

## Neo-Paganism: A Parametric Analysis

Neo-Paganism, whatever its sources or claims, is a fast-growing religious movement in the United States. According to the ARIS 2001 study, the population of self-identified Wiccans alone went from 8,000 in 1990 to 134,000 in 2001, a 1675% increase.<sup>1</sup> As the Neo-Pagan population rises, there is more call among them for some kind of public structure to lend them credence with other religions and to protect them from various kinds of attacks. Whether "structure" is taken to mean "edifice" or "regularly-scheduled supplication breakfast", Neo-Pagans are looking for a way to answer the question, "Who am us, anyway?" This paper proposes to use Parametric Analysis, a conceptual-notational device, to answer this question.

Identifying Neo-Pagans has a spotty history. Part of the trouble has been the definition promulgated by the Christian overculture, viz., "1. One who is not a Christian, Muslim, or Jew, especially a worshiper of a polytheistic religion. 2. One who has no religion. 3. A non-Christian."<sup>2</sup> This overly broad definition would fit Buddhists, who are obviously not Pagans and certainly not Neo-Pagans. More recent attempts by others [ref] have been less than satisfactory. It's an old saw among Neo-Pagans that "if you put two Pagans in a room and ask a question, you'll get three answers." As far as that goes, "Who's a Pagan?" is considered a good conversation starter among Neo-Pagans themselves.

The problem of identification is not likely to abate over time. More people with diverse views are claiming to be Pagan, and there is no central authority to prevent any particular group from splintering or from starting something *de novo* and calling themselves Pagan. The question is also central for determining who should have access to a community's (limited) resources, and who should not. Perhaps the problem is not with Paganism and its diversity but with the concept of definition.

Definitions have two requirements. First, the definition must apply across all instances; therefore, a definition is a list of what is *universally uniform* in cases. Second (and rather differently than we have been taught), definitions are ultimately an appeal to the competence and judgment of the user. That is, if you look up the definition of *numinous* and find "of or relating to a numen", your competence with the word *numen* is being challenged. You must essentially follow down the chain of definitions until each word is inside your competence. Unfortunately, a word in the chain often refers to an earlier word in the chain, and then you're stuck. In a classic instance, comedian David Brenner reports looking up *vim* after hearing the phrase *vim and vigor* only to discover the meaning of *vim* was "vigor". This appeal to competence and judgment is present in definitions in all fields.

If we stop looking, then, for what is universally uniform, we require a device that depends on the competence and judgment of the user but still provides a complete solution space for the subject at hand. Fortunately, devices of this type have been catalogued by Ossorio [ref] under the heading "conceptual-notational devices" (CND). In his work, *acting on concept X* means *acting on a distinction between X and not-X* (whatever X may be). For example, to take a drink of coffee, I must have the concept *coffee* and be able to tell coffee apart from whatever is not-coffee. (If I couldn't do this, I might drink tea instead of coffee, not know, believe I had succeeded, erroneously expect coffee-related results, etc.). Thus, a CND is a way of noting what distinctions persons make to identify something as being one kind of thing rather than another.

At the risk of belaboring the idea, the concepts used to identify something may identify a concept, too. For example, if we talk about the concept *car*, we must specify the concept *wheels* because people use wheels to tell if something is a car. Three is the minimum number of wheels (two is a motorcycle and one is that freaky thing where the driver is inside the wheel), but we don't need to state how many wheels above three (unless notable: "...the odd wheel was for Old Weird Harold. He had a Continental."<sup>3</sup>). *Type of wheel* is not conceptually necessary because wheels can be tires but don't need to be (could be a wagon-type wheel, etc.); but if it were necessary, wheels could also be subjected to this kind of concept cataloguing. Further car concepts let us distinguish a *railroad* car from an *ore* car or a *toy* car. And so on.

Again, the central concept is *what distinctions are necessary*. Ossorio has identified *Parametric Analysis* (PA) as the process of cataloguing how two instances of the same thing are similar and different. This process is cumulative, so further instances can be compared to the catalog, and the parameters of the catalog can be checked and expanded. Ultimately, there should be a point at which any instance of the concept being catalogued is covered by the various possible and conditional choices of the parameters. (I announce that as a pragmatic truth rather than a logical truth—there is a point in talking as if the catalog were actually complete and then finding a way to incorporate an instance that happens to fly in from the dark side of the moon [or wherever].)

The Parametric Analysis depends on the competence and judgment of the user; thus, it is important to remember a PA is normative rather than definitive: it looks for what a competent user of the concept at hand would *normally* say about an instance of the concept (what distinctions a user with good judgment would *usually* make about the distinctions being made). For the human sciences, this is an advantage: the PA process naturally tends to reflect the concepts and values of community members and generally prevents observer projection. After all, if the observer tries to insert a set of concepts the community doesn't use, they will never allow them (except, perhaps, to spoof annoying observers).

In that sense, I have constructed a PA of Neo-Paganism centering on a series of discussions held as part of the Mentoring Elders Program (MEP) at the Evenstar School of Sacred Paths in St. Paul, MN. The School of Sacred Paths is squarely situated in "Paganistan", an area of "uniquely innovative, eclectic, and feisty Neopagan community of the Twin Cities Metro area of Minnesota" and one that is "patient with innovations, creative with reconstructions, and are very careful to keep a sense of humor about themselves."<sup>4</sup> This innovation, creativity, reconstruction, and eclecticism is well-represented by the members of the MEP, who describe themselves as "Wiccan / Shaman / Druid / Zen / Taoist / Shintoist / Animist / Heathen / Slavic Reconstructionist", "Twyern Witch / Polytheist", "Wiccan / Heathen / Fool / Animist", "Goddess / Wench / plain old Witch", "Wiccan / Heathen / Druid / bastard eclectic", "Witch / resourceful / traditional", "Creole / syncretic / American Pagan / hot-dish Heathen / Witch" and so on. They essentially form a core group who are exemplary of what it is to be Neo-Pagan while also being exemplary of the problem of "defining" what it is to be Neo-Pagan. Thus, discussions centered on differences and similarities among the members (as Pagans) and of absent Pagans who were well-known to the members. The result of the discussions, a parametric analysis of what was necessary and normative among Neo-Pagans, is shown below.

1. Pantheistic (P)  
"Tolerant of all participating spirits"
2. Contact (C) with Participating Spirits (PS)  
"Intellectual or spiritual power in hetero-human phenomena (including objects and places)"
3. Immanence (I)  
"Indwelling, inherent; actually present or abiding in; remaining within" with specific reference to PS.
4. Register of Experience (RoE)  
"The domain from which metaphorical explanation of life happenings is drawn."
  - a. Nature (mandatory)
  - b. Self (mandatory)
  - c. Other values optional. Sample values are Art, Outsiders, Self, Elders, Tradition.
5. Practice / Praxis / Method (M)
  - a. Yes  
Sample values are Worship, Participation (i.e., Gifting), Magick, Prayer, Meditation, and combinations of values.
  - b. No
    - i. Non-practice (proper practice is undiscovered)
    - ii. Primal Life (life is not separate from practice, per Highwater<sup>6</sup>)
6. Psychic Phenomena (ESP)
  - a. no comment
  - b. PS helper
  - c. gift
  - d. natural capacity

NP = <P, CPS, I, RoE, M, ESP>

Where:

NP = Neo-Pagan

P = pantheistic

CPS = contact with participating spirits (PS)

I = immanence

RoE = register of experience

M = method (practice / praxis)

ESP = psychic phenomena

RoE = <N, S, O>

N = nature

S = self

O = optional RoE parameters (including no other options)

M = Yes / No

Yes = specifications optional but values mandatory

No = <U, L>

U = undiscovered (proper practice not yet found)

L = primal life

E = no comment / PS helper / gift / natural capacity

## Notes

- The definition of *Pantheism* has been restricted to reflect what is conceptually necessary. The OED defines *pantheism* as "Worship or tolerance of all or many gods," but Pagans do not necessarily "worship all" or "tolerate many" (both of which are possibilities in this definition). Pagans do necessarily tolerate, and their toleration must include all gods.
- Naming the parameter *Contact (C) with Participating Spirits (PS)* was also a change to reflect what is conceptually necessary. This arose out of discussions in which one of the Pagans was essentially an atheist (without a god belief) because he wouldn't give any spirit that rank. Rather than name the parameter *gods* and include an atheist value with a *participating spirits* sub-value, it became clear that *participating spirits* was the necessary parameter, and *gods* was a sub-value chosen by users, but not all users. Individuals may make distinctions between spirits (gods, faeries, power animals, etc.), but those distinctions are individual, not necessary.
  - ♦ PS are persons (per Ossorio<sup>5</sup>) but are *preterhuman*. This is a neologism created for this PA and it means "outside the ordinary course of what is normally human; differing from or surpassing what is normally human" (adapted from *preternatural* in the OED). Preterhumans are part of Nature, but their status includes things humans' status cannot.
  - ♦ Gods can be seen as PS with high status who have also been assigned high rank.
- *Register of Experience* is adapted from York<sup>7</sup> There's nothing erroneous about his original formulation ("The domain read, etc."), but many people found it difficult to understand. I believe my adaptation says what he meant.
- Subparameter 5.b.i: non-practice (proper practice is undiscovered). This allows a Pagan to relate to other Pagans the way the Essenes related to mainline Judaism, that is, we are somehow not achieving what we want, so we should investigate that; and while we are investigating, we will not do the suspect practices. Note that this choice would normatively be treated as a claim and accompanied by community monitoring for actual, ongoing investigation.
- Restrictions for new parameter values (such as those of parameter 4.c): must be community-affirming ("not world denying" in York; and see Putman<sup>8</sup> to connect *community* to *world*). Community is "all my relations" (per First Nations invocation), including other communities and PS, so solitaries have community (if only with PS). This is required via the "Pantheism" parameter: other societies reflect their gods' values; therefore, tolerating their gods is tolerating their values, unless those values violate community-affirmation (which is a violation of "Pantheism", which would exclude them from being Pagan). Community affirmation is normative, that is, if a Pagan or Pagan community were not community-affirming, that would be a failure and would require explanation.
- Although *Psychic Phenomena* largely could have been explained under combinations of other parameters, the Heathen position of "no comment" (not lionized, demonized, or ignored) required a separate parameter. Heathens are very squarely Neo-Pagans, so they must be accounted for.

## Methodology

Because the PA is normative and not definitive, the primary tools for arriving at these parameters and their values are the following questions:

- If someone were to say, "I'm a Pagan, but I don't X", is there any condition where that could be true, or must they X to be a Pagan?
- What explanation would satisfy you that someone was a Pagan but didn't X?
- If someone you took to be Pagan didn't X, would you want them to explain that, or would you let it go?

These questions are essentially the same questions, but phrasing is sometimes important to get at the distinctions competent users are acting on. There are obviously many variations in common speech for any question, and natural mastery of question generation was not suppressed in favor of survey uniformity.

Parametric Analysis can begin by taking an obvious sample case for study ("if there was ever a case of one of those, this is it") and compare the case to other cases to formulate parameters. In the canonical situation, it's best to start with the most complicated sample case since every other case will be less complicated, and the parameters of the sample case should cover all other cases. I tried this, starting with contact J3S, but there was significant resistance. I dealt with this by logical analysis of the objections, but it was clear the results weren't real to him. I followed by offering a theoretical Pagan to the group ("If someone said 'I'm a Pagan, but...' ") and then consistently used one of the group members (V) as the beginning place to respond to the group's analysis ("I see what you are saying about that. V, is that your situation, too? Or aren't you X about that?"). I did not specifically say to V that I would use him as my paradigm case but merely referred to him first each time as a practical example or contradiction. This more surreptitious approach seemed fruitful.

I also had the advantage of good familiarity with the members of the group, so I was able to switch which member was the paradigm case if I felt a feature was better exemplified or contradicted in some other member.

I took notes on what members were saying about commonality of elements and generality of disparate phenomena; used their own notes on our discussions to refine my notes; and began using some of the parameter concepts in the discussions at hand. A parameter's explanatory power was easily tested by speed of adoption and degree of contest when used in a description of the Neo-Pagan community.

## Analysis

This set of parameters seems unusually compact for something supposed to cover a phenomenon as broad as Neo-Paganism. If we compare to another well-known, successful parametric analysis, we might see that compactness is not a particular measure of error. The PA I have in mind is the standard mathematical treatment of a wave form. This can be represented as  $a\sin(b\theta + \omega)^d + \phi$ , and substituting values for each variable (parameter) can control all aspects of a wave (length, frequency, amplitude, displacement, order, etc.). This has been well-known and well-used for several centuries; it is the backbone of our success with telecommunications. Thus, there is no necessary relation between compactness and error.

But does it cover the subject? Let's refer to a number of questions and requirements in Neo-Paganism and see if they are present by any manipulation of the values.

*Magick.* Without getting into what magick might be, Pagans admit the possibility of magick. This is not the ritualized practice of magick (which fits under the Practice parameter), but the occurrence of what other religions might call *miracles*. These results would be of two kinds: physical phenomena in Nature we don't understand and spiritual action. The first is hardly excluded by the PA, and the second is allowed under the Participating Spirits parameter.

*Cyclical time-frame.* This can be derived from the Nature value of the Register of Experience parameter (Nature is cyclical). But perhaps we are taking the wrong perspective on the question: simple timekeeping requires cycles ("there's one...there's another...hey, it happened *again*...") so this is a question of values (rank of motivations, status of concepts), which are user-dependent, but note that high rank for this concept is supported by other concepts in the domain (particularly the Self value of the RoE parameter).

*Personal responsibility.* There is rather an emphasis in Neo-Paganism on taking responsibility for your own spiritual development. This can be as simple as exploring which Participating Spirits are most amicable and facile; it can be as complicated as pushing past theodicy to explain anomalous phenomena. This span of activity is represented under the Self value of the RoE parameter. For comparison, the inverse would be, "I am a Pagan, but I never pay any attention to my own experience. If I see spirits or cones of power or anything like that, I just ignore it. And I just accept what other Pagans tell me about the world." Anyone who said that would be discredited as a Pagan. Conversely, a Roman Catholic who said, "I do what the Pope tells me, and I don't look back," would not be impeached as a Roman Catholic.

*Idolatry.* Covered under PS, Immanence, and RoE:Self. Possible but not mandatory because recognizing a spirit of object is a user-dependent value.

*Local emphasis.* Covered under PS (a spirit of place) and Immanence. Possible but not mandatory because recognizing a spirit of place is a user-dependent value.

*Are Satanists Pagans?* (This question refers primarily to Le Vey Satanists.) Only if they can meet the community-affirming implications of the Pantheistic parameter. They also appear to emphasize the RoE:Self parameter to the exclusion of almost all other parameters. Finally, the reductionist nature of "human beings as merely animals" violates the Person Concept<sup>5</sup>, which would void the PS parameter (humans could not be participating with the spirits).

*Creeds.* Neo-Paganism is considered a "living practice", that is, Nature and Self are changing, so there is no final solution to human culture; thus, there can be no final creed by which Pagans could swear and be accepted, either as a group or as individuals. In that sense, performatives<sup>9</sup> are discounted by Neo-Pagans generally. By comparison, Covenant of the Goddess was clearly moving to exclude "creed-swearing saboteurs" by requiring any person joining CoG to state, "I am a witch."

*Psychic Phenomena.* For whatever reason, Neo-Pagans try to account for ESP and similar phenomena among humans. Most consider them to be just another ability, like perfect pitch or being ambidextrous. Others see them as gifts or as a state that can be achieved. (Note that state here is "a systematic variation in Powers or Dispositions,"<sup>5</sup> and Neo-Pagans largely concern themselves with the variation in the Abilities and Knowledge categories of Powers.) Whatever their beliefs about the sources of such matters, they do undertake to train them and consider it "wasteful" not to do so (denying of RoE:Self).

The notable exception are Heathens, who have no positive, negative, or neutral culture about the matter and so make no commitments about such phenomena.

*Other things on this list.*



## References

- <sup>1</sup> ARIS 2001  
[http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research\\_briefs/aris/aris\\_index.htm](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/aris_index.htm) 03/27/07
- <sup>2</sup> The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000.
- <sup>3</sup> "Go Carts" from *Wonderfulness*, by Bill Cosby. Audiorecording, Columbia Records (1965).
- <sup>4</sup> The Fourfold Goddess and the Undying God: Anatomies of Minnesotan Bootstrap Witchcraft Traditions, Murphy Pizza
- <sup>5</sup> The Behavior of Persons, Ossorio, DPI (2006).
- <sup>6</sup> The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America, Jamake Highwater, Book Sales (1983).
- <sup>7</sup> Pagan Theology, Michael York, Publisher (year).
- <sup>8</sup> "Community", Anthony O. Putman, Advances #00, Publisher (year).
- <sup>9</sup> How to Do Things with Words, Austin, Publisher (year).

In Ossorio's parlance, we are looking for what is conceptually necessary to say, "If there was ever a case of one of those, this is it."