“TO KNOW, TO WILL, TO DARE AND TO … SPEAK UP!”
DEVELOPMENT, SELF-DISCLOSURE,
AND SELF-VALIDATION OF BELIEF
IN DUTCH-SPEAKING PAGANS

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Abstract: In this paper I will focus on the problem of the self-validation of belief as a typical mode of making sense of alleged encounters with the divine in a ritual context. Drawing on examples taken from semi-structured interviews with Dutch Pagans, I will touch upon motives of self-actualisation and aesthetic appraisal in the process of interpreting these ritual experiences in an idiosyncratic fashion. I will then discuss the problem of self-disclosure. Finally, I will proceed to tie self-validation in with two competing theories on the nature of ritual knowledge. The ‘variation-theory’ understands knowledge as emergent only from gradually changing rituals, while the ‘masterpiece-theory’ emphasises the need for repetitive exposure to a ritual, gradually incorporating its essence.

Keywords: contemporary Paganism, religious experience, self-validation, ritual, interviews, Flanders, the Netherlands

1. WHAT IS AN EXPERIENCE?

What is an experience? Although I shall not be trying to explain this very troublesome but indispensible term, we cannot but all agree that it is ineffable when we come to think of it. Let me start with a thought-experiment. Imagine that you have the only piece of chocolate that exists. You put it in to your mouth, and experience its taste. How could you describe the sensation to others? You will probably give a description that contains references to taste sensations that have a resemblance to chocolate, for instance, communicating its ‘sweetness’. But that is a crude, if not a very delusive comparison. Talking about chocolate can only convey the idea of its taste, as the words employed to describe it refer to taste experiences which others must have had. Thus the word ‘sweet’ only rings a bell when we have experienced ‘sweetness’ in the specific chocolatey sense and talked about it to make

1 This article is a slightly adapted version of the paper delivered at the 10th Szeged Conference on the Ethnology of Religion, Szeged, Hungary.
sure that we all refer to a similar taste sensation. This holds for a religious experience, too – these do only make sense as far as they have been shared by others to an extent. An altogether other experience than fellow adherents would have had, would be a hard thing to accept, so even with religious experiences at least some commonalities are needed.

Another observation we can make goes in the exact opposite direction: the assurance of having shared a taste experience, or the illusion of such, might take away the incentive to deconstruct the experience altogether. In the end, in most conversations chocolate just tastes ‘good’, precisely as religious practice just feels ‘right’. Such disinclinations may be triggered by differences in power between the mystic, and her audience – here charisma transforms the noetic quality of any revelation into an institutional validation, which, in turn, may offer allusions to their personal hopes and fears. There are, however, spiritual movements that both are egalitarian and experiential. One of these is contemporary Paganism. Here we find an openness to disclose personal revelations together with strong personal opinions, and often strong convictions. In the present study I want to discuss the nature of religious experience, its interpretation and communication among contemporary Dutch and Flemish Wiccans. I will start off with some considerations on the nature of experience and validation of belief, before moving on to the description of a small series of depth interviews I have conducted with both initiatory and non-initiatory Wiccans. Then I will proceed with drawing a few tentative conclusions, tying the experiences in with two theories about the nature of ritual knowledge trying to advance a new insight on their relationship.

Contemporary Paganism is a loose association of so-called earth traditions, for the present purposes restricted to various European modern nature religions and their related spiritual practises. Central to their ideological system is the reverence for nature. It does not amount to a religion per se, but all the more to a fundamental attitude and worldview. As far as Paganism amounts to religion, its – by lack of a better term – ‘theology’ is pantheistic, or polytheistic. Pagan Wicca, a mystery tradition branch that is central in the present article, is duo-theistic: both the male and female aspects are present. Present-day Pagans believe nature to be all-enveloping, inherently sacred and thus something of which man is an inextricable part. In addition, the various aspects of the archetypal cycle of decay and renewal, observable in night and day, birth, reproduction and dying, and the change of the seasons themselves, are celebrated as nodes on the yearly chain. Through ceremony Pagans are likening the stations of the sun with the phases of life, thereby interlocking the profane with the sacred, and the personal with the public (VAN GULIK 2010, 2011).

Since Wicca is a pluralistic and a democratic religion, as much as it is experiential, we are bound to find an emphasis on encounters with divinity, great differences among them, and an asserted right to voice and critique each and every one of them. In his book ‘Cyberhenge’ Douglas Cowan refers to the state of affairs as the ‘Pandora-problem of Paganism’ (COWAN 2005: 33–50). He states that as soon as individuals are granted their right to have and voice their own convictions, then incommensurable interpretations will emerge – both to each other, and to the little theology that has become orthodoxy. The Pandora-problem to a certain extent is a paradox, since the rise of pluralism and democracy seems to support dogma – if your own experience of the divine tells you the way things are, then why should you believe others?
The personal interpretations of religious experiences lead to a self-validation of belief. In both emic (e.g. MacMorgan-Douglas 2007: 23) and etic literature (e.g. Cowan 2005: 35–37), one can encounter the synonym Unverifiable or Unusual Personal Gnosis (UPG). The term ‘unusual’ refers to the deviation of what is the norm; whereas ‘unverifiable’ relates to the fact that since it is the private encounter of a single person, it can never be checked. Both terms imply a problematic relation with the community, which is needed to sanction the personal encounters, regardless of personal entitlement. As far as personal gnosis is communicated, then the person with the experience is seeking to advance or explicate her position among fellow Pagans. The politics of sharing entail both acceptance and rejection of alleged encounters that are often described in a specific relation to the self (Van Gulik 2010). This personal involvement and ego-investment make the issue of debate around experiences especially problematic: a matter that I have taken into account when collecting the narratives of a few Wiccans about their religious experiences.

2. THE INTERVIEWS

As a pilot study of ongoing research I have conducted five in-depth interviews and asked them about their religious experiences, the interpretation of those experiences, and the way they looked upon experiences that others shared with them. I have tried to categorise the motives, beliefs, interpretations, emotions, and so forth associated with these. Each interviewee will be briefly introduced the first time I will quote from him or her. The emphasis will be on these quotes, letting the data speak for itself as much as possible. Strung together, the quotes will offer a meta-narrative in which I try to make sense of the structure of their experiences, their function, and the way they are related to the lives of the interviewees.

The first observation I made was that when I asked my respondents about their religious experiences, I got extremely different examples of such experiences. Take for instance Magus, a Dutch priest-magician of 66, who was trained in ceremonial magic at the Service of the Light, and later self-initiated himself into Gardnerian Wicca. He first recollected experience was an apparition of the Indian Elephant-headed God Ganesha.

(1) As a teenager I bought a statuette of [Ganesha], and subsequently I used an old Hindu ritual to breath life into it. At a certain moment, when I walked in the woods […] that statuette appeared to me man-sized and walked next to me. And he taught me lessons. […] [The experience] lasted at least fifteen, maybe twenty minutes.

During Pagan rituals Magus had other encounters, this time with the God and Goddess, who again appeared before him.

2 Many Wiccans do not accept self-initiation, as one needs to be brought into the craft by a person already on the ‘inside’. Self-dedication, however, is widely accepted, and may well be the first step towards an initiation.
several times, not only as a force, but also almost as persons […] I had the feeling they were guiding me, let’s put it that way […] The God [looked like] the Horned One, really a bearded person with antlers, which is one of the possible forms of the God, also known in the literature. That may play a part, to be honest. And [I saw] the Goddess as a young woman wearing her very long hair loose, yet with a tiara with a radiating half moon on her forehead.

Striking here is the emphasis on vision – almost seeing with the naked eye. The encounters with the Gods where expressed as being almost like apparitions, that materialised in his immediate surroundings. A different, but still very much sensory example was given by eclectic witch Aleesha (40), from Flanders, Belgium.

(3) How I would describe religious experiences? […] As a warm feeling […] a feeling of happiness, or a calming feeling, something like that.

In desperate need of words, there is no imagery here – at least not in the experience itself. Even a history of torture in the cathedral of Chartres is described through sensation only.

I couldn’t keep my feet on the ground. When I sat down, I had to keep my feet in the air. I just couldn’t stand there. I didn’t know what had happened there […] It was a gruesome experience. […] [putting my feet on the ground] gave a stinging sensation.

Striking here, however, is the relation to a historical event in which the stinging sensation could well have been experienced by the victims of the torture. While the last example is not a religious experience pur sang, it fits in with Aleesha’s understanding of the term, and goes well with her emphasis on clairvoyance, which ultimately made her look for modern day witchcraft, because she was branded as a witch by both neighbours and colleagues.

Rather than producing imagery like in the examples given by Magus, imagery also may play a large part as a trigger for religious experiences. We can observe this in a narrative produced by Elisabeth (22), who now calls herself a religious atheist, but still has a weak spot for Pagan ritual.

(5) […] I was 14 and was rather ‘Wiccan’ in a sort of devout way […] One day I was walking through a meadow at night, and saw the full moon and was struck by a feeling of awe by its sheer beauty. And yeah, by such a feeling of devotion, I fell over into a puddle of water and sat down for a while. It took a long time before I noticed I was cold an all. […] I remember tears rolling down my cheeks because [I] was fully surrendering to the feeling of devotion. […] That was the first of what I would call a religious experience. That is, one of the larger kind.
Interesting in this example is that the experience clearly triggered by a distinguishable outside source, and is singled out as such by the observer. The experience has a quality of immediateness, and seems hardly mediated by much contemplation. What it has in common with Magus’ image-like experiences is the emphasis on aesthetics, even if that aspect comes in at a different moment. Another interesting aspect of Elisabeth’s narrative is the fact that she moved away from the religious belief associated with the moon-encounter, whilst maintaining the spiritual significance of the experience. Noticeable here is a distinction between imagery that is associated with a specific religion, and the outright acceptance of aesthetically pleasing visual input as having a religious quality expressed in the mere beauty of the spectacle.

This emphasis on aesthetics can also be found in an example by a friend of hers, named Marijke (25), who also moved from non-initiatory Wicca to religious atheism.

(6) It was […] a ritual for Yule, which we performed in my room. It was all very new to us. So we felt a bit uncomfortable and were a wee bit giggly. And so, during the ritual the feeling grew on me that something magical was going on. How it was magical I cannot recall, but I felt – it felt sparkling, as if we were doing something momentous – something important, like what you do when you have to bury someone – I mean the only thing you do is lower someone into the ground, but at the same time that is a momentous (grave) act. Now I [do] understand that a funeral is something very negative, [and the ritual wasn’t negative at all] but the ritual seemed to have the same import and meaning. […] When we just finished our ritual and opened the circle, it began to snow real heavy. The whole day had been sunny, and then suddenly the snow came falling down. We danced in my room, because we were so flabbergasted. [We had] a magical feeling [of] the world being beautiful, or at least that reality here-and-now was very worthwhile. […] It was just as if you are pointed to the beauty of the world, or realise that you are, the world is […] and contains so much beauty and is very worthwhile.

Here ritual precedes aesthetic appraisal, even if there is no clear connection between the two. Although implicit here, from this example we may glean a function of ritual, which is the changing of the mindset – a technique to change consciousness towards a receptive state of mind which, in the present example, was aided by the tension of being playful and serious at the same time. Further questioning her recollection revealed that Marijke was very reluctant to assert a causal relationship between the ritual and the snowfall, but appreciated the mystery of the meaningful coincidence between the two.

Other than with full-fledged mystical experiences, which after Walter Stace’s phenomenology of religion can be strung together on the basis of a common core (Stace 1960), in these very diverse experiences we can’t readily make such distinctions. One of the reasons is the idea of experiential development – what people experience and how they interpret these, is a function of their prior knowledge, earlier experiences and not in the least a function of the state of mind ritual has put them in. Rather than interpreting experiences, they are literally experiencing ad hoc interpretations of sudden encounters of Gods, the moon, or even pieces of history. Some experiences are the result of effortful meditation. One
example of such a practice, we find in Richard, a 57-year-old Flemish Wiccan, currently underway to become initiated into a blend of Gardnerian and Alexandrian Witchcraft.

(7) I [did] a meditation a while back [about a tree] and then I had the experience that I was in fact part of that tree. That was an unbelievable feeling. You’d feel the sap stream, and [in effect] the flow of life. That gave an idea of an experience of ‘there you are with your head in the clouds’, and that sort of thing. And that is fine in retrospect. Perhaps it helps you get an understanding of what a tree ultimately is, [because] that is a long way from us. [In the end it aids] in valuing its [particular] consciousness.

Other examples of meditations included pondering questions of the meaning of certain Sabbats (i.e. celebrations on the year-cycle), imagining the God Pan whilst waking in nature, and seeking personal quests to receive divine inspiration, guiding him to find the answers that came as sudden insights.

3. CONCLUSIONS

A few tentative conclusions can be drawn from the data. The functions of interpretation and aesthetics are apparent in the meta-narrative I presented, as is a sense of experiential development, to which I will return in a minute. I have to deal with the self-validation of belief, however, and that is no easy task. Although there is plenty personal gnosis found in the narratives of my informants, their ego-investment in claims of authenticity is mostly low. Circumstantial evidence may be found in the level of certainty that accompanied certain descriptions of experiences (for instance the apparition of Gods Magus described, or the stinging sensation in Aleesha’s cathedral experience), but explicit questioning of the truth-value of such experiences only caused the ego-involvement to recede, while the narrative changed to one of emphasising ignorance towards the origins of the experience, or suggesting the possibility of naturalist causes of self-authorship which was phrased in terms of imagination or even brain-activity.

Asking about their take on self-validating claims of other Wiccans, some would become more open and question the intentions of sharing certain experiences, even if discarding the experiences or the interpretations was very rare. A notable example is Elisabeth’s comments of a conversation between Wiccan she overheard. I have included it here, because it is typical of the kind of criticism you would find on online discussion boards, which apparently provoke a very different kind of discourse than the in-depth interviews here.

(8) [A] motive [of sharing experiences] is, I think getting attention, not necessarily to brag, but rather as a means to change the perception of awkward aspects of oneself. I remember a conversation I followed between a few women. One of them was afraid of water […] which is in fact a bit of a negative quality. But then she told a story, that she went into regression therapy and that she [found out] that she
was murdered in a former life, chained to a stone, while the water level was rising, and that was the way she drowned. [She told] that she was asked to return to the earth to come to terms with her fears and with being murdered. It was a very dramatic, theatrical story. The other women listened open-mouthed […] she got hugs, and yes, everybody thought it was so extraordinary […] [where it boils down to with these kinds of stories] is that no-one dies in his sleep in a former life.

COCO – WOODWARD (2007) have reported discussions in which similar sentiments were voiced. Although their study is not so much concerned with self-validation of belief, they found ample examples of heated discussions among Pagans about consumerist commodification of Pagan tools and practices, and popular media depictions of the craft. Acceptance and rejection of fellow Pagans was negotiated through discourses about Pagan values, which on the one hand stressed the need for authenticity, and respect for individual autonomy on the other. Here, too, the opposite tendencies of the need to belong and the need to distinguish oneself were present. One notable difference is the relative reluctance to disclose the positive evaluation one might have of popular media renditions of Paganism such as Charmed or Buffy, compared to the unrestrained expression of personal encounters with the divine I found in my interviews.

There is, however, also an important difference between the data gathered from online discussion boards and from interviews. Through the entrenchment of opinions, discussions tend to result in juxtaposed still lives of religious outlooks. The improvisatory quality of spontaneous speech acts in an interview setting together with the non-dismissive attitude of the interviewer increase the chance that changes in one’s convictions and beliefs will be disclosed. Returning for one last time to her own example, Elisabeth’s case brings home the impact of religious development on narratives of experiences. Conveniently, the example also offers another motive of self-disclosure.

(9) I used to talk about [my experiences a lot more. In [the days I was still Wiccan] this was much easier with words like ‘Goddess’ at my disposal, while now, [attempting to talk about my experiences of unity] turn into a stutter I feel ashamed of. […] I am the kind of person that positions herself about new aspects of her identity and her life by talking about it a lot. […] By bleating to anybody I can gauge the reactions, and yes, I form my identity. Not so much by waiting for approval, but by refining it by mirroring it. Like a sort of bat that sends out signals and receives the echo’s enabling it to locate itself.

We may conclude that explicit personal gnosis is easier to describe. Shame and embarrassment have come into the discourse where experiences have become abstract. The much more difficult concepts of ‘wholeness’, ‘universe’ and ‘melting into the vastness’ are prone to be voiced in a stutter. Note that the embarrassment is limited to the wording only, but not at all to the experiences themselves. What does happen is that people develop a disinclination to communicate their experiences so openly as they once did.

The comparison of the different narratives produces a sense of experiential development. Experiences come to be reinterpreted over time when the person in question has move
on to new ways of belief. This idea not only aids in making sense of the very diverse array of experiences and their interpretation, but it offers an interesting link into the literature of ritual knowledge, if we understand ‘ritual’ in a broad sense, and appreciate the fact that all the examples from the interviews are drawn from either ritual, or magical practices.

The question whether rituals need to change or not if participants are to gain ritual knowledge has attracted some debate. Through his variation-theory Jennings (1982) argues that ritual as a means of religious self-discovery and gaining an associated worldview can be overlooked if we take ritual to be a fixed sequence of symbolic actions. To him, the element of inquiry and discovery requires the ritual to change over time, since otherwise ritual activity is no more than the transmission of already established knowledge, with no new knowledge gained. Contrastingly Williams – Boyd (2008), likening ritual to the concept of a piece in art – hence their so-called masterpiece-theory – suggest that a continued exposure to a ritual may yield a gradual gaining of knowledge of that ritual. In art, it claims, the eventual aesthetic appreciation of an artwork – grasping it – is a function of the unchanging nature of its displayed intent.3

Although it is not my aim to delve into this discussion, there are four comments about the claims I have to make on the basis of my present findings. First, given the change in knowledge of believers over time, or their perspectives, any similar ritual act will yield different knowledge to different persons, at different times. Therefore, the possibility of different interpretations already releases the ritual from a required change in that context. Second, and contrarily, rituals do in fact change over time, so the argument that rituals do not need to change is largely irrelevant. That is, when people change, so do their practices. Third, the link between art and rituals is not straightforward, since some masterpieces require performances, whereas others, like the visual arts and literature, consist of unchanging works.4 Given the extreme differences in triggers of experiences we found, there is no saying what kind of masterpiece we ought to look for. Fourth, we must distinguish between the sorts of knowledge gained in ritual. Not only factual data about the teachings of a religious tradition, or the ritual script, but also the coming to know the engagement with the “in ways not reducible to propositions” (Williams – Boyd 2008: 295) – in other words, to directly experience the numinous. In the end, then, both Jennings (1982) on the one hand, and Williams – Boyd (2008) on the other, may be referring to different kinds of ritual knowledge, rendering their positions more compatible than both sides have anticipated.

We have seen this in the interviews as well: Magus’ ritual activity has changed to match a similar experience of different Gods, while both Marijke’s and Elisabeth’s narratives suggest that a similar experience (from what could have been a similar ritual) could

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3 Williams – Boyd use the phrase ‘exhibiting aesthetic necessity’, but I find that it masks a weakness in their argument, since there may not be an intent that is displayed. By calling it an ‘aesthetic necessity’, they unfoundedly claim that people will arrive at a similar understanding/appreciation/experience of a piece of art.

4 With regard to music and theatre, more akin to ritual, matters are indeed very complex. Directors and performers alike have to deal with issues like the differences between text and performance, the level of openness to change and improvisation the composer allowed, and not in the least any discrepancy between the zeitgeist in which the work was conceived and that in which it is performed. In his aptly named book ‘Subsequent Performances’ Jonathan Miller (Miller 1986) explores the last problem. Given the fact that in many of the performing arts works outlast their creator, they have to be reinterpreted and recreated by later generations, posing questions about intentions, aesthetics, actuality, and appropriateness.
eventually yield a different experience, or at least a different interpretation of that experience. In the end, then, development is a function of the precarious interplay of different factors: experiences produce knowledge, as much as knowledge produces experiences, while in the background, the changing motives, intentions, and spiritual development of the person experiencing influences and is influenced by both.

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