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Pagan Prayer and Worship: A qualitative study of perceptions

This article arises out of recognition of a dearth of information about the concepts of prayer and worship among those who identify as Pagan in the UK. According to the Office for National Statistics, this is not an insignificant proportion of the population, with 31,000 people identifying as Pagan and 7,000 as Wiccan in 2004 (Office for National Statistics 2004), out of a population of just under 60 million (Office for National Statistics 2011). This may be related to the Census data for the UK[1], which reported that Christians made up 71.6% of the population, Muslims 2.7%, Jewish people. 0.5%, Buddhists 0.3% and those of no reported religion, 15.5% (Office for National Statistics 2004). Hutton suggests there may be 250,000 Neo-Pagan adherents in the UK, roughly equivalent to the Hindu population (Hutton 1999). Jensen and Thompson suggest that Wicca and NeoPaganism in general is one of the fastest growing alternative spiritualities (Jensen and Thompson 2008).

Much is known about prayer in a Christian context, and this research is moving to investigate prayer in Islam and Judaism as well. For example, Turton and Francis have investigated the religion between attitudes to prayer and professional burnout among Christian clergy (Turton and Francis 2007), prayer may be positively associated with psychological well being among Christian cancer survivors (Meraviglia 2006) and among Muslim patients undergoing chemotherapy in Iran (Rezaei, Adib-Hajbaghery, Seyedfatemi and Hoseini 2008).

Previous authors have suggested that prayer is the 'very soul and essence of religion' (James 1985, p. 505). However, this concept of "religion" references primarily the religions of the book, which proclaim the importance of the practice of prayer and give examples of how this is to be accomplished. As yet, there is very little known about perceptions of prayer and worship within the various Pagan traditions which find adherents in the UK.

While there have been attitudinal studies among Pagans (Author et al 2010), which included attitudes toward various issues including prayer and worship, this is the first

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[1] As this was an online survey, it is not possible to trace the origins of all respondents; location was not a field in the questionnaire. Contextual analysis shows that some small percentage of respondents were from outside the UK.

study which specifically examines not only attitudes towards but understandings of prayer and worship among Pagans in the UK,

It is important to reach such an understanding, if we are to comprehend the views of respondents per se, rather than only in relation to other, majority religions.

Context

> "Magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts" (Versnel 1991, p. 177)

"Pagan" is not an uncontested category. We have imposed no parameters on the term in this research; rather, we have relied on self report, as the survey was open to all who self identify as Pagan. There is no official definition of the term, "Pagan". McIntosh uses a broad definition of "all the polytheistic, nature-oriented religions of the world..." (Mcintosh 2004, p. 1038). Broad as this is, it may arguably still be too restrictive, as it is unclear if, for instance, Heathenry could be described as a nature-oriented path. For the purposes of this article, we impose no definition, but rather allow respondents to self define.

 Further, it is not clear who, other than individual practitioners, would have the authority to give such a definition. There is, within the UK, a Pagan Federation, but it is a voluntary organisation which exists to:

> "...support all Pagans to ensure they have the same rights as the followers of other beliefs and religions. It aims to promote a positive profile for Pagans and Paganism and to provide information on Pagan beliefs to the media, official bodies and the greater community". (Pagan Federation 2009)

As such, it is not a central authority for Pagans in the UK and makes no claims to such authority; there is no organisation which is generally recognised as having such authority. A reliance on personal autonomy and responsibility is an important part of the spiritual path for many Pagans, as we shall see below.

In fact, as York points out, one of the things which sets Paganism apart from other faith systems is that it does not have this central authority, with the ability to decide

who is and is not a member of any given movement. This includes a rejection of any sort of catechism of belief of set programme of practice (York 2005).

Qualitative and self contained

> Protestantism, and to some extent Catholicism, are constructed as the normal against which the "other" is established. An ancillary point is that it is nearly impossible to gain an understanding of the identity of those "others" from existing survey research. (Beaman 2003, p. 313)

We have attempted to avoid falling into this trap – we do not take Christian conceptions of prayer (which are not, in themselves, united) as a standard against which to "judge" Pagan practices; nor do we see Christian understandings of prayer as normative. Rather, we approach this research as openly as it is possible for us to do, working from a basis of grounded theory.

We operate neither from a stance of methodological atheism (Ezzy 2004) nor from a prioritisation of Christian belief/practice. It is true that the Author's scale used had previously been used to investigate Christian prayer, and indeed we received comments from respondents that the terms used were not appropriate for pagan practices. However, this was preliminary research; the scale used to investigate Christian prayer has priority only in terms of time, not in terms of being normative. One of the outcomes of this research will be a revised scale which is more appropriate to those who identify as Pagan. Rather, with Primiano, we argue that to designate belief systems such as Paganism (and those systems within it) as "other" or different, or to be compared and measured against other, more established systems, "residualises" the religious lives of those involved (Primiano 1995, p. 39). We also agree with the author on the need to study the experiential aspects of belief (Primiano 1995).   We make no claims on the "reality" of what is reported by respondents. In this work, we chose to leave aside such considerations. When respondents report communication with god/s, spirits, entities, we take the respondents at their words; what we are investigating is people's perceptions of their own experiences. We are not attempting to relate those experiences to some sort of external norm or standard.

Methodology

This report is based on responses to an online survey, created using SurveyMonkey software. Information about the survey and requests for respondents were disseminated through a variety of means, including social media (facebook and Livejournal), personal blogs, and emails to individuals and organisations. 434 fully completed questionnaires form the basis of this report. 34% of respondents were male, 63% female and 4% chose not to disclose gender. The largest group of respondents (32%) were in their 20s, closely followed by 26% in their 30s, 22% in their 40s, 12% in their 50s, with 6% in their 60s; the remainder were 70 years of age and above. Respondents were asked to choose an affiliation - with simply "Pagan" or to choose from a list provided or to fill in a blank category; respondents were free to choose as many categories as they felt were appropriate. 71% of the overall sample stated they were Pagan, 10% affiliated themselves with Christianity, 22% with Wicca, 12% with Druidism, 3% stated they belonged to the Faerie group, and 18% affiliated themselves with Heathenism. Respondents were also asked if they were members of organised groups related to their beliefs; 48% agreed that they were part of such groups, of whom 45% belonged to a coven, 28% to a Moot, 23% to a Circle and 3% to a Gorsedd[2].

We have accepted at face value any declaration of affiliation or belief i.e., Pagan, Druid, Wiccan, etc. Cognizant of the permeable nature of boundaries between these groups, we did not make the choice of affiliation exclusive; respondents were free to choose as many of the given options as they liked, as well as to add further information in the "other" category.

The coding framework used for the open questions was a grounded one, in that the codes used arose from a reading of the data, rather than being a priori codes imposed by the researchers (Glaser 1999). The process involved a preliminary, blank reading of the data, which led to a basic coding framework. As the frameworkwas applied to the data, it was further refined, with new codes being

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[2] We are aware that these are not analogous categories.

added and some codes being subdivided for clarity in reporting. A copy of the final framework used may be found in Appendix (whatever).

This article will concentrate on the qualitative responses to the open questions.

Results[3]

Prayer

On the basis of the results from the open question, " What do you understand prayer to mean?", prayer was seen by respondents as above all something to do with deity, which received 177 mentions, more than any other coded item. (Figures represent the number of times a concept arose in the data, not the number of respondents who mentioned the concept). Second to this was the concept of communication, with 130 mentions. For the majority of responses then, prayer was some form of communication with deity. The most common form that this communication takes is petition (with 120 positive mentions).This must be set against the number of respondents who claimed that they did not pray, 7 in all (we will return to this below). Prayer means, for some respondents, "To speak directly to deity[4]" (P), "Direct communication with the gods and goddesses" (D), "Speaking to God/s and/or Goddess/ess personally" (W). These responses may be summed up best by "communication with the divine" (P) or "Direct communication with a deity" (P,D,H).

These responses may also be summed up by the Wiccan response, "making an appeal to the divine directly" (W). "Ask" or "asking" was the most frequently used verb, although "begging" was used once (DW.F.H), along with "appeal", mentioned a number of times. Petition was mentioned as the sole reason for prayer only 25% of the time (31 out of 124 mentions). Most often, prayer of petition was included with other aspects of prayer, such as gratitude (52 mentions), praise (14) or within the overall category of communication with deities/entities.

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[3] Signifiers for direct quotations relate to the alignments chosen by respondents, therefore (P,D) would signify a respondent who chose both Pagan and Druid. If more than one respondent is indicated, their affiliations will be shown in separate parenthetical statements.
[4] Capitalisation is given as it appears in respondent responses: therefore, Deity and God/s/ess are at times capitalised and at times in lower case.

Giving thanks also ranked as an important element of prayer, with 52 mentions. The only other category to receive a significant number of entries was "entity", with 86 mentions. This category included all beings and/or entities to whom prayer could be directed, which were not clearly part of the category of "divine": wights, ancestors, the universe.

When we break these responses down by group, there are some interesting results. The discussion which follows will concentrate on the same three most populous groups: Wiccans (with 22% of the respondents), Druids (12%) and Heathens (18%). The totals are shown in TABLE WHATEVER

	Druid	Wiccan	Heathen
	2		
petition	22	41	12
yes			1
no			
adoration	1		1
worship			
praise	2	5	2
devotion		2	2
offering	1	1	2
physical			
spiritual			
communication	21	25	12
aloud	3	2	5
silent	1	1	4
meditation	1	4	1
conversation	2	4	11
god/deity/goddess	25	43	19
entity	18	19	12
ritual			
intent/will			
other	8	15	6
I don't pray /worship	1		1
Being in relationship with	7	2	1
Love			
unity			
honour	3	1	1
respect (reverence)	2	1	2
thanks(giving)	6	6	18

Table 1.   Prayer codes by group

When we look at prayer of petition, Wiccans mentioned engaging in this type of prayer 41 times, Druids 22 times and Heathens 12; yet no Wiccan mentions prayer as including adoration, of which there was one mention in each of the other groups.

21 Druids saw prayer as a form of communication, while only 25 Wiccans mentioned this (in spite of Wiccans forming almost twice as much of the sample as Druids) and 12 Heathens; clearly, the concept of communication – usually with deity – features more prominently for Druids than for other groups.

In relation to mentions of deity, these align much more along the lines of the proportion of the sample: 25 mentions for Druids, 43 for Wiccans, and 19 for Heathens. In relation to entities, however, the responses are more skewed: Druids, 18, Wiccans 19 and Heathens 12. Wiccans, therefore, were far less likely overall to mention entities than were the other two groups.

Druids were far more likely to see prayer as being about relationship, as this was mentioned 7 times by this group, 2 times by Wiccans and only once by Heathens. Druids and Heathens each mentioned "respect" in relation to prayer 2 times, while only one Wiccan used this concept. Again, Wiccans represented almost twice as much of the sample as the other two groups, so the low number of mentions of such concepts is interesting. Druids reported a view of prayer as "opening the connection between myself and Great Mystery" (D), "To seek rapport and communication with deity"(D), as a "means of engaging/communication with the Other in a way of establishing a reciprocal relationship"(D).

Not all responses to this question were positive, however. While no Wiccan reported that they did not pray, one member of each of the other two groups did make this statement. Overall, there were 7 respondents who stated that they did not pray, [prayer is] "Something I don't do!" (P,D), "Something that Christians, Muslims, Jews and other monotheists do. Witches cast spells, call upon spirits, act on their own inspiration, but they don't pray" (P).

These answers may be somewhat explained by the response, "I don't use the term" (no affiliation given) and by "Prayer is a supplication. This is not what I do. I approach the Gods respectfully and honour them..." (P.H).

Overall, the response to what was understood by "prayer" was overwhelmingly positive, showing that within their own understanding, for the respondents of this survey at least, many Pagans do pray, with their own understanding of what this term means.

Worship

Respondents were asked the open question, "What do you understand worship to mean?" As with the results reported for prayer, the numbers given in this section relate to the number of times a concept was mentioned (and thus, coded), rather than the number of individuals who mentioned the concept. This means that the results reported here relate to the strength of the presence of a concept.

Overall, the concept mentioned most frequently in relation to worship not surprisingly was deity (which included God/dess/es), being coded 330 times. This concept appeared almost twice as often as the next most common one, that of respect (172 times). This latter code is one of three which occurs a similar number of times, including honour(ing) (157 times), and entity (154 times). There is then a gap, and another group of communication (99 times), ritual (91) devotion (89) and relationship (75 times). At the other end of the scale were silent and vocal prayer, petition, spiritual offering, unity and a negative view of petition, all with less than five mentions.

Concept	Mentions
God/goddess/deity	198
Other	166
Entity	98
Honour	95
Respect	94
Communication	56
Veneration	51
Ritual	47
Relationship	44
Offering	33
Thanks	32
Praise	28
I don't worship	21
Love	17
Adoration	15

Petition yes	10
Meditation	8
Dialogue	4
Petition	2
Physical	2
Silent	2
Petition no	1
Worship	1
Spiritual	1
Aloud	1
Intent/will	1
Unity	1

Table 2.   Coding for Worship

It is clear that worship, for the respondents, relates somehow to interaction with deity (and/or entities), and that the act of worship includes giving honour and showing respect above all. "An act of devotion or veneration directed at Ancestors and/or Deity and/or spirits" (P). "Experiencing a sense of oneness with the Divine" (P), or, in an echo of what was reported under the heading of "prayer", "Conversing with Deities" (P).

Respect and honour also figure in the definitions given to worship. "Worship is paying honour to the Gods, through ritual, prayer and devotional practices" (P); "Honouring/praising a deity" (P), "honouring spirits" (P), "honouring that which a deity stands for and represents" (P).

Worship within groups

All of the results for the three major groups can be seen in TABLE WHATEVER. This section will discuss anomalous results, in which concepts receive a greater number of mentions than one would expect, based on the proportions of groups in the sample.

	Pagan	**Wiccan**	**Druid**	**Faerie**	**Heathen**	**Pagan no other**
Petition	2					2
Yes	8	3	1		1	5
No		1				
Adoration	7	4	2	1	5	3
Worship	1					1
Praise	22	2	3		4	14

Devotion	37	8	10	2	8	24
Offering	20	5	3	1	10	11
Physical	2		1	1		1
Spiritual	1					1
Communication	44	9	5	2	8	31
Aloud	1					1
Silent	2					2
Meditation	6	3	1			3
Conversation	3	1	2	1	1	1
God/deity/goddess	143	43	21	5	40	86
Entity	63	15	15	3	24	37
Ritual	37	10	7	7	6	24
Intent/will	1					1
Other	118	45	13	13	23	79
I don't pray /worship	14	4			5	11
Being in relationship with	31	7	8	1	10	18
Love	10	5	3		2	6
Unity		1				
Honour	62	21	13	2	23	36
Respect (reverence)	72	20	16	6	16	42
Thanks(giving)	20	6	1		11	14

Table 3.   Worship coding by group

The first of these is the category of "entity", which was mentioned by Wiccans 15 times, the same number by Druids, but 24 times by Heathens. "Honouring, adoring and offering to the Holy Powers", "Honouring and thanking the Gods, Ancestors and Earth", "giving honour to the Gods, the Ancestors and to the Land Spirits" – these were all responses from Heathens. As can be seen from these illustrative quotations, the concepts of entity are generally coupled with the concept of deity.

And indeed, Heathens had 40 mentions of Deity, only slightly fewer than those from Wiccans (43) and almost twice as many as those from Druids (21).

Typical responses in relation to the divine were, "The acknowledgement of the divine" (P), "Seeing the divine inside and outside you" (P,W). What differs with the group who identify as Heathen is not so much what they say about divinity, but rather the frequency with which they say it.

There are three aspects of worship which Heathens mention a disproportionate number of times: adoration (Wiccans, 4, Druids 2, Heathens 5), relationship

(Wiccans 7, Druids 8, Heathens 10) and offering, (Wiccans 5, Druids 3 and Heathens 10). Worship can be seen as "Adoration to Deity" (P), "Adoration; Waiting; Listening; Action" (P,D), "expressing my adoration and reverence for the gods and the spirits" (H) or as "To give honor,[sic] respect and adoration" (H). Heathens had more than twice as many mentions of adoration than Druids, despite having a lower number of respondents.

The same is true of offerings. Offerings are most commonly mentioned as one of a number of actions which make up worship. "To pray, to honor[sic], and sacrifice to gods" (H), "Honouring and paying tribute to a god, goddess, or gods with prayer, offerings, and ritual" (P,W), " Giving the Gods their due in order to maintain right relationships" (H) "The word used in Norwegian can also mean "cultivate", I see it like this: just like with trees and plants a garden, it takes an effort to make a relationship grow and stay healthy" (H).

The final area in which Heathens are over represented is that of relationship with deities/entities. "Entering into relationship with the God(s), power(s), spirit(s) or other entities or forces that your path leads you to" (D). "The performance of actions designed to bring an individual or community into closer relationship with divine/spiritual beings"(P,D,H).

The one area where answers from Druids stood out was that of devotion, (this code included the words "devotion", "veneration" and "homage"). "Worship is when you give cult and devotion to a specific deity or group of deities"(P), "devotional, religious practice (such as making of offerings, performing Church services, etc." (P,F,H), or, simply, "Veneration, respect and love" (P,D); "A formal expression of devotion" (D), "Worship can be either specific devotion to a chosen deity, ritual workings to gods or spirits, or simply living life well to worship nature" (P,D).

While the low sample size does not allow us to generalise, it is certainly true to say that among those who responded, Heathens saw adoration, relationship and offering as a larger part of worship than any other group, and Druids saw devotion in the same way.

Overall, then, it is again quite clear that most of the respondents to this survey are involved in something they call "worship". The negative responses in this section,

which were of a higher number (34) that those relating to prayer; "I don't worship" (P), "We do not worship, but rather we honour our Gods"(H), present the same issues as those raised above – for many, even many within the group of Heathens, honouring the Gods is a form of worship, while for this respondent, the two are separate. For most of the respondents, however, this difficulty did not arise, and they report their practice of worship as being that of showing respect and giving honour.

Discussion

It is clear from the findings of both the closed and open questions that, at least for these respondents, Pagans in the UK do pray and do engage in worship; both of these activities are directed toward Deity and other entities, and involve seeking aid, and giving respect and honour. The small sample size of 434 respondents does not allow us to generalise to an unknown but considerably larger population, but the results are, at least, indicative.

The results do present some anomalies. As noted above, in both the prayer and worship sections, there were discordant voices. It may be that the respondents giving negative answers are reacting to a particular perception of prayer as "set texts" (P) of petition. Yet others, within all groups, described petition as part of their experience of prayer. What is clear in 3 of the 6 negative answers about prayer is a rejection of the concept of prayer as used by other groups, the Church of England (P), Protestants (P), and monotheists (P). This points again to a need to understand these words –prayer and worship – as understood from within these groupings, rather than in reference to outside groups, whose usage of the words is rejected.

The difference here may be merely one of semantics – with those who gave positive responses using a broader definition of prayer. However, this does not allow us to say that those who gave negative answers were in reality praying, even if they are undertaking actions which fell under the definition of prayer for others (thanking, honouring, etc.). To make this judgement would be to impose an understanding – even if it is that of the majority - on the practice of the respondents; in effect, it would be to say that we understand their practice better than they do, themselves. Rather, we merely raise the anomaly and use it to highlight the difficulties involved in

research around what can be contested terms. We must accept the labels that respondents give to their own practice, even when such acceptance makes categorisation of results difficult.

This preliminary research has made use of a previously used scale, as mentioned above. However, this scale is not overly appropriate for understanding the views of respondents within the numerous groups which self define as Pagan. A new scale is under construction, using the results discussed here.

Appendix: Coding Framework

1. Petition

   1.1. Yes

   1.2. No

2. Adoration

   2.1. Worship

   2.2. Praise

3. Offering

   3.1. Physical

   3.2. Spiritual

4. Communication

   4.1. Aloud

   4.2. Silent

5. God/deity/goddess

6. Entity

   6.1. Entity

   6.2. Ancestor

7. Ritual

8. Intent/will

9. Other

10. I don't pray /worship

11. Being in relationship with

    11.1. Love

    11.2. Unity

12. Honour

13. Respect (reverence)

14. Thanks(giving)

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