

From Mike Stygal, President of the Federation

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With regards to the recent BBC article regarding the "Rise in 'witchcraft' child abuse cases" I would like to make the following statement:

Child abuse linked to accusations of witchcraft- thoughts on media reports about the issue.

Some years ago I spoke with the detective in charge of these crimes. My concern at the time was whether the police were making any distinction between children being accused of witchcraft and then suffering abuse and modern witches and Wiccans. I have been informed on a number of occasions that the training and guidance offered to professionals (including teachers) around spotting signs of abuse, particularly within cultures that believe in the ability of 'witches' to possess children, or to invite the devil to possess children, would be clear enough to ensure there would be no confusion.

What I would NOT want to do would be to suggest that it was impossible for modern, western witches and Wiccans to be abusers as abusers can be found in all walks of life and the Pagan Federation has clear safeguarding and child protection policies that would help us to respond to concerns. Other Pagan organisations are also very conscious of the need to safeguard the vulnerable.

But these cases of abuse are not actually carried out by witches, but by people whose spiritual leaders (generally a form of African Christianity, although the issues do occur in other countries around the world and with other faiths) instill a belief in the possession of children by witches or through witchcraft. Our media is very good at being lazy. They also seem to be very good at twisting stories for what I can only imagine are entertainment purposes (mainly their own). So we often avoid making statements through the media as the norm is that we're completely misrepresented.... the media seems to like to sensationalise and hype fictional perspectives, rather than boring old reality.

I think this kind of media misrepresentation would be an awful lot harder if schools were to include some kind of overview of Pagan paths.

It is important to note that there has been quite a bit of involvement from African churches and bodies representing African churches in trying to stop child abuse linked to accusations of witchcraft going right back to the aftermath of the Victoria Climbe case.

I'm again seeing if it might be possible for the police to be a little more cautious in the words they use when speaking to the media... simply changing the phrase child abuse linked to witchcraft to child abuse linked to accusations of witchcraft would help, and be more accurate. I would also be reluctant to see a broad faith label attached to those who commit these crimes for much the same reason that I am unhappy that the way the crimes are reported could lead people to believe witches are committing the crimes - I wouldn't want good Muslims and Christians, for whom these crimes will be as abhorrent as they are for me, to be mistakenly identified as potential abusers.

I know that various international agencies have, in recent years been investigating and highlighting the issues of people, usually the vulnerable, being accused of witchcraft and subsequently abused or murdered in various places around the world. There have been a few fundraising activities carried out by the Pagan Federation in support of charities who try to address these issues. But finding the right words to use is particularly difficult.

Globally, the understanding of the word witch or witchcraft varies quite a bit, but outside of societies that have seen the growth of modern Wicca and witchcraft, the understanding is generally of someone who does harm to others- through magic and/or poisons. It's just modern Pagans who have reclaimed the words for generally more positive practices and beliefs that muddy the waters (and have done for at least the last 70 years). I'd quite like another opportunity to meet with Terry Sharpe and, perhaps the appropriate government representative to see if we can find a way to highlight the issues whilst limiting the potential for misunderstandings about modern Pagans.

I understand the Police Pagan Association have released statements differentiating between the African witchcraft often referred to in these articles and that practiced by Pagans, and have a corporate communications document which covers such things. Obviously, in cases of criminal activity, the police must investigate all possible avenues in order to obtain evidence. But having access to information documents that illustrate the distinction between African witchcraft and modern Pagan witchcraft should mean that they are less likely to confuse these cases with the practices of modern Pagans. It's a pity our media seem to prefer that the general public might be misled and ill informed.

(NOTE: This statement was published with permission from the author, Mike Stygal, and copied in an unedited form directly from the Centre for Pagan Studies Facebook page.)