

PARANORMAL PHENOMENA IN BRITISH WITCHCRAFT  
AND WICCAN CULTURE  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SPELLCRAFT

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*ABSTRACT*

This paper analyses the claims of practising witches in order to assess the validity of their pronouncements. This was undertaken by extensive fieldwork involving contacting groups of witches, covens and individual practitioners around England. In particular, witches' claims to have healing powers by spellcraft were explored and compared with Christians' use of prayer. The paper starts with information about rituals, spells and use of magic in witchcraft and provides examples from historical and modern sources. It then moves on to analyse the results of questionnaires sent to both witches and Christians. The conclusion discusses how persuasive the evidence is for a belief in paranormal phenomena being evident in contemporary witchcraft culture.

RITUALS, SPELLS AND MAGIC

Most contemporary books on witchcraft, Wicca and paganism contain one or more spells, and some are devoted to the subject (e.g. Farrar & Farrar, 1990). The rituals, words and incantations vary according to historical periods, geographical locations and the knowledge and education of the participants. No doubt, some are invented for the purpose of selling glossy books to teenagers—a current fad encouraged by the media at large. I contacted the author of one such book and inquired the source of the spells therein, but I was denied this information without any reason. However, serious academics have also researched the subject as part of a wider context (e.g. Luhrmann, 1989), although it seems likely that a wide range of views can be discovered according to the knowledge of the authors and their particular emphases. Psychical researchers such as Guy Playfair (1985), Letitia Fairfield (unpublished, but in the Society for Psychical Research's Archives at Cambridge), and Serena Roney-Dougal (1984) explore magic from a largely impartial viewpoint seeking to find material that can be analysed in terms of producing anomalies from within nature. Historians such as Ronald Hutton (1999) and P. G. Maxwell-Stuart (2000) are more concerned with the interpretation and validity of documentation within the periods studied. Sociologists, folklorists, psychologists and even musicologists (Willin, 2005) apply their own research methods to the spells discovered. It is the self-styled witches themselves who tend to repeat the spells found in a wide variety of sources as well as presenting their own inventions. Of course, these people can also have academic expertise in any of the above fields or others. Vivianne Crowley lectures in psychology and has written several books on Wicca (e.g. Crowley, 1996). She is a leading figure in the Wiccan scene, and several others who are known to the author hold positions of importance in universities as well as being prominent in witchcraft rituals and celebrations.

One finds a degree of conformity in the books written by witches about spells

and magic. Spells tend to be separated into different categories according to the desired effects. For physical problems, natural herbs and ointments are often suggested, with or without enchantments (Ventimiglia, 2006), and mental healing is often an important aspect of spellcraft (e.g. Buckland, 1999; Cabot, 1989). The emotions, notably of love, are featured throughout most books providing spells, but an ethical warning is frequently provided. Since it is believed by the witches writing that the spells will indeed work, extreme caution should be used just in case the spell has undesired after-effects (Seafield, 2003). In contemporary witchcraft one does not find the traditional ingredients that abounded in old folklore sources (cited in Briggs, 1997), but easily obtainable items are suggested, including garlic, ginger, pentagrams and candles (Ventimiglia, 2006). Similarly, the language used does not require the somewhat archaic use of Hebrew or Latin and the vernacular is used, albeit with some use of anachronisms such as 'thee' and 'thou'. Perhaps some witches, notably practitioners of Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wicca, use such language to give a degree of respectability and tradition to what can be thought of as a relatively new religion in that status.

Practitioners of witchcraft who are also authors have a vested interest in promoting the efficacy of their spells and this can indeed be found throughout the literature. Beth (1996), Buckland (1999), Cabot (1989), Farrar (1996) and Gallagher (2003) all promote the success of their spells within a framework of caution and love—the concept of 'black magic' is virtually missing from witches' books, appearing almost exclusively in works exploring historical accounts (e.g. Robbins, 1968). The notable exception to this norm can be found in the documentary film, *The Legend of the Witches*, allegedly centred on the work of Alex Sanders in 1970 and directed by Malcolm Leigh. It contains a scene mentioning hatred leading to revenge on a person to be cursed. Skewers are inserted in the head and feet of a doll, followed by metal, herbs, wood and sperm. It is sealed and then the coven dance around it in a circle. The high priestess lies in a pentagram shape with her head to the south and feet to the north. She has a cord in her mouth. The high priest inserts the doll into her vagina and ties it round himself and lies on her as in sexual intercourse. The doll is pulled out and drowned to signify the death of the person cursed. Interviews that I have conducted with practising witches concerning this scene have produced such statements as "What a load of rubbish"; "He [Sanders] cannot have been serious!" and "This has nothing to do with witchcraft . . . what a field day the Christians will have if they find out about this".

Academics often research spellcraft from within a historical context, notably concentrating on the seventeenth century when witchcraft in Britain was under considerable scrutiny for reasons outside the remit of this paper. Nevertheless, during the last decade a few scholars have examined contemporary magic. Although strictly speaking the research of Tanya Luhrmann (1989) came before this period, her work is still regarded as having some importance and is often cited by other researchers (e.g. Lamond, 1997). From an anthropological view, she observed that groups were "astonishingly diverse", especially in spiritual terms, and that they avoided clear-cut beliefs; she was generally unimpressed with the magic produced: "We lit a fire in the cauldron and danced around it to the cassette, the taped music feeble and incongruent"

(Luhmann, 1989, p.76). Susan Greenwood (2000) is arguably more positive towards magic, stressing her reflexive and experiential fieldwork and her role as a communicator between two worlds: one academic and the other that of the 'magic counterculture'. She writes (p.2) about the "art of using spells to invoke supernatural powers to influence events" and does not trivialise magic: "underneath the glitter and glamour of magic there is another more serious process of psycho-spiritual transformation". She is refreshingly open-minded to the broad concept that there might be other worlds outside our current perception. The cosmos is seen to be alive with forces and energies, some of which exist in a time and space distinct from, but also very closely connected to, everyday reality (p.23).

Ronald Hutton explores early modern witchcraft in his influential book, *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999), but he provides more specific comments on magic and spellcraft in an article in the pagan magazine, *Pagan Dawn*, where he describes his own interpretation of magic: "Magic consists of any formalised practice by human beings designed to achieve particular ends by the manipulation of supernatural power or of spiritual power concealed in the natural world" (Hutton, 2003, p.21).

There are, of course, other scholars whose views could be included, such as Lamond (1997), Farrar and Farrar (1984) and Crowley (1996), but their obvious allegiance to witchcraft and self-proclaimed practice of it may lead to accusations of bias. However, their works corroborate what most of the academics, and all the authors of books of spells, maintain, namely that spellcraft is a force that can have direct effects upon human society in anomalous ways.

#### EXAMPLES OF SPELLCASTING

Sometimes the rituals can "express desires and needs as ends in themselves" (Neusner, Frerichs & McCracken Flesher, 1989, p.15) and a degree of dramatisation can help convey the essence of the spell in symbolic terms. One reads again and again of the importance of words in rituals: "Magic words and magic names . . . are of paramount importance" (Butler, 1998, p.15) and "[a spell] reflects belief in the power of sound" (Drury & Tillett, 1997, p.13). The author David Conway (1974, p.86) gives a strong reinforcement to the importance of words:-

Words are important in magic because they are regarded not just as a means of communication, but as an intrinsic part of the thing they name. They can therefore be accepted as a substitute for that thing because they contain its essence

Further to this, sound is also specified as being 'mystical', which is corroborated in the importance given to the 'Word' of God, the chanting of 'Om' and the combination of sound with the chakras in Tantricism. The state of mind is an important factor in conducting a ritual and the preparation for spell-casting and the following list contains some possible methods of enhancement:-

- An attitude of open and earnest expectancy and total commitment to the job in hand.
- Total lack of resistance or doubt.
- Clear visualisation of what is being asked for.
- General consensus that what is being prayed for is both theoretically possible and in the common interest.

- Chanting and dancing to achieve altered states of consciousness.
- Using auspicious times such as a full moon.
- Using personal tools, fumigation, herbs, etc.
- Dramatisation and imagination.

There are many spells that could be quoted, but the bibliography provides many sources for an interested reader. However, a few examples will be given to illustrate the variety of material available. In Early Modern Europe and before, spells and charms often contained direct Christian imagery mixed with pagan or folk-orientated imagery. One such example was allegedly used by Anne Whittle (alias Chattox), one of the so-called Lancashire witches in 1612:—

Three Bitters hast thou bitten, The Heart, ill eye, ill Tongue:  
Three bitter [*sic*] shall be thy boot, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost a God's name.  
Five Pater-nosters, five Aves, and a Creed,  
In worship of five wounds of our Lord. [cited in Rosen, 1969, p. 363]

A love spell sought the assistance of St Thomas: "Good St Thomas do me right, And bring my love to me tonight, That I do look him in the face, And in my arms may him embrace" (Rosen, 1969, pp. 70–71). Spells can miscarry and sometimes with somewhat humorous results, as in the case of John Fian in Scotland. Allegedly he attempted to win the love of a woman by using a lock of her hair as the focus for a spell. However, she outwitted him by substituting the hair from a cow, which thereafter followed him around in devotion (Seafield, 2003, pp. 46–47).

Cord magic has been and still is used by witches in connection with casting spells. Knots are tied in a cord at various places whilst the following words are chanted, and to break the spell the knots are either undone or the cord is destroyed:—

By knot of one, the spell's begun.  
By knot of two, it cometh true.  
By knot of three, so mote it be.  
By knot of four, power I store.  
By knot of five, the spell is alive.  
By knot of six, the spell is fixed.  
By knot of seven, events I'll leaven.  
By knot of eight, it will be Fate.  
By knot of nine, what is done is mine.<sup>1</sup>

A controversial spell was allegedly conducted during the Second World War to halt the much-predicted invasion by Hitler's forces. It was referred to as 'Operation Cone of Power' and achieved its aim (according to the people involved) but with the cost of at least one life, since the strain of conducting the exhausting ritual led to a premature death. A detailed study of Gardner's involvement with witchcraft and this ritual can be found in Heselton (2000).

If these spells and the many thousands of others actually work, then one might wonder how. Skelton (1988) offers three possible answers: auto-suggestion, as in a placebo effect; telepathy through unknown vibrations; and the transfer of images. However, there is always an undercurrent of successes being advertised after a ritual and excuses being found for the failures. The

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<sup>1</sup> Details of this spell can be found in many sources, including Adams and Adams (1998).

sociologist Tanya Luhrmann (1989) studied spells and came to the conclusion that they did not work, but the author Frederick Lamond (1997) felt that she was worried about her career and credibility in promoting their success. The witches Janet and Stewart Farrar devoted a complete book to the study of how spells work, with many examples included (Farrar & Farrar, 1990).<sup>2</sup> Their ideas encompass the linking of the spiritual, divine or occult with the astral or etheric to produce mental states that can become physical. They stress the importance of a strong ethical code being used before tampering with people's lives, which is reproduced in most books and articles on the subject.

#### INTRODUCTION TO FIELDWORK

It has been shown that there is a vast amount of information available concerning the history and practice of spell casting. The types and methods have varied throughout time and their effects have been discussed. The problem with encountering so much contradictory material prompted me to undertake a practical study using contacts that I believed to have practised spells as part of their witchcraft activities. I devised a questionnaire and sent it to forty people, and I received eighteen replies. To be able to make comparisons with witches' spells and Christians' prayers I devised a second questionnaire that asked the same questions, but was worded differently to accommodate the tenets of the Christian faith. I sent it to twenty people and received eight replies. I sent it to fewer Christians because I am not acquainted with so many, but the percentages of replies, namely forty-five and forty per cent respectively, would seem to indicate a fair balance in the response. There was a degree of concealment from some of the witches who declined to reply because, as they later told me, their spells were very private matters and not open to academic discussion. One Christian minister would not be involved in the research because she knew of its involvement with witchcraft and she objected to this. Others were happy to expand at length about their methods and practices.

#### THE RESULTS OF THE WITCHES' QUESTIONNAIRE

When it was felt useful to clarify trends, the answers were converted into percentages from both questionnaires to encourage direct comparisons. This was not always appropriate when insufficient data were available. Numbers were used, rather than words, to facilitate effortless reading in the witchcraft sections, and capital letters in the Christian results. These changes were made to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

##### *1. Do you use practical magick<sup>3</sup> or spellcraft as part of your witchcraft activities?*

In answer to this question, 83% gave an unequivocal "yes" and others wrote "very rarely", "infrequently" or "as part of meditation only". One respondent (number 9) wrote that it was only used when a coven member had work to

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<sup>2</sup> This book is required reading by many Alexandrians, but viewed with more caution by other 'denominations'.

<sup>3</sup> This spelling is often used to differentiate the word in pagan circles from conjuring for entertainment purposes.

do, and another expanded: "Very rarely—the more I learn the more careful I become about using spells/magick. Having said that, I find celebrating the changing seasons to be a magical activity." Although spell casting is only a part of the witchcraft religion it would seem from the above response that it is nevertheless used by a large majority of witches in this sample. This has been further corroborated by my own anecdotal evidence in talking to many other witches in social situations.

*2. What form does it take, e.g. use of words, healing, objects, herbs, visualisations, other?*

There were a number of key words in the responses that occurred frequently: 78% used 'ritual'; 72% 'visualisation', 56% 'herbs' and 50% used 'healing', 'candles', 'tools' and 'chanting'. The 'tools' mentioned included a wand or athame (blunt knife) used for the directing of magic. Other words that were used because they were important included 'meditation', 'oil', 'talismans', 'poppets' (puppets) and 'crystals'. Oil is used for anointing purposes in rituals, talismans act as a focus for energy and likewise poppets can represent the person involved in the spell. It is possible that respondents used more items or methods than they listed, but lack of space or memory may have mitigated against their inclusion here. A rather less formal method was mentioned in this category: "The only magick I use anything like frequently is searching for lost items—as a last resort I will ask Anubis. And I wear an Anubis pendant for protection and guidance when travelling. Then there's the usual parking space spell." In this example 'Anubis' refers to the Egyptian deity who can be considered in a similar light to Hermes in Greek mythology, i.e. a messenger with licence to travel in both the underworld and the world of the living. The 'usual parking spell' involves visualising a space being available where and when required and then sending out energy to secure a successful outcome.

There was a certain amount of double usage with some of these words; for example, 'candles' would be mentioned as a 'tool' for the focus of magic and in one reply even 'walking' was stated as an aid to it. Overall there was a fair degree of consistency in the replies and they lacked any of the extreme concepts that the media (and others) sometimes stress, namely the shedding of blood or sexual activities.

*3. Where do you get the knowledge of your spells?*

Apart from the inconclusive reply of "many sources", books, the internet and magazines were mentioned, as well as experiences from coven activity and people's own encounters in life. One respondent mentioned only one book as being important and another provided a small list of mainstream publications, but mainly they were not specified. 'Instinct' and 'spontaneity' were also mentioned as being important in devising and carrying out rituals.

*4. Can you provide details of how you undertake these activities?*

This question was answered in more detail in many cases than the previous examples, but five provided no information and a further three would only agree if a face-to-face interview was held (44% of the total). The need for privacy for such ceremonies is often felt strongly by witches and this is not only to avoid possible ridicule and misinterpretation by outsiders. Some people

believe that the efficacy of a spell can be impaired by its details being made known, unless they are known only after it has been concluded. There was variety in the replies that are summarised here. Five people left this question blank or refused to answer it. Three people said they would answer in an interview situation or referred me to their books, and the rest mentioned factors such as "Within a sacred space, clearly defined and dedicated as such"; "Meditative/positive thinking; healing thoughts; asking deity"; "Agreement within coven and with lots of planning"; "Circle, appropriate moon phase, healing, music and incense"; "Ritual, moon and thought projection"; "Circle, candles, cords, visualisation and poppets"; "Mind focus in/out ritual and tools/music if wanted instinctively. Also time/ place limitations." (The 'circle' refers to the traditional sacred space that witches form for protection at the start of most rituals.) Two others provided separate sheets of details that included full circle, elements, visualisation and altered states of consciousness.

Two respondents provided details of specific case studies, which are printed in full below. In the first case study presented, Respondent 14 wrote:—

I had trouble with an unwanted admirer so my friend and I (it worked more powerfully with two of us) cleared her dining-room, took four items, each representing an element and placed them in each quarter, covered up the mirror, and then shut our eyes. We visualised the person in question walking out of our sight further and further away and then finished by saying that the magick would be done by the next new (or full—I can't quite remember) moon. Lo and behold, exactly on the time we said, the person rang me up whereupon I could tell him to go away! I never saw him again and as far as I know he never chased a married woman again!

The second case study, Respondent 18, reported:—

On New Year's Day I was phoned up by an elderly Spiritualist friend who lives near Durham. She was in a terrible state and phoning from hospital where she had been rushed to during the night with chronic septicaemia—she feared for her life. She asked me to undertake a healing spell for her and also informed me that her Spiritualist friends were also sending her healing prayer. I undertook a specific healing ritual for her with the help of a witch friend. This may seem bizarre, but it involved the baking of a lemon tart which was dedicated to her, consecrated and eaten. We sent her healing sustenance as we enjoyed the tart. (The reason for a lemon tart was that the last time I had seen her she had been playing the part of a tart/prostitute dressed in the colour lemon and had performed a cabaret performance . . . much to everyone's enjoyment.) A week later she phoned me from her own home and told me that she had made, according to her doctors, a "miraculous" recovery. She didn't care whether it was my spell, her Spiritualists' healing, or the hospital care—it had worked! P.S. A year later and she is still well.

As in many similar studies that are available in the literature and elsewhere, there are different interpretations available concerning such cases. These might include:—

- Fraud/intentional mis-reporting of circumstances mentioned by the participants through reasons, for example, of financial gain, practical joking or status seeking.
- Unintentional mis-reporting of circumstances mentioned by the participants through reasons, for example, of poor memory or exaggeration.
- Misinterpretation of natural phenomena as paranormal when, at most, a description of them as unusual or abnormal might be more appropriate.

In the first case study presented, traditional elements of modern witchcraft are mentioned in preparing for a spell, notably the visualisation and the location of the 'elements'. Although not strictly elements as such, the archetypes of earth, air, fire and water are often present in rituals (hence the use of the pentagram with the fifth angle representing the spiritual ether or soul). A sceptic could easily claim a coincidental result for the alleged outcome of the spell, and the final sentence, "I never saw him again and as far as I know he never chased a married woman again" has a biased speculation, since if the man was never seen again then how could the knowledge of his activities be known? He could just as easily still be chasing married women! The second case study is admittedly somewhat bizarre in its execution since baking does not normally play a part in spellcraft. Firstly one has to believe that the patient was indeed in the situation she claimed to be in. It sounds believable unless a degree of paranoia was evident. Secondly one has to rely on the respondent reporting the case precisely. On a personal note I am well acquainted with the man in question, who is very well educated and I trust his remarks, since I have found him to be unusually sceptical about many paranormal matters. Whether she was at death's door only the doctors involved might know, and because of the circumstances of the healing any combination of witchcraft, Spiritualism, medical science and the woman's own immune system may have saved her life. Respondent 18 mentioned that he undertakes types other than just healing spells, including binding (blocking off negative energy) and positive emotional or psychic enhancement. He stressed that neither money nor gifts are accepted for this work and that he has had a varied success rate. It is very time-consuming and can be exhausting.

*5. Can you provide details of the success-rate of your spells?*

The answers to this question varied from being a little vague: "To know, to will, to dare, to keep silent", to being fairly specific: "Difficult to quantify objectively as much of what I do is for 'self-development' purposes and even with more practical issues it's difficult to know if the same outcome would have happened anyway. However, I feel the success rate is high, perhaps 80-90%." Respondent 11 even provided me with the following percentages: "Pregnancy 100%, healing effectiveness 75%, selling property 80%, jobs 95%, exams 98%", but then she added, perhaps in a moment of self-doubt, "but what would have happened if we hadn't done any?" Overall the respondents seemed from 'fairly' to 'very' happy with their results. Only two did not know the results because of lack of feedback from 'clients' or spoke of no 'empirical' evidence. The nature of evidence in this field is open to considerable debate and the possibility of self-delusion must always remain a possibility. Researchers are forced, through their own ultimately subjective interpretations of objectivity, to form a balanced opinion of the claims encountered.

*6. Can you provide verification from other people of your successes?*

My personal acquaintance with many witches led me to believe that this question would be answered with caution since an affirmative would lead respondents, quite correctly, to think that my response would be to ask for people's details to 'check the record'. For reasons of confidentiality 55% refused



to give such details. One respondent felt the question invalid since "they have to do their own spells". Another answered affirmatively, but had filled in the questionnaire anonymously! Some respondents have offered verification that I have duly received, having spoken to the people they cited, in addition to the following:—

When I did a protection working for a friend she called me a few days later to say she had just seen a ring, like the Colgate 'ring of confidence'.

I did a protection ritual at the request of a friend for her daughter who she felt was suicidal at the time. A few days later the mother informed me that her daughter had felt a surge of positive energy at more or less the same time and was feeling a lot better. I don't know whether this has been maintained or whether it was simply a coincidence.

A strong ethical stance was prevalent throughout the answers to the questionnaire which, of course, could be used to conceal poor results. Despite this small sample of results it would seem that there is an element of belief in the powers of witchcraft, however intangible it would appear in current scientific academic thinking. This will be expanded upon later.

#### *7. What safeguards do you use concerning this work?*

A wide range of different methods were offered for safeguarding both spell casters and outside participants. These included ethical values of not discussing the rituals outside the work in hand and not undertaking work unless the recipient desired it. The implications of the spell working were highlighted, particularly in terms of concern that it be of benefit for all concerned. Respondent 8 stressed that one should only attempt what one was confident with, and Respondent 9 praised the benefits of group work to avoid self-deception by an individual. The use of a circle and secure grounding were mentioned by several respondents as being vital to the participants. One very specific answer was given, which is printed below in full. It comes from a very well educated mature lady, who holds a professional post in further education as well as being a very experienced witch:—

Never do spells for anyone who would not want one. Word spell to give protection. Invoke Earth Mother first. Word spell to be utterly specific and try to define action needed with all eventualities pinpointed. Take responsibility for action. Do nothing lightly. Give own considerations to requests. Prepare well. Half hearted spells don't work. Use as many correspondences as possible, the more thorough, the better chances of success. Don't use the outer planes without trying all possibilities practically first—after all, we live here. If cursing, curse the behaviour, not the person. If healing, physically and psychologically, remember the person may need to go through the problem for their own journey. After spells—ground, thank and bathe!

The "outer planes" here refers to what might be thought of as different dimensions or states encountered in altered states of consciousness. The concept of 'cursing' is mentioned not in the often-misunderstood way of being part of a black art aimed to do harm, but rather as an attack upon a situation that it is believed to be in need of severe change. Overall, spell casters treated the subject of safeguarding all the people involved very seriously and this was confirmed not only in the responses to the questionnaires but also in private conversations with witches outside this research.

## DISCUSSION OF THE WITCHES' REPLIES

It seemed to me that eighteen replies from contemporary witches who practise spellcraft was a small but reasonable number to draw data from concerning their activities. The people who replied were erudite and in some cases highly educated. They displayed in their answers both care and a sensible, practical approach to matters that they obviously felt worthy of thoughtful consideration. The questionnaire encouraged them to focus on specific actions and allowed me to scrutinise their responses. The results indicated that a majority use spellcraft or related techniques as a part of their religion and that this is helped by a variety of techniques and tools, which include visualisation, chanting, herbs, candles, crystals, oils, poppets and incense. Witches obtain their knowledge of these matters from literature, other people, and their own feelings and intuition. Techniques within and without ritual vary, but these would seem to encompass very simple meditative techniques as well as full-scale rituals within a protective circle and with clearly defined elements in a coven meeting. Respondents believe spells to be successful and that there is some verification for this. However, they are not performed lightly and a high ethical stance is operated before, during and after such activity. This mainly seemed to be a far cry from both the evil activities and the ridiculous frivolities that have typified them for the last few centuries.

## THE RESULTS OF THE CHRISTIANS' QUESTIONNAIRE

1. *Do you use organised prayer as part of your religious practices for specific purposes?*

There was a unanimous affirmative to this question with only two extra comments. Respondent G answered "Yes and No. We have a prayer group who pray before the morning service and once a month prayer breakfast." Respondent H added "with individuals as and when and where needed".

2. *Where do you get the wording of your prayers from?*

A general theme ran through the answers to this question, ranging from specific books such as *Common Worship* and the *Office Book* to more general statements such as "the Lord leads and from the heart" (Respondent A) and simply "God" (Respondent G). One respondent expanded on this:-

Every act of public worship includes prayers of intercession for the world, the church, the local community, and people in specific need. We have specific prayers for people at our weekly Prayer Group. We have a monthly Healing Service in the context of Holy Communion. After everyone has received Communion there is a time and space for anyone to come forward to the Communion Rail for prayer, anointing or laying-on of hands.

4. *Can you provide details of how you undertake these activities? <sup>4</sup>*

Respondents provided comments such as "when needed" and "for the sick". "Laying on hands" was mentioned twice and "we wait on God" once. One respondent reported in slightly more detail:-

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<sup>4</sup> This section did not include an equivalent to the witches' survey's Question 3, since it was assumed to be encompassed in Question 2.

Monthly healing service in context of communion. Once a quarter, this is our main morning service, otherwise in a sparsely attended evening service. Laying on of hands is offered for people for themselves or on behalf of others. The times and types of prayer and activity seem to be fairly regimented but with healing directed at the sick via an overall focus on God.

5. *Can you provide details of the success rate of your prayers?*

The replies to this question were varied. One respondent answered simply "No" and one other did not answer the question at all. Another respondent stressed the subjectivity of such claims and Respondents B and H felt "success" needed defining before details could be given:—

I am currently praying with a lady with (probably) terminal cancer. Her friends at church desperately want to see her cured and restored to the fullness of health here and now. However, I believe her healing is taking place. She may not be cured, but she is at peace with herself and at peace with God. QUESTION: am I being deluded by using such language as "healing" in her case? Is there a difference between "cure" and "healing"?

We have been praying with a man in his late 30s who has cancer. We have encouraged him to complete the therapy provided through the NHS. Alongside that we have prayed for him by name. His cancer has disappeared. QUESTION: who cured him? Was it the doctors or the vicars, the NHS or the Church? The answer has to be both—and neither—for God is the healer.

The approach by this vicar was thoughtful and, to my way of thinking, fair, since he ultimately affirmed his faith in God, but allowed other possibilities to enter the overall scheme of healing. Another respondent opposed the idea of measuring success: "We don't measure the success-rate of our prayer. We pray in faith. People ask us for specific intentions—like sickness, exams, and employment".

6. *Can you provide verification from other people of your successes?*

Once more two respondents answered simply "No" (A and D) and one did not answer at all (C). I had difficulty with Respondent G's answer: "The people God has healed yes", which, frankly, I did not understand at all! One respondent mentioned that healing had indeed taken place, but he did not provide verification (F). It was Respondent B (again) who provided the most rational thoughts on verification:—

Verification of healing in the here and now is so difficult. Ministers have no access to medical records. A person's story of the ailment, its effects and its "removal" are all highly subjective and open to a range of interpretations. What timescale do we use when asking about "success"? Immediate change is encouraging, but will there be a "morning after the night before"? Most serious illnesses can have periods of remission—is that "healing"? Ultimately, in the new heaven and the new earth of Revelation 21 healing is for all who find themselves in the presence of God in the heavenly places—by then no-one is counting success rates, but rejoicing in the presence of the Living God.

7. *Do you use any safeguards concerning this activity?*

There was no reply from two respondents (C and F) and Respondent E explained that healing was always undertaken in the "confines of the community". Similar safeguards were provided by Respondent A, "always

in the open"; D, "two people involved"; and G, "in twos and in front of the church". Respondent B spoke of the "will of God" being a great safeguard and Respondent H maintained that healing was always in a "pastoral" context. It would seem from these replies that the power of the Church and God would be sufficient to act as a safeguard against either physical/mental complications or abuse.

#### DISCUSSION OF THE CHRISTIANS' REPLIES

The number of respondents was smaller than from the witches but nevertheless the replies produced some overall information concerning the practices of Christians in their use of prayer. Firstly, they all use it as an integral part of their religion and the sources of their prayers range from prescribed Church publications to personal and pastoral examples coming from God. Indeed, as one would expect from a monotheistic religion, God is vital to all the religion's workings. Healing was given either during, or attached to, Communion or other services, and its success was mainly unmeasured, but in some cases anecdotal evidence was cited, and in others it was deemed successful from a spiritual viewpoint without the need for verification. Safeguards were not really thought to be relevant since the healing and prayers were mainly in the open and following the "will of God". With one exception (Respondent B), there was a lack of what might be called sceptical scrutiny in the answers, since it was believed that faith in God was the ultimate answer to these and, no doubt, other questions. Nevertheless, there was a very genuine 'feel' to the respondents' replies from within a seemingly caring environment.<sup>5</sup>

#### COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE TWO SETS OF ANSWERS

Although, for terminological reasons, the questions asked were not exactly the same, they were nevertheless intended to be similar in comparing witches' uses of spells with Christians' uses of prayer.

Both religions used what might be called a paranormal method of communication with a supernatural phenomenon to achieve their desired ends. The witches' methods were more direct since they did not necessarily involve communication with a god/goddess, whereas Christians believed very much in the supplication of a divine God. The witches used a wide number of different sources, methods and aids to their rites for a similarly wide number of aims and purposes, and not necessarily just healing. Christians used prayers designed for such use or informal spoken prayer. However, Christians mentioned laying on of hands, but witches used no physical contact. The details of such activities were expanded upon at length by the witches, whereas the Christians' details were mainly sparse since there was little to add other than "prayers were said". Witches also claimed more successes than the Christians but rational comments about coincidences were also made. Similarly there was a greater degree of verification made available from the witches of their successes. The question of safeguards provided differences between the two

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous referee who has drawn my attention to articles concerning the efficacy of prayer groups by Astin, Harness and Ernst (2000), Byrd (1988) and Dossey (1993). Unfortunately it is not possible to include their results in a paper of this scope.

approaches. Witches obviously gave considerable thought to the matter of ethics before casting their spells, etc., whereas Christians' faith in God allowed them to put their faith in God's goodness rather than taking responsibility for their own actions. This is an important difference between the two faiths. Overall there were similarities between the intentions of witches' spells and Christians' prayers. They were both aimed at providing healing, peace and comfort to the sick and their friends and families, even if the former contained a wider range of desired manifestations. Where they differed was in the intense personalisation and energy used by the witches in respect of the individual spells in contrast to the Christians' more traditional format. The ethics of saying prayers was an important issue with the witches, whereas Christians believed that their place within the community of God was sufficient safeguard.

In informal conversation with both witches and Christians I found that the former were happy for Christians to pray to their God, believing that there are more ways than one to finding spirituality and as long as harm was not done then they had no problems with Christian prayer. In contrast, Christians were uncomfortable with witches' spells, believing that, since by definition they could not come from God, they were open to abuse from human and occult (by their definition, 'evil') influences. The witches' fundamental principle "an it harm none [*sic*], do what you will" is often subjected by witches to considerable soul-searching concerning the nature of 'harm' and, although self-deception must always remain a possible explanation, nevertheless all spells are treated with significant conviction. There appeared to be a degree of 'cosiness' and lack of strong emotion in some Christians' use of and approach to prayer, thereby lacking the witches' intensity.

#### CONCLUSION: HOW PERSUASIVE IS THE EVIDENCE FOR THE PARANORMAL IN CONTEMPORARY WITCHCRAFT CULTURE?

A large amount of literature has been reviewed here that is readily available in retail outlets and libraries as well as magazines and journals. In addition to this, witches have been questioned both formally via the questionnaires as well as informally at gatherings, in covens and at social events. From these sources there would seem to be a general belief that spells in particular work according to laws that are currently not understood but that might be described as paranormal. Witches are aware of the possibilities that coincidences may be responsible for their successes but they feel that a 'meaningful coincidence' is closely allied to spellcraft. Generally they do not charge for or advertise their services (there are exceptions that are frowned on by many other practitioners), and they do not conduct spells unless asked to. It is an intense and private process only involving those who are directly connected.

Because of the necessity of including the possibilities of coincidence, inaccuracies in reporting through memory, and mis-information or fraud, it is impossible to provide statistical data that might either confirm or deny paranormal activity in witchcraft. To achieve a suitably large database, considerable time and expense would be necessary. This would involve devising a series of tightly controlled experiments using witches who agreed to be scrutinised scientifically concerning their spell-casting capabilities. A control group where

no spells were undertaken would also need to be instigated in a similar way. The experiments and the results would have to be supervised by people whose authority and integrity was trusted by believers, sceptics and academics alike. Because of the unlikelihood of this happening, perhaps one will always be left with the axiom that is expressed in Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon* concerning magic:—

The first stage is when you totally believe in witchcraft.

The second is when you realise that it's a complete lot of rubbish.

The third is when you realise that it's a complete lot of rubbish; but somehow it also seems to work. [Hutton, 1999, p.396]

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