# I Converted to Paganism During Christian Seminary.

Long story short?

I found a spiritual tradition that matches my liberal theology with my embodied worship style.

Long story longer? Read on.

I was born into a spiritual but not religious household. When I was 13, I joined a Christian youth group at the local Foursquare church (which was evangelical and charismatic). I had the ecstatic experience of speaking in tongues and I became deeply involved with the church. Two years in, my parents and the youth pastor exchanged some words, and I was no longer allowed to attend that church. (Looking back, my parents totally made the right call, not allowing someone else to feel more entitled to the moral direction of their child than they were).

I bounced around different community and youth groups, and once I was in college I joined a multi-denominational Christian club that was theologically moderate, with a basic evangelical, emergent church worship style, meaning passionate, Jesus-based rock-n-roll style music, and off the cuff, charismatic sermons from preachers in jeans and a t-shirt.

By sophomore year, I was also getting involved with an organization nationally known as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF). The group continued to keep my attention with its focus on social justice, and charming banjo playing, folk-music singing, young preacher couple. By senior year, I led bible study in my dorm suite, played guitar and sang for the worship band, and actively recruited members. Over three years, we saw membership in IVCF jump from three students to over fifty students.

Stick with me, I know we’re going deep into Meowster’s Christian past.

Summer between Junior and Senior year of university, I went on an evangelical “missions trip” with Josiah Venture to Latvia. I taught English, lived simply, and worked to convert masses of youth at our English camps. I read the entire New Testament (New Living Translation) and a vast majority of the Old Testament (up to the minor prophets) that summer.

Side note: I am no longer an evangelist, and I do not condone this behavior now. I have grappled with what to do with the feelings of shame and disgust over evangelizing. I need to remind myself that I was doing then what I believed to be right, and today I choose to trust that those folks are participation in whichever spiritual path, or none, is right for them.

Around Thanksgiving 2010, I had a dream that I was marrying a close female friend. Upon waking, I thought to myself, “it is weird that I didn’t feel like that was weird in the dream.” I realized I was gay, and sprinted out of the closet.

I came out to the IVCF folks, and it did not go over well. They told me that I would need to 1) not date, and 2) not talk about it in Bible Study, if I wanted to keep leading Bible Study with them. Since finals and winter break were coming up, I told them I didn’t plan on breaking either of those requests any time soon.

During winter break, I traveled to Australia to meet with that close female friend. Before the trip, I told her about the dream — concerned that she would not want to share a hotel room with me. Thankfully, she was accepting of my feelings, even though she did not feel the same way. During that trip, we talked about her study abroad experience in India, and my missions trip experience in Latvia. We came to a conclusion (a la Huston Smith) that all religions are different paths to the same divine. She spoke of Hinduism and the festivals in India, and I told her about my religious studies degree and how Buddhism and folk religions fascinated me.

I came home from my trip to Australia theologically changed. My mind had expanded, and I was ready to operate out of a broader paradigm. My experience with IVCF had changed by then — the worship no longer felt authentic, especially since I was being asked not to talk about my queerness or date anyone. I distinctly remember the last night I spent with them. I left mid-worship, and asked my friend to bring my guitar to me when the event had ended. I never returned.

A few weeks later, a friend in the chaplain’s office on campus contacted me and asked me to share my story with the campus chaplain. I skipped class (with my professor’s permission), and told my story.

In short order, IVCF was being investigated for discrimination, hazing, and pressuring first year students into housing strangers (interns interviewing for IVCF). The conclusion of the conduct meetings was that the off-campus advisers were banned from school grounds for a year. A large population of the group was enraged by this outcome, and many of them reached out to me in anger and pain. I was frightened that first night, so I spent the evening in the suite of a fellow student — a student leader with the multi-denominational club I mentioned earlier. This student would become my first girlfriend in short order.

Once I graduated from University, I decided to join the Lutheran Volunteer Corps because it was the queerest volunteer corps I could find. After a brief and conflict ridden stint working at a homeless day shelter, I ended up being placed back at my Alma Mater. I ended up working closely with the chaplain who was my ally the year before.

While working in that position, I had an opportunity to attend the Global Chaplains in Higher Education conference at Yale University. It was at that conference that I thought my call to ministry became clear: I was supposed to support individuals going through a crisis of identity and/or faith, of any tradition, especially in the university setting.

Inspired to pursue college chaplaincy, I applied to graduate school that winter.

In August 2012, I drove down to Berkeley, CA with my new kitten, Neferkitty, and an abundance of passion and excitement. I enrolled in an MDiv program and I was eager to finally sort out my theological conundrum of reconciling my queer sexuality with my Christian faith.

A month or so into studying, and I met a fellow Leo in the dining hall. They were organizing a pagan ritual to honor the ancestors, called Samhain (pronounced Sow-en) for October 31st, and invited me to attend. Having just had an intense marginalization experience with IVCF, I wanted to be an ally to this small group on my new campus as much as possible. I attended Samhain, and saw that paganism is not satanic or scary the way it is often portrayed in the media. I started spending time talking with my Leo friend between classes, and I began attending sabbats (the eight holidays that follow the wheel of the year) and esbats (moon rituals).

Spring semester that first year, I was in Christian History class, sitting next to my Leo friend. The professor was talking about St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland. A classmate raised their hand and asked, “Didn’t the pagans realize that they were being converted?” Knowing that they in fact were slaughtered if they did not convert, Leo friend turned to me and asked, “Jac, how can you hear all of this history and still call yourself a Christian?” And I swiftly responded, “Don’t call me that!”

We looked at each other, shocked at what I had said. If any moment was my “conversion moment,” that was it. It was a slow process that took a number of years, but that was the turning point.

During my second year in seminary, I started studying paganism in earnest. I created an independent study course called Introduction to Paganism. I met with my Leo friend each week and we spoke for three hours about the topics laid out in the syllabus we created for me to follow.

My fourth semester in school, I realized that I did not want to continue spending money for a Christian degree if I was now pagan. I spoke with the registrar about my options — transferring to another local school that was more new age, going on a leave of absence, or something else; she had an even better option! She looked at my credits and saw that I had exactly — to the decimal point — the amount of credit I would need to graduate that spring with a Masters in Theological Studies. I would just need to write a 10–15 page synthesis essay as the capstone to my coursework. I chose the topic “Embodied Spirituality” and wrote about divination tools within paganism, giving a tactile and direct connection to the Divine. I graduated May 2014 with a Masters in Theological Studies (MTS).

I wrote the bulk of this for my essay to apply to Clinical Pastoral Education in 2013-2014. Even now, looking at it, my voice seems so much flatter than it feels now. I spoke very good “Christian,” and it completely dampened my creativity to tell and retell the story.

Looking through my correspondences, I have tended to email this essay to prospective sweethearts, so they’ll “better understand me.” I see now that I wrote this and sent it to folks because I get asked this question a lot, and I am tired of telling the tale.

I hope this has helped you. If you’re looking for LGBTQ+ community, please find me on Twitch or Discord: [https://linktr.ee/GenderMeowster](https://www.patreon.com/GenderMeowster?fan_landing=true)

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