I was attracted to this work [of working as a chaplain for Wiccans and Pagans in prison] as it gave me an opportunity to fulfill this mandate [making Paganism public]. Of course, I personally believe that followers of Wicca and other Pagan paths need to have the same resources as other faith paths…. I am continuing with the work because I enjoy it and because I have come to believe that it does have an impact, however small, on the inmates, and so, on society in general.

Wiccan Chaplain
Canadian Prison System

In the past thirty years, prison chaplaincies in North America have been transformed by the arrival of people belonging to religions different from Christianity. This introduction of new belief systems and their presence in the penitentiary population can be seen as a reflection of Canada’s larger general population (CSC 2006: 3). In fact, when we look at data from Statistics Canada for religion in the 2001 census, Roman Catholics and Protestants still dominate, even they are only 72% of the population as compared to 80% in 1991 (Statistics Canada 2003: 5). On the other hand, the presence of other religions, including non-Christian groups and those who profess no religion, has increased. According to Statistics Canada, this is due to two major factors, namely the increase in immigration and the decrease of young people declaring themselves Christians. The religious identities of the general population can be compared with those whom we find in penitentiary institutions during the same year. Their Christian faiths represented between 69% and 92% of the inmate population depending of the region (CSC 2002a: 2–6).[^1]

[^1]: The Correctional Service of Canada (henceforth CSC) divides the country into five regions: Atlantic, Québec, Ontario, Prairies, and Pacific.
As observed by James Beckford (1998: 265–66), sociologists of religion do not usually study the prison context. Prisons do, however, provide the opportunity for understanding religious practices and their accommodation in a context where restrictive rules and regulations apply. The question of accommodation, whether in prisons or not, is presently at the center of a public debate in Québec, especially through the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences (the Bouchard-Taylor Commission). Among other purposes, this commission has the mandate to gather and analyze information about religious and cultural accommodation practices within the province and hold public consultations on the matter. The very existence of the Consultation Committee, however, serves to show that the question of reasonable accommodation and the acceptance of religious minorities by the general population are not always as clear and simple as one may think. Given that the penitentiary context faces these same issues but within a confined environment, researchers in religious studies could gain some much needed insight by studying them.

In response to the variety of faiths present in the penitentiary system, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has sought to provide interfaith chaplaincy services within its institutions. This has been done to accommodate one of the few rights that inmates still have, and to represent better the mosaic of the contemporary inmate population. To this effect, the different traditional Christian faiths have had to modify their approaches and create chaplaincy teams that include representatives of non-Christian faiths as well.

Today, Pagan volunteers and employees, mostly Wiccans, form part of these chaplaincy teams. Wiccans are practitioners of Wicca, a syncretistic reconstruction of a nature-based witchcraft religion rendered public by Gerald B. Gardner in England in the 1950s. Wicca is considered a nature religion within the Pagan mindset. It is one of many neo-Pagan traditions, such as Druidry, Asatru and Goddess Worship, which see nature as sacred and view the divine as immanent in nature. They can be polytheistic, animistic, or pantheistic. Wicca does not have a set of unified beliefs or dogmas, nor does it have a central institution. Most Wiccans follow similar beliefs and practices, such as the Wiccan wheel (sabbats celebration), the threefold law, and the Wiccan Rede. The Wiccan Rede is an ethical guide that forms the premise of a Wiccan’s work and beliefs. It consists of the following eight words: “An Ye Harm None, Do What Ye