On the Pagan Parallax
A Sociocultural Exploration of the Tension between Eclecticism and Traditionalism as observed among Dutch Wiccans

Léon A. Van Gulik

Abstract
Post-modern nature religions face the challenge of justifying their practices and theology since there is no unbroken line between the classic and contemporary Paganisms of the Western world. Against the background of progressing historical knowledge, these religions constantly have to reinvent or reconstruct their traditions. At the same time, the present context is entirely different to that of when the classic Paganisms emerged. By discussing their roots in romanticism and expressivism, both the relevancy of the revived nature religions and the challenges they face, are explained. These issues are illustrated by drawing on initial results of discourse analyses of on-line discussions between Dutch Wiccans, yielding imaginative narratives of self-justification and self-identification amidst a continuous tension between traditionalism and eclecticism. Generalising these findings to contemporary Paganism at large, I have argued that the latter movement is counterbalancing sociohistorical developments by its changing acts of sanctioning, its aims to remain the maverick, and its constant striving for experiential receptivity creating an illusory idea of autonomous movement: the Pagan parallax.

The Dutch cabaret artist Theo Maassen once said about dancing: “die eerste stap is altijd lullig” – “that first step is always shitty.” That is, the transition from walking to dancing is experienced as awkward. Picture this: one walks onto the dance floor, seemingly unaffected by the music, and then, merely as a function of reaching the desired spot, the bodily posture changes dramatically to facilitate the getting into the groove. The same uneasiness goes for the abrupt start of a religion. How does one start a new religion? Starting from scratch seems hardly an option. The rituals would be adrift, the God or gods having been dreamt up on the spot, would be as capricious as the invented theology. Contemporary Paganism, which consists of various nature-religious movements that are clearly new in their focus, practice, role of the self, understanding of divinity, and specific appropriation of older material like texts, imagery and so forth, is in such a position. How are genuinely novel initiatives justified? I argue that the answer depends on whether one puts emphasis on the belief system as a whole, or on the individuals that consider themselves part of the movement. Although in each of these levels both claimed historicity and observed efficacy play an important role, the former is more easily encountered on an ‘institutional’ level, whereas the latter is the mainstay of personal involvement. One also has to acknowledge, however, that the cultural and personal levels, as I would call them, are potentially conflicting, since present-day identities are formed by the very processes of modernization, the excrescences of which Pagans seek to overcome in their acts of re-enchantment.

Each belief system in contemporary Paganism cannot but suggest continuity with a suitable and pre-existing form. On this cultural level, the anchor point of historicity is provided by what historians Hobsbawn and Ranger have called the invention of tradition. Each branch of Paganism, then, will either have to be imagined or reconstructed, to make new ideas and especially practices believable. Wicca falls in the category of imagining, that is to say that to the bricolage of romanticism, ceremonial magic, and the cunning folk Ronald Hutton has described, we need to add the initial belief in the myth of modern Pagan witchcraft as a remnant of a pre-
Christian fertility cult, that was forced underground during the witch craze of early modern Europe. Other Pagan paths like Druidry and Asatrú, who have a ‘genuine’ past in terms of locality and ethnicity, are in a somewhat different position to Wicca. Rather than merely imagining, they have to reconstruct their traditions. The greatest challenge posed to these paths is to ascertain to what extent the world views emerging from historical texts are applicable, useful and meaningful in our present day, and even to what extent the historical record is sufficient to establish what the original tradition was like in the first place. In the end, imagination touches reconstructionism where contemporary needs and tastes have an impact on the choices made in the name of restoration.

On the verge of oversimplification one might say that whereas in Druidry and Asatrú most effort is put in forging a rationale to justify the re-invigorated tradition and deduce original material that was lost, in Wicca eclecticism dominates. However, I must already add that there is a huge difference between initiatory Wicca and non-initiatory Wicca or general Paganism in this respect, adding to the already intricate field of tension between eclecticism and traditionalism. For instance, initiatory Wiccans of both Gardnerian and Alexandrian incarnation have begun to crystallize as coherent traditions in their own right. In contrast, in much of non-initiatory Wicca, individuals are left to their own devices in building their spiritual system, even if the parameters of such are constrained by the available literature and the insiders’ community of which they feel they are a part. Here truthfulness and sincerity are continually negotiated rather than established. What all branches of contemporary Paganism share, however, is the cultural level of observed efficacy: present day needs constitute a utility criterion for a religion, in the present case this may entail raising awareness about the ecological crisis.

The sense of history on the level of the belief system as a whole is complemented with a personal understanding of religious efficacy – which I use in this context as the utility and functionality of adherence in terms of religious experiences, literal effects, meaning making, and a general sense of well-being internally understood in terms of the specific theology, symbolism and beliefs of the religion. As said, observed efficacy as such is easier understood on the level of the individual, since the person by definition is either the beginning or the end of each instant. On this level especially Wicca – as a mystery tradition where personal revelation in terms of direct experiences of the divine are sought after – is a good basis to discuss arguments of justification. Wicca is also interesting since while its history is shorter and perhaps more eclectic in its essence than the traditions of the reconstructionists, initiatory Wiccans are stricter in their observance of specific ritual forms and relation to a system of meaning than are the adherents of other branches of contemporary Paganism.

The mythistory of Wicca may offer a suitable excuse to remain conservative, as if the music eventually started playing because they were already dancing. Not for nothing Wiccan conversions are often voiced with the phrase: “It felt like coming home.” Homecoming requires an uncontested anchor point in the past: the very reason for dancing, if you will. Any biographical information, then, is arguably reconstructed in order to fit their present self-understanding. Strictly speaking, these

---


6 For a similar line of argumentation see e.g. Michael F. Strmiska, “Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives,” in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Michael F. Strmiska (Santa Barbara, CA, USA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 1-53.


8 Sián Reid, “‘A Religion without converts’ revisited: Individuals, identity, and community in contemporary Paganism,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. by James R. Lewis, and Murphy Pizza (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 171-191. These kinds of *a posteriori* reasoning like self-attribution, and cognitive dissonance reduction are well researched in the field of social psychology. For an overview see e.g. Philip G. Zimbardo, & Michael R. Leippe, “Influencing attitudes through behavior: When doing becomes believing,” in *The Psychology of Attitude Change and Social Influence* (New York, NY, USA: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 87-126.
acts of revisiting and refiguring one’s own past are a way to justify adherence on the basis of the historicity on the level of the individual. However, regardless of the reinvention of either a cultural or personal past, with the advent of non-initiatory Wicca, self-validation of belief has come into play.⁹ Among the initiatory and non-initiatory Wiccans, then, the tension between established tradition and personal revelation seems to be the greatest, and therefore Wicca is my context of choice to discuss these Pagan tensions in this article.

The differences between both Wiccas notwithstanding, as far as adherence goes personal revelations need to be shared and mutually sanctioned. Direct experiences of the divine, although allegedly ineffable, as scholars of religion like William James and Walter Stace remind us, cannot but be understood and appreciated to the extent that the mystic paradoxically has words, imagery or metaphors at her disposal that her sisters or would-be followers can relate to.¹⁰ Relating to in this respect amounts to nothing less than having had a similar experience, and thus grasping the association. However, subjectivity leaves any imagined direct relationship with the divine in terms of one’s own life both unchecked and incontestable. Apart from the centrality and self-validating quality of experience in Wicca as a mystery tradition, then, we need to acknowledge the need for collectivity: both the cultural and the individual level, and their associated ways of justification come together in a group as small as a coven, or as grand as the entire community of contemporary Pagans.¹¹

In the end, what all contemporary Paganisms inevitably share is a tension between the individual and the cultural, even if each tradition or initiative seems to have developed its own resolution. In addition, there is also a tension between the dominant Western world view and contemporary Paganism, where the latter is understood as a response to the ecological crisis and the disenchantment associated with the former. In the present article, then, written as a hybrid between a theoretical paper and an empirical study, and limiting myself to modern Pagan witchcraft, I will discuss the way Wiccans cope with the difficulties of justifying their beliefs and their identity to their community and the world at large within the changing context of historic knowledge and modern civilization in and out of which their allegedly old ways are reborn. More specifically, I will address the tensions between traditionalists and eclectics derived from these contexts. The obvious first step in this exposition is the identification of the sociohistorical roots of discontent with the current world order: romanticism. From there the increasing role of the individual can be gleaned, and a picture of the intricate double field of tension of person versus community and Pagan world view versus non-Pagan world view emerges.

Romanticism and individualism

When Pete Jennings took office as the new president of the UK’s Pagan Federation, his predecessor warned him of what seems to be the whimsical nature of his job, saying “It’s like herding cats.”¹² Often remarks like these are explained by the fact that Paganism lacks a central doctrine, and typically attracts people that have issues with authority.¹³ While this all might be true, I think it somewhat misses the point. For it is the originally Wiccan adagio ‘An Ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will’, adopted by the Pagan Federation as one of their three principles, that itself amounts to the very attitude of not willy-nilly accepting authority. In the end, there might be

---

⁹ In the emic literature self-validation of belief is sometimes referred to as Unverified Personal Gnosis (UPG). See e.g. Kaatryn MacMorgan, Wicca 333: Advanced Topics in Wiccan Belief (Lincoln, NE, USA: iUniverse, 2003), p. 25.

¹⁰ William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1902); Walter Stace, Mysticism and Philosophy (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1960). Note that these studies refer to mystical experiences, as a subset of religious experiences.


¹³ E.g., Ibid., 7.
more of a central doctrine to Paganism, and its positive morality sustains the centripetal tendencies of Pagans as well. To make matters even more complicated, to Wiccans ‘do what you will’ does not equal ‘do as you like’. Interpreted from this emic perspective, the adagio challenges adherents to learn to act according to their ‘true Will’, and thus requires a serious prior effort to find out what one’s Will is. 14 Wicca, and perhaps Paganism at large, then, seems to be all about self-discovery and, ideally, self-actualisation. Authority, in the end, will be found in the largely unmediated experience of the divine and existential experiences of the Wiccan, amounting to a personal gnosis that eventually will be communicated with others, and will be treated as a justification of the idiosyncratic form Wicca may take in any one adherent. 15

This religiously inspired individualism can be understood from the sociohistorical context of personhood in the Western world. Contemporary Paganism as a broad movement is seemingly rooted in the expressive individualism that dominates post-modernity. 16 In utilitarian individualism, in many respects its predecessor, human action is motivated by self-interest, leading to societal contracts – laws – in order protect property and entrepreneurship. Legislation regulates the interaction between persons, and many of these are thought to emerge ‘naturally’ from the tensions between the often conflicting interests. With expressive individualism, in contrast, people tend to continually emphasise their uniqueness through practices that procreate authenticity. 17 The idea of the self-validation of belief, referred to earlier, is clearly mirrored here, and, more subtly, the true understanding of the ‘Do What Ye Will’ adagio, that nevertheless also has a utilitarian twist in the restriction ‘An Ye Harm None’. In the end, it may be hard to draw the line between the two in Wicca, or contemporary Paganism in general. 18

But there is more. Expressivism is carried on the wings of romanticism, which perhaps now more than ever has its role to play. Romanticism did not originally imply a yearning for a better world or the enlightenment of mankind, both of which might theoretically be achieved in a distant future. On the contrary, the romantic mourns the loss of an old world, no longer tangible. Romanticism requires unfulfilled longing. The cultivation of wild nature, increased technological mediation between the world and human beings, and the associated processes of institutionalisation, mechanisation, rationalisation and pragmatization left modern people uprooted, and the fabric of direct experience torn. 19 The acts of re-enchantment in contemporary Paganism, then, not only entail probing what is left, and inferring a past to justify and make sense of the present, but rather also involve acting as if the old structures are in place, but with hindsight knowledge of what was their fate. Indeed, Pagan romanticism stretches beyond its repertoire of melancholy and sweet suffering to an activism of restoration, a charismatic mission. 20 In the end, expressivism cannot be the driving force behind such course of action, working towards change from the perspective of a personally felt inadequacy of modern day life, and the fulfilment of the individual Will, even if such pursuits of authenticity are performed in a Pagan context of a distinct signature.

What greatly hinders such endeavours is that with the loss of traditions, the sense of place and human dimension went, processes of democratisation eroded societal cohesion, and preor-

---

14 ‘Will’ refers here to the intent of a practitioner, explicitly addressed in ritual. Here a link between Wicca and ceremonial magic can be observed.

15 Kaatryn MacMorgan, p. 16-44.

16 This view is dominant, but not uncontested; cf. Siân Reid, 171-191.


18 The grey area between expressive and utilitarian individualism as observable in contemporary Paganism is mirrored in the division between mutual and communal validation of belief in Danièle Hervieu-Léger, 161-175. See also note 4.

19 For an account on the effect of these developments on direct sensory experience see Edward S. Reed, The Necessity of Experience. (New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press,1996).

dained life trajectories can no longer be drawn. Thus, the self has become saturated with choices, leaving it clueless at the same time. In addition, present-day practices of going on holiday, visiting museums, appreciating history, retaining archival data—all disjunctive activities—are separating lived-through reality from a newly acquired third-person perspective. All typify modernity. All objectify what once was subjective. On a smaller scale, even the self has become an object of scrutiny. Reflexivity and self-reference are relative newcomers in our cognitive repertoire, and arguably distance ourselves from who we once were—both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. Pertaining to the latter, in reaction, some sort of ersatz-continuity is achieved by ‘romancing the self’ through constructing narratives to make sense of what I—quoting William James somewhat out of context—would call the “great blooming, buzzing confusion” that is life in the modern world. In self-narratives tradition, myth, purpose and human potential are all folded back onto the ego, which has become the focal point of one’s life in a normative sense. Re-attachment with the outside world, and the appropriation of available systems of meaning, then, seems the imperative. In contemporary Paganism these sensibilities have taken the form of a return to the alleged old ways of being.

All in all, the great paradox is that the process of modernity that divorced us from our past, also bears the seeds of its undoing. That is, as a function of the acquired ability for self-reference the modern person has emancipated from passively undergoing change, minding her own business, to asking the great questions of “What’s it all about?” with unprecedented freedom to act accordingly. Contemporary Paganism is one of the responses formulated. Yet reasoning back, every step attempted towards the pristine world of old simultaneously affirms the gap between the here and there, the then and now; it painfully shows the misfit and the rites out of place. If re-enchantment is, indeed, a renaissance—first and foremost the self itself needs to be re-born. Since innocence is lost forever, a simple retracing of steps will not do. Not unlike the dialectics of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the paradox can only be resolved when one moves beyond modernity; in the end, expressive individualism may well be the fate that is freedom.

Religion is compelled to change according to the newly formed centrality of the self. As such, religious systems will be adapted more and more to match the idiosyncrasies of the believer. That is, rather than re-connecting the person to the divine, the divine is now often re-directed to the individual. This state of affairs entails that the more exotic religious expressions get, the greater the ego-involvement will be: here the size of investment equals the lengths of justification. Apart from the tailoring of religious material, eclecticism, the same holds for the adoption of a religious tradition as one complete package, where one could have picked another entirely: there is a freedom of choice. As I stated earlier, tastes make only sense when they are communicated between people that share similar associated experiences. Paganism, in the chocolaty sense, is very much an acquired taste, provoking adherents, followers, and self-styled connoisseurs to go to great lengths to justify their practices and beliefs. The defensive posture and touchiness that sometimes can be observed with the prodding of Pagan beliefs, often tempts detractors to question the sincerity of Pagan desires for community, and into identifying ego-involvement with narcissism. Although the latter two may sometimes coincide, they are not identical. Contemporary Paganism attempts to walk the stepping stones across them; the movement pulsates, supercharged as a gathering of Wills that keep it in dynamic flux. Paganism may yet serve as a showcase for the human condition in our day and age. Being caught between the perturbation of religion and the pertinence of spirituality, it is a movement pur sang, continually adapting to remain viable, authentic and sincere, remaining firm by change—a Pagan parallax.

---

In the next section I will show how the paradox of modernity comes to the fore in the narratives of self-justifications and self-identifications of Wiccans, who are confronted with the traditionalism/eclecticism dichotomy in their movement. From there some specifics of the continual adjustments that make up the parallax emerge.

Self-identification and self-justification

On two Dutch internet forums, one of which (Silver Circle On-line) mostly catered for the needs of initiatory Wiccans, and the other (Occultned) was populated by a very diverse array of mostly eclectic Wiccans and Pagans, I opened a new thread “Tradition or own preference?” In the initial post, I asked the members to discuss why they would opt for ‘eclecticism’ in their own practice, or rather follow a tradition, or something in between. All the people that participated in the discussion were of Dutch nationality. Especially on the Wiccan board, the participants of the discussion had impressive records when it comes to the number of postings, indicating a long standing tradition of on-line debate. Within a week I got 110 posts on the Wiccan board, roughly 25% of which were complete answers, and serious additions to the discussion, and 16 on the general Pagan board. Only after the discussion was over, I have revealed my purpose as a researcher, apart from being a fellow Pagan, and asked permission to the administrators and members to use the data. For reasons of privacy I was asked not to disclose any information on their personal backgrounds apart from their age and nationality. The names I have used are all fictitious. I have reasons to believe that especially on the Wiccan board, people knew each other from real life, even if they were not so close as in being in the same covens; when it comes to experienced adherents, the Dutch Pagan community is small enough for that.

By utilising the discussion boards as a variation of a focus group methodology, I was able to study discussions in their ‘natural setting’, and prevented influencing the discourse by disclosing my identity as a researcher only afterwards. I have analysed the collected material by seeking out commonalities in the various responses, turning these into categories. (1) In addition to painstakingly motivated choices voiced in the initial reactions, a debate soon started about two interlocking aspects: (2) what Wiccans in general ought to go for (given specified conditions), and eventually, (3) what the value was of words like ‘tradition’ and ‘eclecticism’ to begin with. Together these three aspects of the forum correspondence are leitmotifs of the Pagan parallax. Therefore, I have discussed the findings on the basis of their topical relatedness, rather than on the order of appearance. For clarity I have labelled the categories: reflections on the self, reflections on the other, and reflections on the terms, respectively. The numbers in the text refer to the quotes; each comes with the name, age and adherence of the discussant In order to get a sense of persons behind the discussants, I have chosen as many quotes as possible from the same individuals, if they voiced what I have found to be a commonality of opinion with others.

Reflections on the self

Most notably, Wiccans displaying tendencies of eclecticism tended to opt for an in-between position, although that on the basis of their stories and examples, one would be tempted to place them under the header of ‘eclectics’ (1, 2).

[1] To me it is a matter of and/and [rather than either/or]. (Freya, 41, eclectic)

[2] Magic according to tradition or according to your own method are both fine, as long as you can feel the magic. At least, that is my experience. (Martina, 21, eclectic)

As the debate developed, however, most redefined their positions, leaning more towards ‘eclecticism’ (3, 4). One Wiccan even shifted from a middle position to eclecticism in one lengthy message (5). Although rather speculative, these changes might be explained by the negative connotation of ‘eclecticism’ in some Wiccan narratives, or the lack of self-reflection, the latter gradually
dissolving during the discussion. All in all, we may conclude, that contrary to their traditionalist counterparts, the eclectics argue that choosing for eclecticism or tradition is up to the individual, whereas the traditionalists, as I will show, justify their choice depending on the context, even if they eschew the very term ‘eclectic’.

[3] I shall have to opt for the eclectic side. I am hopeless when it comes to sticking to traditions or standards. Trying things out nice and easy, and thinking about the results. (Duncan, ?, eclectic)

[4] Silently I call most of these [traditional] actions ‘hoo-ha’ that don’t work (of course it works, but not for me). (Martina)

[5] On the one hand, I prefer to give my own personal interpretation to my rituals and magical acts. What I do find important in that, though, is finding out why something is, the way it is. (…) Where the traditional comes into play for me is in, for instance the drawing of a circle, and invoking the elements. I wouldn’t do East first, and then do West, South, and North. The order isn’t right, you end up with a mess in your circle, and the energy won’t flow properly. But that as well – has to do with feeling. (…) In the end, coming to think of it, I mainly follow my feeling (in doing rituals). When the feeling is not right, the magical work won’t work for me either. Then I can’t approve of it, and could as well have done nothing at all. (Freya)

At first glance the ‘feel good’ sensitivity of the eclectics seemed to come to the fore when eclectic choices were asked to be explained, but in the course of the debate, ‘feeling good’ affects gradually became more articulate. Although the centrality of emotion among eclectics remained, ‘good’ was interpreted as ‘right’ in due time. In that respect, some negative emotions were still considered ‘good’, as long as they contributed to an overall learning experience (6). In addition, cathartic release of built-up tensions due to enduring negative moods outside of the ritual, were also discussed, as was the changing nature of feelings during the different episodes of a single ritual (7), and the heterogeneity of feelings between different rituals, where one ‘non-specific’ pagan even compared rituals to episodes in a romantic relationship with its ups and downs (8).

[6] Setting your emotions free provides relief. And not only the laughing, but also anger, grief, impatience, frustration, etc. etc. etc. Often it helps me moving forward on my path, and getting to know myself somewhat better! (Martina)

[7] I think a fit of laughter from time to time, also in rituals, can set you free. To me, laughing is a strongly positive emotion which I am glad to be able to feel. The energy flows profusely. I experienced once, that I was laughing [so] loudly, which worked as a release, that I could let go of my grief. Crying suddenly! (Martina)

[8] [In your relation with the divine world there are] just as in a relationship good days and [days] where doors are being slammed. I see it as a personal relationship where there should be room for humour as well as the expression of frustration. One’s inclination to be decent and respectful has to be stamped out. An advantage compared to the normal romantic relationship is that in this case your lover won’t leave his or her socks lying about. (Duncan)

One Wicca remarked that my manner of “inciting the debate was much appreciated”, arguably because my continuous probing into the nature of their experiences gradually dissolved the ‘feeling good’ stopgap of their initial responses. Although less fluent than the initiatory group, I suggest that the affective motivation to and in performing ritual is rather similar in the eclectics I met online. Yet it remains open to debate whether both groups share a worldview beyond the epithet ‘Wiccan’ – let alone ‘Pagan’ – most notably with regard to the role and meaning of the self. The use of disjointed assumptions when most eclectics were asked to reflect upon the meaning of tradition (saying “it works for me” one instant, and later “things either work or they don’t, regardless of me”) points in the direction that some may not have thought things through, or at least have never felt the urge to do so.
Reflections on others

In traditionalist quarters, the motivated choices more or less coincided with what they argued that Wiccans ought to choose. Notably, one witch, half jokingly, half seriously, referred to eclecticism as “suitable only for the far-far advanced.” Many relate to rituals as to “a content in need of a form”, demarcating between the structure of ritual, which is traditional, and the form, that was allowed by most Wiccans to be more open to adaptation. Some distinguished in that respect between coven work, and solitary praxis, which may well be performed by the same individual (10). When allowing for these different approaches depending on context, traditionalists keep stressing that effectiveness rather than affect ought the be the judge of what to do in solitary praxis, especially when it comes to working magic, rather than mere celebration (11).

[10] Inside a coven-setting you work magic according to tradition, and at home you do other magical work in an other way, and use that (obviously, ha ha) what works for you. But this has nothing to do with eclecticism, because the magic you work at home, is mostly [done] in a traditional fashion, [like with] talismans or candle magic and so forth. (Edward, 54, Gardnerian)

[11] In rituals like celebration, thanking the Gods, and so forth, it may be all about ‘what feels good’ (yech! newagefluffylingo), but in order to reach states of altered consciousness (magic) often a strong stimulation is needed. (Ernie, 20-30, non-specified Wiccan)

The need for tradition is obvious as a point of reference, and heralded as superior to eclectic praxis because it is tried and tested (12). In this regard, some lean to supernatural explanations like the heightened energetic quality through repetition of the traditional praxis (13), or the gaining of strength of the ritual itself as a function of the increasing number of practitioners since its inception (14).

[12] In a process of many years, and [through] many users/initiates, traditional systems have been tried, tested, and found meaningful. Otherwise [they] would have been changed or discarded. The idea that traditional systems are full of rubbish that doesn’t work, is nonsense. Traditional systems have not remained unaltered since day 1. On the contrary, they have been refined until they form[ed] a well-built structure. (Edward)

[13] To focus it helps enormously if you would learn all the ways of one system/mythology/world view, by devoting yourself exclusively to it for a longer period. And indeed there exist these ‘well-worn energetic pathways’, where you end up. When you touch these, all of a sudden, you are sucked into the experiences of many that went before you. (Theresa, ?, eclectic)

[14] Purely from a magic/energetic viewpoint, I see the western magical tradition of the say last 200 years as a huge flow, with tributaries going from it, and sometimes go into it. This stream is powerful because of its inherent power, but especially because of everything the practitioners put into it. A tradition gains momentum through its adherents. Through that it becomes easier to go with the flow. (Ernie)

Implicit in virtually all descriptions the more tradition-inclined Wiccans offered, is the notion the effectiveness of ritual, supporting this group’s interpretation of ritual work as primarily magical rather than religious. Interestingly, the agreement between traditionalists and eclectics on the fact that there is a place for both, permits an interpretation that both groups mostly differ in their praxis, rather than in their systems of belief. Wicca is able to cater for both contexts, by the flexible rendition its source material affords, and the dominance of experience over beliefs in the movement (15).

[15] The effectiveness not only holds for the magic, but also for the religious bit. Wicca, but in a wider context all other pagan schools, are characterized by practices and much less by beliefs, the difference between orthopraxy and orthodoxy. Also, the rituals and acts that apparently have primarily a reli-

For an emic publication arguing this very viewpoint see: Frederic Lamond, Religion Without Beliefs: Essays in Pantheist Theology, Comparative Religion and Ethics (London, UK: Janus, 1997).
gious purpose, certainly serve, within the context of the western mystery traditions certainly a prac-
tical magical and spiritual purpose as well, often in relation to the spiritual development of the per-
son [in question]. (Edward)

Reflections on the terms
Prompted to define the word ‘tradition’, one witch responded that it

[16] at most [it refers to] a certain continuity of a fixed group of people, with fixed practises within a 
fixed context. (Jan, 42, non-specified Wiccan)

Tradition, then, can only be retained, insofar the eclectic strands themselves are perceived to 
form a coherent whole, and, more importantly, have endured a longer period of ‘use’ which ap-
parently proves their value. In the course of the on-line discussion the genesis of tradition was 
criticised, in that traditions cannot but be built from building blocks that had not been associated 
with each other before – inevitably leading up to a process of arbitrary compilation, that only 
with hindsight can be justified, yet can easily be likened to eclecticism. Some debate arose about 
whether the grandfather of Wicca, Gerald Gardner, was himself an eclectic, although his ground 
laying work is now referred to as tradition (17).

[17] I find personally that the people who initiated the various traditions were no eclectics, but people 
who, on the basis of an existing strand, through a lot of research, knowledge, wisdom, inspiration, 
possibly divine inspiration, constructed variations, which led to new strands (…) Indeed, Gardner 
is sometimes being called an eclectic (…), but if you think that on that basis you can be an eclectic 
witch yourself, you mix up [different understandings of eclecticism] and that is very blond (sic). 
(Edward)

Interestingly, what not too long ago in the Netherlands was still accepted as a historical fact, 
namely the so-called Murray thesis, which states that modern day Wicca has an unbroken line 
back to a pre-Christian fertility cult, was not deployed in defence of Gardner. Rather a stark 
pragmatic justification prevailed (18).

[18] It has proven to be effective, so it must be right. (Edward)

An important aspect both the ‘unbroken-line’ and ‘effectiveness’ justifications have in common, 
on the other hand, is the relative neglect of establishing truths of the ontological status of the 
divine, regardless of its veneration and presence as supernatural agents in a magical context. In 
turn the discussants went on to deconstruct the term ‘eclectic’ into the egocentric and superficial 
‘dabbler’ of her own free but uniformed choice versus the dedicated and enlightened ‘autodidact’ 
born out of necessity (19).

[19] In general, [speaking] about creating something new, I think that there are two approaches. You 
could call these the top-down and bottom-up approach, and I look at them also as the puzzle and 
the collage. In a puzzle (…) the total picture is complete before you start. The factual work con-
sists of finding the right pieces for the correct bit of the image. Sometimes you choose a provi-
sional piece – in other words replacing pieces for better ones, is a characteristic [of this way of 
working]. In a collage (…) you start with a random set of unrelated pieces you really like, and 
through turning [them] this way and that, you try to make a whole of it. Something arises then, 
that could not have been known beforehand. Because the pieces were all selected personally, re-
placing them [for better ones] does not come up. (Edward)

In the end, what holds as tradition and eclecticism in both Wiccan groups is rather fluid. Apart 
from both respective deconstructions, the interdependence of both terms was noted: there is 
more than simple word-juggling to the phrases ‘eclecticism of traditions’ and ‘traditional eclecti-
cism’ (20).
I think (...) that ‘tradition’ and ‘eclecticism’ are not each others opposites. Every tradition has (...) something eclectic within, and all forms of eclecticism is based on a traditions. I think that the choice between ‘traditional’ or ‘eclectic’ is not a real choice, you will always get an element of both. (Jonathan, 48, eclectic)

Towards the Pagan parallax

The time has come to wrap-up, zooming out in order to draw some tentative generic conclusions heuristically represented by the parallax image. The illusion of movement is maintained by three intertwined motives among Wiccans: the changing acts of sanctioning, the aim to remain the maverick and the constant strive for receptivity. These three motives will then be related to some aspects of Douglas Cowen’s book ‘Cyberhenge’, and linked to suggestions for further research, together forming the coda to this essay.26

The acquired taste of Paganism is rationalized by upholding a self-image that perpetuates a tension with the secular world without, and sometimes even the non-initiated world within. This tension can for instance be observed in the clinging on the ‘witch’ pejorative in Wiccan circles, the meaning of which clearly differs between in- and outsiders. The bad press which Wicca received is criticised or lamented on the one hand, yet exploited on the other to uphold the image of deviancy: “Yes, I am a witch, deal with it!” From the looks of it, the gradual acceptance of the Pagan-phenomenon by society at large, and its adoption into pop culture, led to distancing between initiated, old school Pagans, and younger adherents, their uncertain first steps now interpreted as a lack of truthfulness (the so-called fluffy bunnies), rather than just a lack of experience in genuinely heeding the call. A factor not to be underestimated is that of the internet as an important means of communication. The internet not only made information gathering a two-way process (compared to for instance books), the anonymity associated with its use might trigger deception, and makes unchecked pretences of being knowledgeable easier. Together with the problem of the Unverified Personal Gnosis, and the hyping of particularly Wicca by the popular press, these developments cannot but trigger a wave of reactionary elitism. That is, when external structures of authority, vested by publishers and tradition, have come under pressure, a social reaction of group sanctioning has to take its place.27 Apart from these specific dynamics in Wicca, the disembodiment associated with on-line communication has generated similar in-group dynamics in for instance gaming communities, where wannabe players, showing pretence without substance or skill, are dismissed as ‘noobs’ (derived from ‘newbies’), and cast out of the in-crowd. The same holds for ‘trolls’, who are labelled as such after the community reached consensus in identifying them as troublemakers, who do not abide by the rules.28

The on-line Wicca community, then, has rules of conduct, which may or may not be explicated, but which can be gleaned from the interactions between eclectics and traditionalists. More widely, with the gradual crystallization of on-line communities, different subgroups, catering for the diverse array of Pagans have been established. Still, with Paganism as a religious movement being the odd man out, Pagans of different persuasion, spiritual literacy, and age, seemingly do encounter one another more often than do people from other communities. That is, contemporary Paganism seems to have a centre of gravity strong enough, that commonalities rather than differences are emphasised in the way people decide what forums and what communities to become members of. This state of affairs makes for fruitful grounds for debate and controversy regarding practises and beliefs among all its denominations. All in all, then, not only the internet, but also the way – in my case – Wiccans make use of it, drive the gradual change in the way tradition and genesis are defined in Pagan circles, and offer us the first key on the Pagan par-

alax: because of the centre of gravity, contemporary Paganism seemingly shifts, but only in response to the internal tensions, and changing nature of its adherents. From the inside out, then, the counterbalancing which keeps Paganism on course in a sea of change, is the way acts of sanctioning are continually adapting themselves.

When looking at the relation between Wicca – or Paganism in general for that matter and the outside world, we can clearly observe a compelling difference between the kinds of criticism contemporary it receives from outsiders and those that befall other religions. Not only does it seem that critique, for instance, of the internal logic of the theological underpinnings and the ontological status of (the) God(s), is largely absent, but most engaged criticisms revolve around the issue of invented tradition. Most strikingly different however, is the fact that these discussions outside Paganism and those inside are virtually identical. Pagans and non-Pagans alike seem display the same concerns, even if their conclusions may differ. Contemporary Paganisms, therefore, have the potential to change, or promptly respond at least, to emerging critique. The paradox with its self-chosen exile disappears when we conclude that perceived otherness necessitates some extent of sameness, what psychologists call the ‘level of optimal distinction’, not only does one have to have a firm grasp of what one is distinguishing from, in order to keep the difference constant, one is bound to change in accord with developments in society at large as well.

With the debunking of the Murray thesis new ways to justify practices and beliefs have emerged in traditionalist Wiccan circles. The gradual increase in the emphasis on the green nature of the religion, first emerging in the 70s, is tale-telling in that respect. Moving justifications from the mythistory of its genesis to its viability and significance in the ecological crisis is a fitting response to the detractors. Apart from other Pagan groups like Asatrú and Druidism which stress the relatively scarce historical records to justify their practices and beliefs, Wiccans, who may boast being part of a now crystallized new tradition, increasingly put an emphasis on the efficacy of the magical aspects of the tradition. Again, we can observe Paganism not so much on the move, but merely changing complementarily to its shifting sociohistorical context. In contrast to the internal affair of the changing acts of sanctioning, we see Paganism adapting here to changing demands of the sociohistorical landscape: another key to the Pagan parallax. These shifts both in self-image and in debate all contribute to the constant generation of new vistas, possibilities and material, that also can be put to work intrinsically: to creatively adapt religious practices themselves. Most notably, however, counterbalancing is what it means to be a counterculture in the first place. Contemporary Paganism is aiming to remain the maverick.

At the end of my forum discussions some important clues of a larger picture were offered, when the eclectics stressed a need for receptivity, creating the right atmosphere, aiming for spontaneity and appreciating feeling literally ‘in place’. In her effort to justify eclecticism, one Wicce even purposefully employed an internalising logic: in doing away with as many ritual objects as she could, she tried to keep the ritual as ‘natural’ as possible. These efforts say something about Pagan creativity in general, and about what drives these people. The eclecticism I encountered among my sample of Wiccans, was not the same as self-indulgence per se, but may rather be a sincere attempt to re-attach to the past and the raw immediate experiences of the present. In that respect, re-enchantment is neither more nor less than the attempt to appraise and foster the qualia of the lived life again, fleshed out in the aesthetics of indigenous European culture, symbolism and the associated agents of the otherworld.29 Here religion touches earth almost literally. In terms of the parallax, the ever present receptivity – or openness to new experiences – will, through the trial-and-error nature of the actions of the dabbler and the eclectic, be in a continual state of flux. These motives to re-attach to the genii loci of Europe of old, the tribal ancestry, and, in a global context, to the return to a reciprocal relationship with the natural world, can be seen

29 In the philosophy of mind, qualia refer to the subjective qualities of ‘what it is like’ to experience something. See e.g. Janet Levin, “Qualia,” In The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences, ed. By Robert A. Wilson, and Frank C. Keil (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 1999), 693-694. Since a quale (singular) has no truth value (neither positive nor negative), its complexities are akin to the problem of the Unverifiable Personal Gnosis and the noetic quality of mystical states.
as adaptations in a cultural evolution. In turn, their fitness is continually altered by the magi-
coreligious ecology of the group of adherents on the one hand, and the wider context of the out-
side world on the other.

The danger that lurks here is the fact that the forces of commercialisation, anything-goes
mentalities, and the emphasis on personal rights rather than duties, all born out the levelling ef-
fects of the democratisation of culture, may seriously hamper the quality and viability of the reli-
gious movement in the long run. Many novice eclectics strand long before attaining any personal
growth, or disengage their attempts altogether; more even before they left a lasting impression on
the keepers of the faith, or society at large, for that matter. Still I suggest that we look beyond
their ‘bad cooking’ of religious ingredients – for sometimes they are trying to home in on the
source of their contextualised direct experience – their ‘Will’ if you will – but are as much led astray by all the cheesy imagery, as some commentators are, when they too easily condemn the eclectics’ genuine, albeit naïve quest for contextualised experience.30

Coda: Metaphors of religion and the quest for experience
It seems open to debate to what extent there was need for me to resort to metaphors like danc-
ing, and cooking meals to explain Pagan religion in general and Wicca in particular. Still, I am in
good company. Douglas Cowan, for instance, invokes imagery of the internet, software, and pro-
gramming in his aptly named work ‘Cyberhenge’ about ‘modern Pagans on the internet.’31 Yet a
good metaphor is more than a quirk; and to find out if it is, one has to see the extent to which
the metaphor is applicable, and learn the latent meanings it carries. New religious initiatives are
sometimes labelled ‘supermarket religions’. Implicit here is the centrality of the believer, and the
discreteness of the elements of belief. Implicit also, is the freedom with which the spiritual cos-
tumer can choose her products – regardless of good taste, quality, or appropriateness. Hidden in
this imagery is a normative discourse of rejection. Cowan’s ‘open source religion’ is more help-
ful.32 Implicit in his metaphor is the idea that whatever the adaptations to the free- or shareware,
the program itself needs to be able to run properly, and the peer-community will continually
monitor user-submitted improvements, upgrades and alterations to it. Thus, not the believers so
much as the belief system is central to this metaphor, and the need for internal coherency be-
tween the whole and the added element is emphasised as well. All in all the ‘open source religion’
metaphor is purely descriptive, and is fruitful to any discussion or the effectiveness of new initia-
tives within the movement.

This brings me once again to the issue of experience as the validation of belief. Again,
Cowan has given this consideration, and identified the acceptance of personal gnosis as a true
validation the so-called Pandora problem of the open-source religion: the perpetuation of the
misfit between the historical and cultural facts and the conviction of the (eclectic) Pagan that her
experience is ‘right’ in one way or the other.33 Although I share his concern to an extent, as I
made clear in the last section, I must comment – and this entails a critique to the open source
metaphor – that the very process which leads to a conviction is itself not in any way explained.
And the metaphor derails at the point where we want to locate the software. If we want to pre-
vent the error of reification, we ought to address the implications for a religious system inside the
person as well. Does it work? Why does it work? And most importantly: what does ‘working’
mean from the perspective of the adherent?

From a psychological viewpoint, then, it is more worthwhile to observe the attempts at
receptivity, the process and techniques of getting experiences, rather than merely observing the
truthfulness of the convictions arrived at thereafter. In the end, the tension within the duality of

30 For the discussion of complexities and pitfalls in relationships between contemporary Paganism, researchers, and
the academic world see Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy, & Graham Harvey, ed. Researching Paganisms (Walnut Creek, CA,
USA: AltaMira, 2004)
31 See note 22.
33 Ibid., p. 49-50.
appropriation and innovation that Cowan uses might be partly illusory to the extent that appropriation is innovation from the person’s view. That is, appropriation will only be arrived at after some unspecified course of action, which in turn is triggered by some personal motivation and intent. Innovation, understood in these terms, includes the fleshing out of affects in any religious person, if this brings her new experiences. Certainly, the level of spiritual literacy will influence the perceived quality of the material put to use to such an end, but the value of the material must also be appreciated from a functionalist perspective: what it is to the believer herself. Interestingly enough, though, arguably the first psychologist of religion to acknowledge the importance of the will to believe, James B. Pratt, already in 1920 recognized the importance of volitional belief. In addition, he emphasised the role that our senses and imagination play in the formation of personal religiosity. In other words, receptivity needs support from imagery, and the appropriation of any material at hand may initially be preferable to any rational dismissal on the basis of apparent inadequacy or inappropriateness. Symbols must – literally – not be taken too literally: “identifying the little thing that they say with the great thing that they mean” is one of the most serious mistakes one can make. The very essence of what it is to ‘believe’, then, too needs to be scrutinized. In our terms, re-enchantment requires imagination and the ‘suspension of disbelief’, and perhaps this holds too for the physical and pictorial instantiations of these beliefs. Therefore, the need, or better, the will to believe, ought to get more attention in the study of new religions. Especially in what many call a secular age, this universal aspect of human behaviour really comes to the fore. It may well overcome the paradox of modernity. In the context of contemporary Paganism, I cannot but garble the line I referred to earlier: “There is no harm to know that ye Will.”

Bibliography


34 Cf. the distinction between psychological (P-)creativity and historical (H-)creativity in Margaret A. Boden, “What is creativity?” In Dimensions of Creativity, ed. by Margaret A. Boden (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 1994), 75-117.


