States. In 2007, the Pentagon counted more than 1,500 self-identified Wiccans in the Air Force and 350 in the Marines, but no numbers were tracked for the Navy or Army, which are much larger branches. Members of Circle Sanctuary—a Wiccan church based in Wisconsin that serves Pagans globally—puts the current estimate of military Pagans around 10,000, but even that number is a guess.

Retired U.S. Army Major Michelle Boshears—herself a Green Craft Wiccan—says those numbers reflect only active duty military who claim Paganism as their religion on official forms. When Boshears served 15 years ago, the only option for Pagans was to mark “No Preference” or “Other.” For that reason, she estimates that the numbers of Pagans in uniform could be closer to 20,000.

Pagans have had an uphill battle to secure the same rights that soldiers of more traditional faiths have enjoyed for years. It was only in 2007 that the pentacle (the Pagan five-pointed star) became available as an “emblem of belief” on headstones in military cemeteries. After a ten-year effort that ended in an out-of-court settlement with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the symbol is now literally carved in stone on more than 72 markers in Arlington National Cemetery and other burial sites around the country.

Securing a Pagan military chaplain has been another longterm goal. Military chaplains predate the Constitution, and they have been employed by the Armed Forces since George Washington was commander-in-chief. Their presence, even today, is often key for soldiers to practice their faith

chaplain commissioned in 2011 to its diversifying ranks. But of the 2,500 military chaplains currently serving, none are Pagan.

Since 1998, the Wiccan church Circle Sanctuary has been working to secure a Pagan military chaplain candidate. Under the leadership of senior minister and high priestess Rev. Selena Fox, Circle Sanctuary applied to become an endorsing organization through the Department of Defense, a pre-requisite for nominating U.S. military chaplain candidates. Fox says the application was ultimately held up in 2002 by the lack of a single signature: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's.

Sacred Well Congregation, another Wiccan group, came close to sponsoring the military's first Pagan chaplain in 2006, when it attempted to endorse Captain Don Larsen. While serving as a chaplain in Iraq, Larsen converted to Wicca from Pentecostal Christianity. But when notified of Larsen's request to change affiliations, his original sponsor—the Chaplaincy of Full Gospel Churches—revoked his endorsement. The Army had no choice but to dismiss Larsen, pulling him out of Iraq.

In the absence of chaplains, the military allows lay-led congregations headed by church-sponsored Distinctive Faith Group Leaders (DFGLs). For Open Circles—congregations that welcome Pagans of all stripes—DFGLs are sponsored by organizations like Circle Sanctuary and Sacred Well Congregation. Circle Sanctuary sponsors Open Circles at 26 military installations, including two in war zones, but that's just over two-dozen groups in a sea of more than 1,000 military installations at home and worldwide.

Michele Walden, a 17-year Army wife, is the DFGL at the Fort Hood Open Circle in Texas, which averages 50 attendees for weekly classes and up to 100 for sabbats, the eight annual Pagan festivals. Though the group celebrated its 15th anniversary this past Mabon (autumnal equinox), Walden acknowledges the military was surprised by the “political firestorm” that initially erupted over its inception. When a positive article about the group ran in the *American-Statesman* (Austin, Texas) in 1999, Congressman Bob Barr (R-Georgia) sought a Defense appropriations bill amendment to halt Pagan practice at U.S. military bases, and then-presidential candidate George W. Bush told ABC News, “I don't think that witchcraft is a religion. I wish the military would rethink this decision.”

The next year, the Ft. Hood Open Circle was vandalized; stones marking the circle itself were scattered and the group's limestone altar was smashed, with one piece left behind being marked with a cross. The base responded by putting up a fence and offering security to the Open Circle. Now twelve years later, Walden downplays the injury in favor of giving the Army credit for stepping in and “taking care of their own.” Believing that familiarity and education are key to reducing misunderstanding, Walden has always been open about her own spirituality: “It's hard to fit you into a stereotype if (people) know who you are as a person.”

Association, Open Online Communities. Every Saturday evening, from 8 to 9 p.m., the Rev. Sheila Fox of Circle Sanctuary hosts “Pagan Warrior Radio,” a weekly radio webcast dedicated exclusively to Pagans in the military. But with no dedicated military chaplains and a small number of Open Circles available to Pagans in uniform, Pagans stationed overseas can feel particularly isolated.

When Specialist Michael Douthit-Hays, a Norse Heathen now stationed at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii, was in Afghanistan—without a Pagan chaplain or other soldiers of his tradition nearby—he had to get creative about observance. The first full moon after the autumnal equinox marked Winternights, a blot (or feast) for Norse Heathenism. There were two holiday dinners—Thanksgiving and Christmas—already on the military calendar, so he ate with the rest of the soldiers and then observed the holiday in his own way in private.

Still, the chaplains Douthit-Hays has spoken with have been open and eager to educate themselves. His last chaplain went online to research Norse Heathenism so he could be of greater service. And his tour in Afghanistan brought him “a lot closer” to his Norse Heathen beliefs, he says. He drew comfort from wearing his symbol of faith around his neck. While his fellow soldiers wore crosses and similar items, he preferred Thor’s hammer “because it’s more a symbol of strength.”

Colonel Craig N. Wiley, the installation chaplain at Georgia’s Fort Gordon, says chaplains get the “schoolhouse version” of Paganism during their training, but that’s no substitute for being on a large post with an active Pagan group. “It’s only when (chaplains) get into the field that their mind begins to open up a bit more,” Wiley says. “It’s our responsibility to learn more and have a better understanding.”

For religious minorities to gain true acceptance in the military, chaplains, and the military as a whole, have to be willing to understand what non-Christian faith groups need. “Paganism is not a fad, a lifestyle choice or a role-playing game,” Stefani Barner says. “Those who voluntarily don the uniform of our Armed Forces and take up arms to defend the Constitutional rights of every American are entitled to, at a minimum, the right to exercise their own freely and without prejudice.”

Jennifer Willis is a freelance journalist, essayist and author living in Portland, Oregon. In 2011, she researched religious minorities in Ireland as a fellow with the International Reporting Project at Johns Hopkins University.

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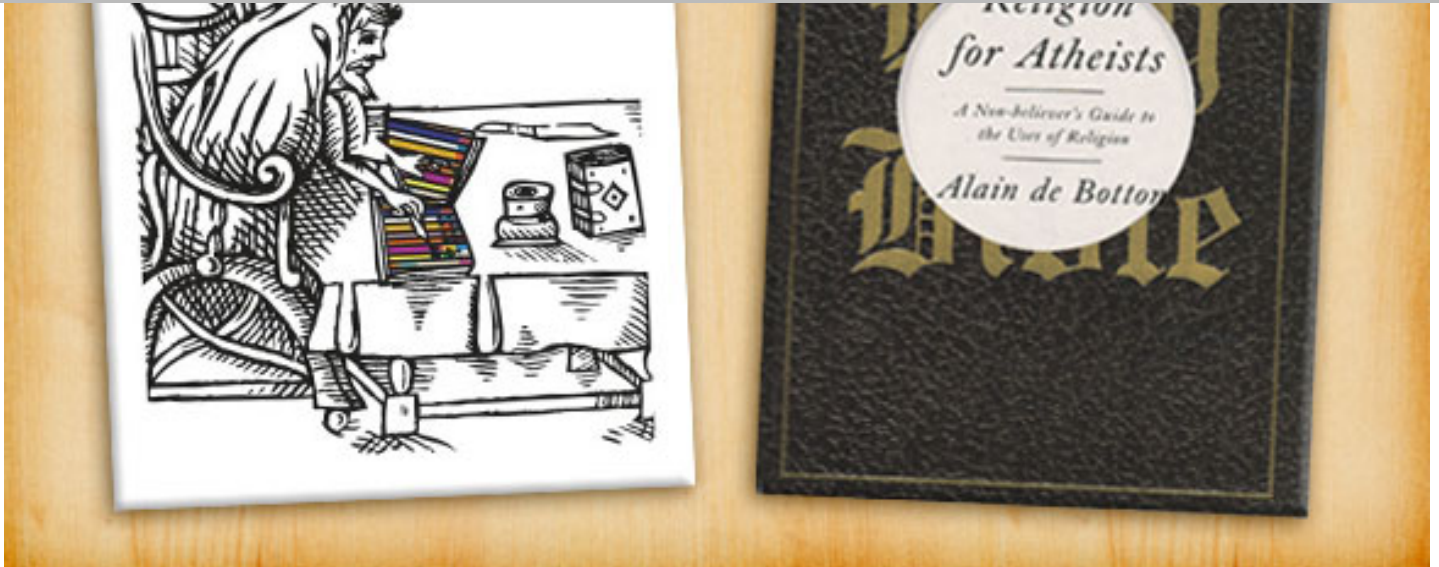


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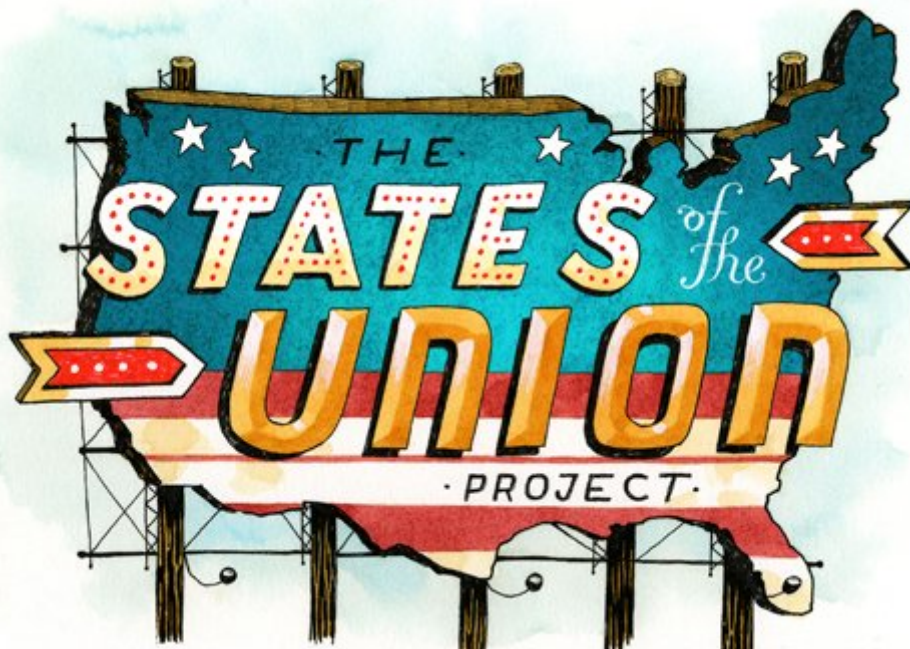
Sandra Rodich · 8 years ago

I like the article I just wish that the military was more understanding I am at Fort Riley and recently they told our group we could no longer practice our faith on post and we were forced to find other accommodations for our soldiers most of which do not even know we have a group because our chaplains do not get the word out. My name is Sandra Rodich and I am an officer stationed at Fort Riley also the DFGL of Fort Riley Open Circle, we do have a facebook group called Fort Riley open circle. I wish I knew why the armed forces are so thick head about it though.

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