

Wicca at Work

Imagine the following scenario: You return to work after taking a vacation day to observe Good Friday and your supervisor asks what you did on your day off. You explain that you were with your family observing the holiday. Before this exchange, you'd had many conversations with your boss, but had never mentioned that you're a Christian. The next day, your supervisor calls you into her office and fires you for decreased productivity. Interestingly, in your quarterly review only a week before, she had no complaints about your performance. You conclude that you were fired because of your religion.

For many of us working in the field of diversity and inclusion, it's difficult to believe that situations like this really happen here in the United States and abroad. But just last year, an employee in the United Kingdom was fired in a remarkably similar situation. And that real-life employee was not Christian. She was Karen Holland, a Wiccan.

In the fall of 2013, Karen returned to work (at a convenience store in the UK) after a Halloween celebration. That's when her employers learned that she was a practicing Wiccan. Shortly thereafter, she was fired. Her employers claimed she was let go for stealing, but Karen claimed the real reason for her dismissal was her religion and sued. The tribunal found in Karen's favor and awarded her over 15,000 pounds for religious discrimination, sex discrimination and unfair dismissal.¹

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2523435/Witch-sacked-taking-Halloween-work-attend-Wiccan-ceremony-wins-15-000-claiming-religious-discrimination.html>



A "NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT" IN THE WORKPLACE

So, here's the question. Why do we find it so troubling when a Christian is fired because of their religious beliefs? And why do most people find it less troubling when the person fired is a Wiccan? The answer is sadly simple. Because Wicca, compared to Christianity and certain other religions, is different, unfamiliar, and maybe even a little scary for many people.

Your company may not have any Wiccan employees (at least any who have self-disclosed) but Karen Holland's story is still worth paying attention to. Why? Because it's an example of discrimination toward members of New Religious Movements (NRMs), a term used to describe modern or outlying religious traditions or groups that often do not get the same respect and treatment as more familiar, mainstream traditions. And while you may not know any Wiccans, there are a significant number of practitioners in the United States (about 342,000

according to a 2008 survey)² and in the UK (the 2011 census found that nearly 12,000 Britons identify as Wiccan and over 56,000 identify as pagan).³ And their population is growing: Wicca is now considered one of the fastest growing religions in the English-speaking world.⁴ Discrimination against Wiccans – or indeed



*If it harm none,
Do what ye will.*

employees of any and all faiths and none – is bound to lead to a decline in morale and productivity. The remedy for companies with inclusive environments is straightforward. No matter how seemingly obscure an employee's beliefs, everyone is respected.

What is Wicca?

As is so often the case, knowledge, awareness, and respectful curiosity are the keys to practicing respect in situations involving people who follow lesser-known religious traditions. For now, let's take a moment to get our bearings with a brief background of Wicca.

Wicca is one tradition within contemporary Paganism or Neo-Paganism. It is a religion that emphasizes the revival of polytheistic religious practices and usually includes reverence for nature. Wicca distinguishes itself from the broader practice of Paganism by its focus on

² <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/10/30/for-some-wiccans-halloween-is-a-real-witch/>

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/datablog/interactive/2012/dec/11/census-religion>

⁴ *Religion at Work*

witchcraft and ritual magic, something that is not practiced by all modern Pagans. While some Wiccans believe that their religion dates back to pre-Christian Europe, the modern practice of Wicca was popularized in the twentieth century. Gerald B. Gardner is regarded as the founding father of Wicca. Gardner “came out of the broom closet” as a Wiccan in 1951 and published two influential books on the subject during the 1950s.

The belief most universally shared in the Wiccan faith is the maxim known as the Wiccan Rede, which states, “If it harm none, do what ye will.” Wicca is very diverse and decentralized but common practices may include participation in a coven (a group of Wiccans who meet regularly), performing ceremonies on the nights of the full and new moon, and observing the eight seasonal holidays of the Wheel of the Year.⁵ (For more in-depth information on Wicca, please see the new Wicca section of *Religion at Work*, Tanenbaum's guide to religion in the workplace.)

One of the most important Wiccan festivals is very familiar and is commonly known as Halloween, Samhain, or All Hallows Eve – coming soon on October 31st. Halloween evolved from the ancient Gaelic end-of-harvest festival Samhain which was considered to be a time when spirits could easily cross over into the

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living world. Later, the Christian holidays of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day were celebrated on Samhain, and that led to our modern holiday of Halloween.⁶

⁵ *Religion at Work*

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samhain>



While children often identify Halloween as a time for candy and costumes, for many Wiccans it is a religious festival celebrated with a special dinner featuring the favorite dishes of deceased friends and ancestors, and the welcoming of spirits to the table.⁷ Some Wiccans may request time off to observe this holiday.

What's next? Wiccan ERGs?

Now that we have a very basic understand of Wicca, let's imagine another scenario. After ongoing employee requests, your company has formed a Christian ERG. The group has a strong business case and adheres to all existing policies. After learning about the new Christian ERG, a group of employees come forward and ask to start a Wiccan ERG. As a Diversity and Inclusion professional, what do you do? Some may fear that if a Wiccan ERG is allowed, there will be pushback from other employees and skepticism from senior leadership. On the other hand, if the group is denied permission to form, you will risk, at the very least, disgruntled employees, if not an [EEOC complaint](#).

This is a challenging situation. One might be tempted to tell the Wiccans that you'll think about it, and hope that if you can brush them off long enough, they'll give up on their request without a fight. But that is not an answer for inclusive companies that are committed to handling such requests professionally, respectfully, and accountably.

In our 2014 Report for Corporate Members, we shared Tanenbaum's better practices regarding [faith-based employee resource groups](#). Our recommendations for ERG guidelines (including the suggestion that any ERG must adhere to all company-wide policies) are applicable to any faith-based ERG request, from Christians to Wiccans and everything in between. Proactively establishing policies and standards regarding all ERGs (not just faith-based groups) provides companies with a tool that can be used to determine whether or not a group is appropriate to advance the business imperatives of the company.

⁷ <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/10/30/for-some-wiccans-halloween-is-a-real-witch/>

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It is also important for companies to clearly communicate these standards to employees, so that employees know the criteria they need to meet, and understand that these criteria are rooted in corporate policy rather than personal opinion.

Diversity and Inclusion practitioners do not need to agree with Wiccan beliefs or become experts in Wiccan practices in order to treat Wiccans fairly. What's important is to treat Wiccans, and people of all faiths and none, with respect. If Wiccans do come forward to request an ERG, pat yourself on the back. Their willingness to “come out of the broom closet” at work probably means that you have successfully created an inclusive environment where members of an often stigmatized group are comfortable. You've made it safe for them to identify themselves and ask to participate in the growth of the company.

The Bigger Picture

In becoming one of Tanenbaum's Corporate Members, you have already taken a proactive step in addressing religious diversity in the workplace. Now is the time to reflect on your Diversity and Inclusion mission and initiatives and think about what it means to be truly inclusive. As Halloween approaches, remember that for people like Karen Holland, the holiday is about more than costumes and candy—it is a celebration of faith.

