

Fox Apologizes for Comments on Wiccans at University of Missouri

Fox News contributor Tucker Carlson has apologized for comments he made about Wiccans, saying he “should have left them alone.”

“Comments in the story offended a number of people—that was never my intention,” Carlson said on the show Saturday. “I also violated one of my basic life rules, which is live and let live. The Wiccans have never bothered me or tried to control my life. I should have left them alone. Sorry about that.”

More than 40,000 people had asked for Carlson to apologize through two online petitions after Carlson, the editor in chief of *The Daily Caller*, spoke against the University of Missouri’s guidelines for religious holidays.

“Any religion whose most sacred day is Halloween, I just can’t take seriously,” Carlson said on the Feb. 17 broadcast of “Fox and Friends” weekend show that touched off the controversy. “I mean, call me a bigot.”

“Every Wiccan I’ve ever known is either a compulsive deep Dungeons and Dragons player or is a middle-aged, twice-divorced older woman living in a rural area who works as a midwife,” he said.

The university’s guide to religions, an educational and planning resource for faculty, staff and students, lists practices and observations for religious holidays from many faiths. It also recommends accommodations for students, such as avoiding major deadlines during holidays that involve fasting.

Eight pagan holidays were added to the guide last fall.

The buzz began on Feb. 12 with a post by University of Missouri graduate student Christopher White on The College Fix. White criticized the university's guide to religions for listing Wiccan and other pagan festivals "right alongside major religious holidays."

Soon after, reported that "Students at the University of Missouri don't need to cram for exams that fall on Wiccan and Pagan holidays, now that the school has put them on par with Christmas, Thanksgiving and Hanukah." The article called it "all part of the school's effort to include everyone's beliefs, although some critics say listing every holiday associated with fringe belief systems is a bit much."

Fox contributor and radio host Tammy Bruce criticized the religious list in the article, saying "It almost seems as though we're looking for excuses for people to not have to take their commitments seriously. It's beyond political correctness; it's almost like an excuse to do nothing. It's like social nihilism, where nothing matters."

Bruce said the university's decision to include the pagan holidays is "less about elevating other religions and other individuals and more about diluting the dynamic about what's important in people's lives."

Members of Hearthfires, a group of mid-Missouri pagans from different spiritual paths, watched some of Fox's coverage during one of their regular meetings. The group's response was mixed—half-smiles and raised eyebrows, half disappointment and hurt.

When Carlson said "Call me a bigot," one Hearthfires member responded: "You are."

"How many Wiccans can name every Wiccan holiday?" Carlson said a few moments later. "I can—and I'm not even Wiccan," another Hearthfires member said.

The Fox stories prompted a flurry of online responses in the

Pagan blogosphere, with one Facebook page demanding a Fox apology generating close to 3,000 likes. The comments prompted articles and editorials in the University of Missouri's student newspaper, *The Maneater*, as well as local newspapers the *Columbia Missourian* and the *Columbia Daily Tribune*.

"What we're doing is making sure people understand the Fox News article is wrong," said university spokesman Christian Basi.

Contrary to the Fox News article, "the University of Missouri is not recommending any accommodations for students observing Wiccan or pagan holidays," the university said in a statement.

The Fox News story "made assumptions about our religious guide and the reporter did not read through the guide carefully," the university said.

Two days after the Feb. 17 show, Carlson apologized on Twitter: "To Wiccans and pagans: Sorry for my pointlessly nasty remarks. Your holidays still confuse me, but you seem like nice people."

Kellie Kotraba is the editor of Columbia Faith & Values. The administrative offices of both Columbia Faith & Values and Religion News Service are headquartered at the University of Missouri.