

Re-Enchanting the Social: Identity Transformation, Embodiment, and Prefigurative
Religious Practices in New Spirituality Culture

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

The Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in fulfillment

of the requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2017

University of Pittsburgh
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences

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This study explores contemporary and alternative forms of religion active in the Pittsburgh area. Otherwise known as New Age and neopagan, new spiritualities are a domain of religiosity marked by individualism, multiculturalism, and idiosyncratic experimentation with identity that is both subjectively oriented, yet communalistic. Under investigation are the rituals and material culture of study participants, which includes examining the physical manifestations of what are often internal, invisible, and subjective processes. Chapter themes include ritual and structure, commodification and healing, psychonautics and re-enchantment, all of which are defined and discussed via participant comments. Understanding processes of meaning-making, and how beliefs work within these subcultures, is enabled in part through an examination of spirituality texts and discourses. Included therefore is an analysis of such texts, in which the story of modern seekership is interpreted and contextualized, but additionally through the medium of such popular collective myths as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Matrix*. Some questions include, what are the social structures of new spiritualities? What kinds of communities exist to house them? How do norms operate, and what sorts of power dynamics govern such cultural spaces? What are the common goals of individuals who follow new spiritualities? What kinds of embodied experiences define them? How are relationships conducted? What is the role of gender? How is sexuality conceived of? And how does this form of religiosity reproduce itself? Answering these questions partly involves contrasting new spiritualities with traditional religions and normative society. New spirituality is a way of life, and a world view. It is an approach to living that is guided by particular values, beliefs, and practices, all of which shape members' orientation to among other things healthcare, diet, technology, and the environment.

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Chapter 1 Introduction and Review of Literature

1.1 Introduction

In part this study attempts to account for why individuals pursue new spiritualities, and what factors are likely to predispose someone's becoming New Age for example. To answer these questions, it is necessary to delineate what we are talking about. Christina Steyn (2007, p. 267-8) provides a list of fifteen characteristics that define the ideal New Ager:

1. A vision of a “new age” of spiritual awakening
2. A holistic cosmology
3. A pantheistic concept of God
4. The individual is the creator of her own reality
5. A belief that everything is in a process of dynamic evolution
6. A belief in the perennial philosophy
7. A belief in the primacy of experience as final authority
8. An acceptance of responsibility for one's self and worldviews
9. An openness to unconventional, alternative, and occult beliefs and practices
10. An attitude of optimism
11. An emphasis on the feminine principle
12. A syncretic belief systematized
13. An acceptance of the Ancient Wisdom tradition
14. An emphasis on transformation and healing (personal and planetary)
15. A deep ecological concern

If an answer can be provided for the question of why someone becomes New Age, the entire phenomenon moves closer to being explained, because no one *has* to be New Age. There are no social forces compelling one to participate in new spirituality culture. By contrast there are social factors that provide powerful motivation for belonging to an organized religion, such as getting a job, having to make money, or even marrying an acceptable person. For example, participation by an individual in a particular religion may be due to their following a tradition, in many cases imposed upon them by their family or society: “I am a Catholic because I was born

Catholic,” or “I am Hindu because my parents have insisted that is what I am, and must be to remain a part of the family, and to get married in accordance with their wishes.” However, no one is born with the designation “New Age,” nor is there a distinct New Age cultural tradition that one could inherit. Even if one's parents are involved with New Age culture, because it is an idiosyncratic composite of many beliefs and practices drawn from various spiritual traditions, each New Age identity is presumably unique. Therefore, one cannot have a self-spirituality imposed upon them by another, though one's particular spiritual portfolio may be influenced by others.

However, a comparison could be made between New Age spirituality and religion in terms of conversion (Lynch, 1977; Luhrman, 1989; Kemp, 2004; Sutcliffe, 2003). One could be born a Baptist and be converted to Islam, or raised as Jewish, only later to become an atheist. In the same way, it is possible to convert from being a Christian to being New Age. While consideration for the issue of how religious conversion occurs within the New Age milieu is important, this study will also address other factors to account for why a person becomes involved with new/alternative spiritualities. For example, what do people gain by adopting a particular set of beliefs and practices? What is it about the New Age and/or neopagan milieu that is attractive for some people? Why does anybody identify with these phenomena?

Again, to answer these questions requires that we determine what we mean by New Age and neopagan. In the following chapters this will be accomplished through deconstructing and interpreting the ideological and practical structures that form the basis of alternative spiritual beliefs and rituals, how they work, and how they work in ways that are different from more conventional forms of spirituality, such as in organized religions. New Age, neopagan, and New Paradigm are a few of the most common incarnations of alt-spirituality, and can be said to

belong to the same religious families (Kemp, 2004). At times they will be lumped together, where the analysis is more general, and where they overlap on the measures under evaluation. While at other points in the discussion they will be examined separately, as unique phenomenon distinct from their spiritual cousins. Moreover, when the analysis calls for it, smaller groups will also be treated as idiosyncratic and particular manifestations of new spirituality, even though they more or less fall under the general headings of New Age or neopagan. These typological distinctions will be explained where they occur.

1.1a What is New Age?

Anyone setting out to study New Age spirituality immediately becomes aware of the difficulties involved with defining it. Enigmatic, elusive, diffuse, variegated, indeterminate, and pluralistic represent just some of the terms that researchers have used to refer to this phenomenon (Kemp, 2004; Sutcliffe, 2001; Shimazono, 1999; Raschke, 1996; etc.). Not only does New Age spirituality defy classification, it is also often difficult to determine exactly what is being studied due to its chameleon-like nature. It changes frequently, it is always morphing into new forms, it is faddish, and yet it contains traditional religious elements that have remained unchanged for thousands of years. Is New Age a social movement or a religion? Is it postmodern or atavistic, secular or post-secular, countercultural, or a commodification of the traditional? For William Bloom (1991) the New Age movement is something which “gives us maps, insights, friends, techniques, inspiration and strength in our exploration of the inner world” (1991, p. xviii). In her book *Aquarian Conspiracy*, social historian Marilyn Ferguson (1980) asserts that it is nothing less than the zeitgeist of the times:

The spirit of our age is fraught with paradox. It is at the same time pragmatic and transcendental. It values both enlightenment and mystery, power and humility,

interdependence and individuality. It is simultaneously political and apolitical. Within recent history it has infected medicine, education, social science, hard science, even government with its implications. It is characterized by fluid organizations reluctant to create hierarchical structures, averse to dogma. It operates on the principle that change can only be facilitated, not decreed. It is short on manifestos. It seems to speak to something very old. And perhaps, by integrating magic and science, art and technology, it will succeed where all the king's horses and all the king's men failed (Ferguson, p. 18).

In an effort to define “New Age,” sociologist Stephen Sutcliffe (2003) emphasizes situating the phenomenon historically, which he believes helps determine what sort of approach is appropriate for its study. Toward this aim Sutcliffe's book *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* provides a comprehensive review of a very prolific 20th century print culture, with an analysis focused mainly on popular New Age books, newsletters, and occult periodicals. The subjects of these publications range from alternative healing to astral travel, with articles on astrology, interpretations of karma and reincarnation, dream analysis, clairvoyance, and other psychic phenomena (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 39).

Sutcliffe does not conflate alternative spirituality and New Age as many do, but shows that New Age is a particular genealogy within a larger religious phenomenon (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 5). He does this by taking a reflexive ethnographic approach to popular New Age reading practices. Sutcliffe accepts Foucault's imperative to “maintain passing events in their proper dispersion” which equates to “identifying the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things” (Foucault, 1977, p. 146). In other words, Sutcliffe believes that what is New Age, both past and present, must be reconstructed by the researcher from among scattered and inconsistent sources (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 19). Its history must be viewed as an “exteriority of accidents,” rather than as a coherent linear and unified historical progression, as a Darwinian evolutionist or Marxist might contend (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 4-5). In chapter two of this thesis I will provide an overview of the sorts of methods that are required for studying New Age and related

phenomena. This will involve a discussion of how religious and/or cultural artifacts are to be interpreted via text analysis.

Sutcliffe suggests that “little else in the history of modern religion turns out on close inspection to be as variegated and diffuse in character as 'New Age'” (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 10). Daren Kemp (2004) agrees, arguing that with regard to its teachings, “it is impossible to reconcile all of these texts into a united religious vision,” which had actually been possible for traditional religions to do in earlier eras (Kemp, p. 47). Due to the sheer variety of practices and beliefs, researchers into the New Age are hence persuaded to do a local analysis, of one or a few groups, and from these discover the elements which are common to other similarly localized studies. Because no researcher could hope to include all groups, or even all categories of groups that fall under the New Age umbrella, Sutcliffe urges that it is realistic to tackle only an accessible arena. Consequently, he limits his analysis of the New Age to within the 20th century, and attempts to explain it by distinguishing it in terms of phases: the pre-1970s which he suggests tended to be more ascetically inclined, puritanical, and other worldly; and the post-70s which he describes as more emotionally expressive, hedonistic, and this-worldly (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 3). Sutcliffe argues that a “hermeneutical shift” occurred in the early 1970s, morphing New Age from an eschatological apocalyptic movement, to a humanistic one based in the exploration of human potential and personal growth (Sutcliffe, p. 28-29). Sutcliffe explains that, due to the fact that it was occurring in a time of social and economic deprivation (Glock and Stark, 1965) such as the great depression, and coupled with anxieties over threats from atomic weapons, the first half of the 20th century was dominated by a millenarian-apocalyptic New Age emblem of the near future. This shifted, in the wake of the counter-cultural upheavals of the late 1960s with

its ethical, psychical, and organismic deprivations (Glock and Stark, 1965), into a humanistic idiom of self-realization, and living more fully in the here and now (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 5).

The inward focus typical of most modern spiritual groups can also be explained by the apocalypticism of the early New Age. This is understandable, as early New Age spiritualism seems to have intensified just following the social dislocation and widespread devastation of WWI, and continued to grow in the midst of the economic instabilities of the 1930s, and later on during the 1950s and 60s nuclear threats. Living at a time in which it might be believed that a nuclear war could erupt at any moment, created according to Sutcliffe a culture of “privacy, discretion, and wariness that turned individuals and groups in on themselves, endorsing exploration of inner realms” of the self (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 67).

In a way similar to Sutcliffe's analysis, Adrian Ivakhiv (2001) splits the New Age into two categories: eco-spirituality (or earth spirituality) that includes neopaganism, eco-feminism, and pantheistic nature mysticism; and New Age millenarianism, which he refers to as “ascensionism” in order to distinguish it from other types (e.g. Christian), that involves notions of reincarnation and rebirth as opposed to an apocalyptic afterlife (Ivakhiv, p. 8).

Daren Kemp (2004) offers various approaches for assessing New Age phenomena. Besides reviewing many theoretical perspectives by which one may classify and study the New Age (to be discussed in section 1.4 below), Kemp provides a competent history that begins in the early 19th century. He then describes in more detail various historical vignettes: pre-war and WWI, Post-WWII, preindustrial, ancient Greek, and mythical prehistoric periods. Kemp thus extends the origins of New Age spirituality further back in time, prior to the Enlightenment. His analysis suggests that the New Age distinguished itself from traditional religions much earlier than is commonly believed. The ideological underpinnings of neopaganism and modern occult

spiritualities, because they draw upon traditional religions in part for their content, have roots which span human history he argues.

By contrast Lowell Streiker (1990), taking a rather ahistorical view, breaks the New Age up into two major branches: the “left hand” or “ecstatic,” that involves gurus, channelers, psychics, witches, crystal healers, and other visionaries; and the “right hand” or “social transformationist,” which is concerned with developing a social and ecological conscience that cultivates responsible investing, gender equality, and a compassion for all creatures (Streiker, p. 10). Streiker conducts a largely contemporary analysis, focusing on current New Age beliefs and practices. Rather than characterizing it as a fad, Streiker suggests that the New Age is a movement oriented around a “spiritual ecology,” which celebrates reflection, androgynous balance, life-affirmation, ecstasy, tolerance of both the mainstream and of itself (including its own con artists and manipulators). He adds that the New Age perspective also emphasizes pantheism over theism, transformation instead of reformation, and xenophilia instead of xenophobia (Streiker, p. 51-54).

Though for Sutcliffe, the New Age is not so much a social movement as it is an overlapping of various social milieu, that he describes as a “bricolage of more or less interchangeable practices and values given focus by an ambiguous eschatological emblem” (Sutcliffe, p. 4). Dobbelaere (2009) agrees, characterizing New Age spirituality as an idiosyncratic and heterogeneous phenomenon in which individuals are free to fabricate their own religiosities as a patchwork of beliefs and practices, bricolages and compositions oriented by subjective interests rather than communal blueprints (Dobbelaere, 2009, p. 367).

1.2 A Brief History of the New Age

It has been argued that the New Age movement began with the Enlightenment (Raschke, 1996; Hanegraaff, 2000), and its political perspective of liberal humanism, that permitted a scientific exploration of the potentials that had been slumbering in humanity since the Golden Age of Greek science and philosophy. The social and political upheavals of the late 18th century, it is argued, paved the road for new ways of understanding and practicing spirituality and culture. For example, New Age notions of social and spiritual change were directly influenced by the newly emerging historical consciousness of the 19th century, exemplified by Marx and Darwin, the theoretical offspring of Enlightenment science and philosophy. Influenced by theories of evolution and dialectical materialism (Ferguson, 1980; Sutcliffe, 2003), the New Age worldview distinguished itself from the more rigid and static medieval view of the cosmos, that had held the Western world epistemologically locked within an unchanging social and religious matrix for nearly two thousand years.

In the early 20th century the New Age re-emerged as an American phenomenon, and became embodied by spiritualists such as Alice Bailey who is credited with coining the modern meaning of “New Age” in 1919 (Kemp, p. 40). In her book *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* (1925) she offers quasi-Christian millennialistic predictions concerning world needs, world opportunities, and the rapid development of human consciousness. Experiments in education and group culture, occurring since the early 19th century, were envisioned by New Agers such as Bailey to ultimately produce an “oligarchy of elect souls” destined to “govern and guide the world” (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 51). Hierarchical and derivative of Marxian historical materialism, Bailey's New Age is one in which humanity is depicted as needing to be led out of the darkness and false consciousness of capitalism by an enlightened vanguard of elite spiritual pioneers.

Imbedded in this view is the notion of the “seed people,” which remains a popular New Age belief, who are conceived of as the small percentage of spiritually awakened individuals who will help guide others towards spiritual enlightenment. Bailey makes references to these “seed groups of the New Age,” which she explains as the growth of loose networks of little groups here and there, as “individuals awaken to the new vision” (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 50).

However, Ferguson (1980) remarks that new paradigms are usually received with ridicule and mockery. New conceptualizations produced by the intuitive leaps of “the mutant” are not yet supported by a well known and respected body of empirical evidence, and so may appear bizarre, or even fuzzy, to those more invested in the older paradigm (Ferguson, p. 27). Ferguson cites Alexis de Tocqueville in support of her views of cultural change, arguing that they occur over long periods. Changes in behavior and belief typically occur in unspoken ways, long before people openly concede to each other that a change has taken place, Ferguson insists (Ferguson, p. 34). In the New Age case, changes in culture will occur as the result of a critical mass, or vanguard of transformed and enlightened people, the Aquarian conspirers, who will catalyze a transformation of society, and rapidly, as is the case for species change in evolution theory. To support this view Ferguson cites the neo-Darwinian theory known as “punctuated equilibrium,” advanced by paleontologist Stephen J. Gould (1979), which argues that evolutionary changes occur quickly, and in short durational spurts. These quantum leaps of rapid development of a species occur periodically, and punctuate an otherwise long and stable period of static equilibrium (Ferguson, p. 158).

In accord with Bailey, Ferguson asserts that these changes will be enacted by small groups acting autonomously, but aligned in terms of their cosmic visions for a “humane, hospitable world” (Ferguson, p. 214). Citing Mahatma Gandhi's pacifist theories of social

change, Ferguson suggests that these separate and local spiritual networks are examples of what Gandhi had referred to as “grouping unities,” which are both intimate and expansive, and that maintain their personal and local qualities. Ferguson insists that these ever growing and overlapping networks will expand their circumference until they envelop the world, creating the “finished” society. Ferguson defines “network” as the 20th century equivalent of a primitive tribe or kinship system, believing that “the network is a tool for the next step in human evolution” (Ferguson, p. 213). They are a more organic form of social organization, she argues, more biologically adaptive and flexible, and more conscious than the hierarchical structures characteristic of modern civilization.

Although Ferguson's analysis is from the largely emic perspective of a believer (to be defined below), she nonetheless points out aspects of New Age culture relevant for sociological analysis, some of which will be taken up in the next sections.

1.3 Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

1.3a New Religions

There are mythologies that are scattered, broken up, all around us. We stand on what I call the terminal moraine of shattered mythic systems that once structured society. They can be detected all around us. You can select any of these fragments that activate your imagination for your own use. Let it help shape your own relationship to the unconscious system out of which these symbols have come (Joseph Campbell, 2001, p. 86-87).

Andrew Dawson (2011) suggests that at the interface of society and religion, every social environment will experience the emergence of new and strange-looking forms of religiosity (Dawson, p. 114). That there exist new forms of religion is not particularly interesting in itself, he says. However, the emergence, spread, and growth of new religious phenomena can tell us much about society, and social processes in general. New religious formation has occurred in

historical periods other than modernity, but the type of creativity and experimentation displayed by new forms of religion can be useful for gauging the character of a particular period. Dawson therefore argues that, although small statistically by comparison with mainstream religious phenomena, what we have to gain by examining alternative forms of religiosity significantly outweighs its actual size and number (Dawson, p. 114).

As mentioned above, new spiritualities have proven difficult to classify. While it is not a church, sect, or cult, Bryan Wilson's typological scheme, which has proven useful for classifying religious movements, could be applied to the New Age. Wilson's theory entails categorizing forms of religion according to types that include: conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, manipulationist, thaumaturgical, reformist, utopian, and acceptance of the world (Wilson, 1970, pp. 36-40). Each of these designations could be used to address a different aspect of New Age phenomena. For example, the vision of Alice Bailey, that a vanguard of enlightened "seed people" will soon lead humanity into a new age of enlightenment, can be accounted for by the revolutionist and utopian explanations. The category conversionist, usually connected with groups such as Evangelical Christians, could be applied to the Hare Krishnas and Scientology, which, being bona fide religions, are more organized varieties of New Age religious culture. Introversionist is exemplified by the Amish, who have sought to create a spiritually pure environment that is best realized through separation from the mainstream world. This same category can be used to account for the changes that occurred in New Age spirituality during the second half of the 20th century, shifting it from an outwardly directed apocalyptic millenarian movement into a humanistic 'inner exploration' of spiritual selfhood. Introversionist is applicable to neopagan groups as well, whose goals include the creation of purified spiritual sanctuaries in nature, to be discussed in more depth below.

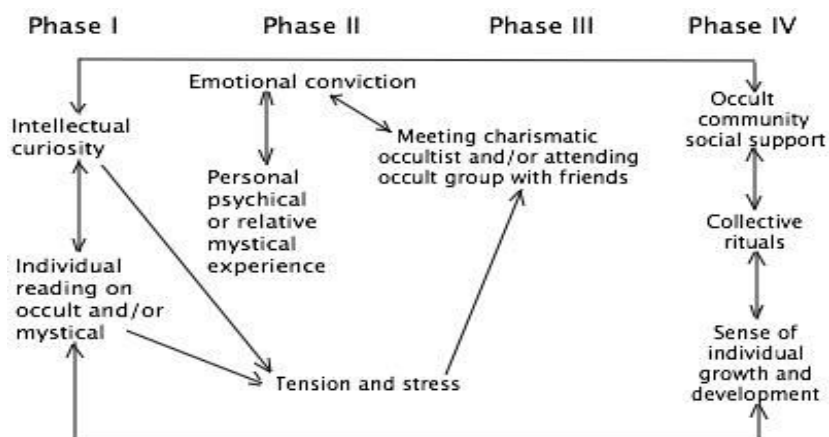
Other categories include manipulationist, which could address certain aspects of Gnostic religions in which secret “underground” powers are harnessed to accomplish spiritual, or material, objectives; thaumaturgical sects that involve being open to the miraculous advantages of faith in healing, good fortune, and well being; and Reformist, for example Quakers, who have the utopian mission of demonstrating to the world the benefits of communal solidarity and collective piety (Wilson, 1970).

This sort of categorizing of new religious movements (NRMs) can be useful for making sense of the wide array of religious forms, by discerning key cultural distinctions and differences that exist between them. For example, there are extraterrestrially oriented NRMs such as Heaven's Gate, Order of the Solar Temple, and Unarians; esoterically oriented ones such as Anthroposophy, Rosicrucianism, and Theosophy; and spirit-based movements such as spiritualism and voodoo. However, analytical schemes dependent upon thematic classifications such as these are often limited due to the hybrid character of new religions. Many New Age forms of religion include a belief in UFOs and extraterrestrials, as well as spirit-based esotericism. Distinctions between particular groups such as Hare Krishnas and TM-ers (Transcendental Meditation) become blurred, although Hinduism strongly influences them both. Some scholars advocate a positional or relational approach to studying new religions, which stresses looking at them relative to the dominant religions within a given social context (Melton, 1995). But because New Age and neopagans groups, in their various incarnations, can belong to anyone of these religious categories, the church-sect-cult model may ultimately be more suitable for addressing different forms of Christianity in a Western context, and suffers limitations when applied outside of this context.

1.3b Conversion

In contrast to previous notions of NRMs as deviant cults which lure vulnerable or maladjusted individuals into their clutches, and the people who 'join' them as pathological, Lofland and Stark (1965) posed the “world-saver” model which explains conversion to be the result of three factors: 1) the subjective experience of tension or strain (i.e. social anomie) as the individual becomes estranged from mainstream norms and practices; 2) having tendencies toward religious as opposed to scientific or political problem solving; and 3) a willingness to look beyond socially sanctioned organizational structures to non-mainstream or alternative approaches. These predispositions require situational factors to be realized, such as some form of break with mainstream societal structures (e.g. unemployment or migration), and the forming of “cult affective bonds,” as friendships and social networks are established with existing members of an NRM. Also, a weakening of extra-cult affective bonds, previously existing friendships, and social networks, coupled with some form of intensive interaction with the newly joined group in which nascent bonds are strengthened, and new patterns of behavior and signification are established (Lofland and Stark, 1965).

The following is a chart created by Frederick Lynch (1977) that illustrates “occult conversion” (Lynch, 1977, p. 895):



Lynch created this schematic, which accords with Lofland's and Stark's theories of conversion, prior to any significant scholarship being done on new spirituality. Although it is based on an NRM model of religion, it could be used to interpret processes involved with New Age spiritual conversion. However, in recent decades emic (insider) denials of conversion have issued from New Agers, in order to distance themselves from the negative stigma associated with NRMs and cults. Kemp (2004) has analyzed accounts from New Age informants that rather speaks of their experiencing a gradual conversion, or what Luhrman (1989) calls “interpretive drift [...] the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity” (Luhrman, p. 12). Kemp cites a number of emic accounts in which individuals claim to have begun their spiritual practice from a rationalist perspective. For example, a person might have started out with a scientific, possibly psychological explanation about what they believed they were doing. But through practicing certain rituals over a period of years, they eventually came to believe in them (Kemp, p. 122).

However, in contrast to the notion of conversion, Thomas Luckmann (1967) asserts a “religious transit” model of belonging in which an individual is understood as successively switching between concurrent participation in assorted religious groups and organizations. Released from established patterns of religious belonging, the individual is free to explore multiple religious traditions and perspectives simultaneously in their spiritual quest for self-fulfillment. Hence religious commitments are no longer life-long or exclusive, Luckmann argues, but exhibit more of a switching back and forth between them, and not so much a totalistic conversion from one form of religion to another. Luckmann reserves the term conversion to indicate a more decisive shift between exclusive religious canons, such as between Christian and Islam (Luckmann, 1999, p. 257). Rather than viewing religious conversion as deviant or

dysfunctional behavior, Dawson argues that “contemporary approaches place much of their emphasis upon understanding religious participation as a manifestation of individual agency and subjective expression” (Dawson, p. 128). The subjective nature of the modern religious experience will be discussed in more depth below.

What might be considered a subcategory of secularization theory, deprivation theory first posed by Glock and Stark (1965), has been useful to NRM scholars for explaining the emergence, or amplification of, new religious phenomenon. Glock and Stark's theory outlines five forms of deprivation likely to spur various forms of religious emergence: 1) economic deprivation, that typically leads to a sect-like structure, 2) social deprivation to a church, 3) organismic deprivation to a healing movement, 4) ethical deprivation to a reform movement, and 5) psychical deprivation to a cult (Glock and Stark, 1965). New Age groups, in various ways, and at one time or another, may fit into all of these categories. For example, individuals who perceive their environment as under siege by “toxic” forces may retreat into clean sanctuaries, to heal their organismic concerns. Others who, having suffering the effects of economic deprivation, may choose to abandon capitalist life in favor of forming small spiritual communities in which to secure material support.

1.4 The Sociology of Spirituality

1.4a Typologies

Kemp (2004) uses the term “implicit religion” to characterize the New Age milieu, which he equates with “self-spirituality” (Kemp, p. 99). Due to its being a somewhat diffuse phenomena that encompasses various forms of spirituality culture, Kemp believes it is useful to utilize a polythetic mode to define New Age, which employs a “one to many” relationship. This

technique relates multiple characteristics to a single definition, as opposed to a one to one correspondence between the definition and the phenomenon. For example, in his book *New Age: A Guide*, Kemp (2004) offers descriptive vignettes of representative New Age groups which, taken as a whole, provides the reader with a sense of the movement as a unified phenomenon. A central theme running throughout Kemp's work is the "family resemblance tree" of New Age religiosity, in which "a number of core family members have been described in the hope that we may better understand the family as a whole" (Kemp, p. 79). The family resemblance theory allows for a pool of "common core" characteristics from which resemblances can be inferred, but also permits dissimilarities between phenomena united by the same definitions.

When studying something like New Age spirituality it is also necessary to make an emic-etic distinction of its accounts, which should be central to any scientific methodology being employed (Kemp, p. 2; Sutcliffe, 2003, pp. 15-16). An emic definition of New Age is one that is given by participants, and is not falsifiable, whereas an etic definition, as provided typically by scholars, is more falsifiable. For example, from an emic point of view New Age is the esoteric quest involving alternative spirituality in order to bring about a change in consciousness in humanity, in the service of a new world that would transcend 20th century fascism, communism, and capitalism, and the indoctrinated conformity of traditional organized religion. From an etic perspective New Age could be conceived of as the cultural space existing between the secular and the religious realms, in which groups and individuals enact their beliefs and values in the form of ritual practices, which they believe is the preparatory work of "seed groups" that will usher in the utopian world they envision (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 53). New Age groups are described in etic terms by Paul Heelas (1996) as secondary institutions providing a middle way between the unstructured subjectivity of anomie, and the systematized bureaucracy of public institutions,

He argues that “the New Age shows what religion looks like when it is organized in terms of what is taken to be the authority of the self” (Heelas, 1996, p. 221).

Sutcliffe (2003) argues that making the emic and etic distinction methodologically clear from the outset allows for emic accounts of the New Age to be revealed more clearly. This is because in some reports of New Age phenomenon, false etic approaches have conflated the two, serving to cover over what is an authentic emic perspective (i.e. letting New Agers speak for themselves). This also helps contextualize the New Age position within what Sutcliffe believes is the wider field of alternative spirituality (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 17).

Kemp suggests using various theoretical approaches, such as NRM, NSM (new social movement), and NSRM, which enables the researcher to highlight different aspects of the groups under observation (Kemp, p. 96). It would be difficult to classify New Age spirituality as a NSM in the usual sense, i.e. as being politically contentious, or concerned with goals involving member recruitment, or of rationally exploiting economic opportunities. Nevertheless, counter-cultural spirituality meets the conditions of a “fluid social movement” through acts of dissension, and flight away from mainstream social controls (Bloch, p. 23). It is involved with challenging cultural codes, and their members are often identifiable as New Agers. Also, by engaging in anti-dogmatic discourse and practices, New Ageism is opposing what is perceived to be a hyper-rationalized and materialistic mainstream society. Wini Breines (1982) defines this aspect of New Left politics as a “refusal of the rules,” or to compromise in conventional political ways which prescribes that social change must occur within a formal rationality, as instrumental politics (Breines, p. 5). For some New Agers it amounts to a rejection of Enlightenment rationalism in exchange for a trans-rational understanding of nature and social relations (Wilber, 1983). As a result, New Age idealism is often criticized for being politically ineffective, or

withdrawn (Steyn, 1994) by not being overtly political or class based. However, due to these structural factors, this form of social movement is not as easily co-opted by mainstream power holders, and according to Bloch (1998) makes it “a stronger collective voice of repudiation against rational society” (Bloch, p. 23).

Alberto Melucci (1989) argues that social and political conflicts no longer have winners, but may produce innovation, modernization, and reform (Melucci, 1989, p. 78). Rather than defeating their opposition (e.g. environmentalist groups vs. transnational corporations) NSMs, like elements of the New Age, may initiate institutional changes by innovating new forms of culture. One of the ways this occurs is through the creation of collective identities in movement groups. Identity formation fosters an awareness among social actors of the ability to work on motivational and biological structures, as opposed to the world which was the focus of activist objectives within previous cycles of social movements (Kemp, p. 94).

In this way, NSMs are self-reflexive through being engaged in identity work, that is not instrumental to a further end, such as securing particular economic or political rights, as in the ERA (equal rights amendment), but is meaningful in itself, and relates to New Age insofar as both are concerned with personal and social transformation. This offers the possibility for symbolic challenges to be made against mainstream opponents, which may work to ultimately overturn dominant cultural codes (Kemp, p. 94). However, Matthew Wood and others argue that New Age and other new spiritualities are distinct from social movements (Wood, 2009; Sutcliffe, 1998; Luckmann, 1999, p. 255).

1.4b New Socio-Religious Movement

Believing that the New Age does conform in many ways to the definition of a movement given by NSM theorists, but finding the two theories to be inadequate by themselves to account for New Age phenomena, Kemp (2004) combines the cult–sect–church theory, NSM, and NRM perspectives into a new theory, NSRM, or a “new socio-religious movement” (Kemp, p. 96). Kemp begins with Colin Campbell's (1972) concept of the “cultic milieu,” in which ephemeral groups emerge spontaneously around charismatic leaders, but typically end with the demise of their leaders. These “local cults” also die off due to incoherence, internal strife, and lack of interest (Nelson, 1969). However, a continual subculture or “cultic backdrop” is created (Kemp, p. 96). This holds the key for longevity, by way of institutionalization and federation, in which spontaneous cults form linkages with similar groups in other localities. This branching effect enables local charismatic cults to survive as NRMs, which thicken to form a broader socio-religious movement, and can eventually lead to mainstream assimilation (Kemp, p. 96).

Kemp's NSRM theory explains this process as beginning within a diffuse cultic milieu, in which an association of cults form to produce a movement, until eventually the cultic phenomenon becomes a mainstream one (e.g. Hare Krishnas or Scientology). Kemp provides the following table to depict the integration of these approaches (Table 6.1 in Kemp, p. 96):

| NRM Theory | NSM theory | NSRM theory |
|------------|---|--|
| Cult | Friendship Network | Cultic Milieu |
| Sect | Activist Network/ Social Movement Organization | Association of NRMs– Broad Movement |
| Church | Professional Association | Mainstream Assimilation |

With popularization and acceptance, certain aspects of New Age culture have also achieved mainstream assimilation as an NSRM. This level of development equates it to a church in NRM theory, for example as aromatherapy and homeopathy have become mainstreamed into contemporary medical practice. However, it is important to realize at the same time that other New Age practices have not become mainstreamed, and remain at the level of the cult or sect, which Heelas refers to collectively as the “holistic milieu” (Heelas, 1996), and involves such things as crystal healing, or the use of entheogens, or sweat lodges for 'healing'.

1.5 Secularization

1.5a Theories of Secularization

It has been assumed by intellectuals since the Enlightenment that, with the secularization of modern society, and the rational scientific explanations it provides for worldly phenomena, that religion and mystical thinking would eventually become obsolete. Hence secularization theory argues that society is becoming increasingly secular, and therefore distanced, or “disenchanted” from religion (Kemp, p. 97; Wood, 2009). Essentially the theory predicts that religion is in the process of going away, which may be referred to as the “de-churching” of society (Wood, 2009, p. 245). A quick glance at the 20th and 21st centuries, however, tells us unequivocally that this is not the case. Religious fundamentalism of all varieties continues to multiply in both the East and West, as attempts to restore traditional societal values for example. Similarly, New Age and neopagan religiosity has been explained as motivation among some for a “re-enchantment the world” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 11; Kemp, 2004, p. 97; Weber, 2015). Modern spirituality can thus be understood as a reaction to the world's current condition of “disenchantment” (York, 1995, p. 5), and its attempt to re-infuse it with a magical belief system.

Bryan Wilson (1976) defines secularization as the modern decline of community (Wilson, 1976, p. 265), and the “demystification of the world” (Wilson, 1982, p. 149). Wilson quantifies the latter notion as the reduction in the proportion of time that people devote to super-empirical concerns. This involves the displacement of a religious consciousness, one dependent upon charms, rites, spells, prayers, or broadly spiritual concerns, with an empirical, rational, and instrumental orientation to existence. Demystification is also characterized by an abandonment of mythical, poetic, and artistic interpretations of nature and society in exchange for a matter-of-fact description, and a separation of evaluative and emotive dispositions from cognitive and positivistic understandings of the world (Wilson, 1982, p. 149).

Peter Berger (1990) characterizes secularization as not merely a phenomenon of social processes and changing societal structures, such as the separation of church and state, but as a secularization of consciousness (Berger, 1990, p. 4). For example, people today who are invested in the supernatural as a meaningful reality are in the “cognitive minority” Berger argues, as opposed to a secular person who bases their life in a rational scientific worldview (Berger, 1990, p. 6). He insists that forms of cognitive deviance, such as New Age supernatural beliefs, can maintain themselves only within a strong counter-community (Berger, 1990, p. 19). In this way, New Age religiosity would be equated with a sect, which Berger defines as a closed community having cognitive tension with the mainstream world (Berger, 1990 p. 20). And as an effect of secularization, he predicts a loss of such sects, or closed systems of deviant knowledge (Berger, 1990 p. 21). Whereas modern open systems of knowledge, he believes, are more likely to thrive in a pluralistic environment.

Secularization also occasions a shift in the locus of power and methods of societal control. As social systems become less dependent upon supernatural beliefs and mores, they

become more dependent on technical imperatives to provide structure and order (Wilson, 1976, p. 266). Mentioning examples such as traffic lights, time-clocks, condoms, and credit cards, Dobbelaere (2006) contends that modern systems of control have become “impersonal and amoral, a matter for routine techniques and unknown officials” (Dobbelaere, 2006, p. 144). In general, religion as a way of thinking, and as an institution for organizing social existence has lost influence, at both the societal and individual levels.

However, there is also the modern transformation of religion outside the scope of religious authorities, often on an individual basis (Dobbelaere, 2006, p. 143), which certainly fits with New Age forms. From an organizational or structural perspective, Dawson (2011) suggests that “traditional religions struggle in changing societal environments, [because] established organizations find it much harder to evolve and adapt novel structures as quickly and easily as newer groups who do not suffer under the inertial weight of inherited structures which are more resistant to rapid modification” (Dawson, p. 30). Employing a Durkheimian perspective, Dawson explains that traditional societies are characterized by structural simplicity and sociocultural uniformity. A small communal society operates via mechanical solidarity, in which social integration is insured by a shared religious and moral universe. By contrast, due to its macro-structural complexity characterized by sociocultural differentiation, heterogeneity, and pluralism, modern society requires an organic solidarity to maintain itself. Members of modern society no longer share the same religious perspective (Dawson, p. 58). Consequently, the overall structural integrity in such a socioculturally diverse climate, that involves multiple societal domains when compared with a traditional society, is held together by alternate social structures such as politics and the economy. There is in modernity, however, no unified acceptance of a single historical truth claim. Nor are there shared doctrinal or ritual repertoires, such as existed in medieval life,

insured in the latter by a shared religiosity. Therefore, other narratives and practices must surface to replace the ones previously provided by religions (Dawson, p. 59).

Steve Bruce (2000) agrees, arguing that due to the complex nature of modern society, social differentiation occurs, in which classes fragment into new sorts of groups. Processes of multiplicity also include structural differentiation, in which new and variegated domains, contexts, and environments emerge to contain their dynamics, technical specialities, and theoretical expertise. Together these factors work to create a richly diverse societal terrain, with a wide variety of different demands, material experiences, knowledge systems, and contrasting worldviews, which progressively undermines traditional religion's all encompassing meanings and explanations (Dawson, p. 69). And due to its liberalizing tendencies, the pluralization of society also causes religion to assume less militant forms, permitting greater tolerance for non-believers and other perspectives. This alone could explain New Age eclecticism, and the rise of self-authority with respect to spiritual matters.

However, Michael York (1995) states that what has not been explained very well is the unexpected reversal of secularization (York, 1995, p. 7). How can rational-secular theorists explain the recent popularization of New Ageism, insofar as many of its members are in fact secular people? Research into new religious movements also clearly refutes secularization, because there should be no new religions according to the secularization hypothesis. Bryan Turner (2009) contends that this issue lies at the very heart of modern sociology. He asks, why should the sociology of religion matter from the point of view of sociology as a whole? What is at stake, he claims, is the very nature of the social itself:

Sociologists have been interested in religion because it is assumed to contain the seeds of social life as such. This insight was the real point of Durkheim's critique of rationalist theories of religious belief – as it was also Wittgenstein's. Religion will not crumble before the flames of rationalist critique or the consequences of scientific experiment, because religion is deeply

embedded in the actual social structures that make social life possible. Durkheim claimed that rational objections to Christian belief simply missed the point that religious commitment is bound up with a particular way of life and the membership of a particular community. Religious beliefs rather like the rules of cricket are neither rational nor irrational, but relevant or not relevant to the ongoing existence of a community. The question that faces modern sociology is whether the social is being dismantled by processes such as globalisation, and if so whether religion can still successfully express the form of the life of a community (Turner, p. 194).

1.5b Plausibility Structures

Whether or not a modern person can sustain a religious consciousness depends in part upon the plausibility, or believability of the tenets of a religious faith. Plausibility structures, according to Peter Berger (1990), are the conversational network by which adherents are able to keep a definition of reality going. These may include therapeutic practices, rituals, and other legitimators (Berger, 1990, p. 40). They work best when they are stable, cohesive, and monopolistic “unquestioned and unquestionable certitudes” he argues (Berger, 1990, p. 47). Plausibility structures are the taken-for-granted knowledge that allows us to move with a measure of confidence through everyday life (Berger, 1990, p. 7).

For example, there is a whole apparatus of supporting structures that confirm for the Catholic that their worldview is as natural as a belief in gravity (Berger, 1990, p. 41). In a supportive community, there is affirmation, confirmation, and reiteration of the Catholic notion of reality in the form of specific practices, such as sacraments and other rituals, which ground beliefs in concrete experiences, as well as “a staff of highly trained experts who mediate the therapeutic and legitimating machinery to the individual” (Berger, 1990, p. 41). Plausibility hinges upon the availability of these social processes, most especially if the belief community is a deviant enclave within one's larger society, as is the case for New Agers.

Religious plausibility structures are more difficult to sustain in modern societies, due to the latter's segmented and differentiated compositions. By contrast, primitive or medieval

societies are better able to produce such epistemological certitudes, and to perpetuate them, partly because they are not continually assailed by competing plausibility structures, as are modern ones (Berger, 1990, p. 47). Even so the modern community of faith, Berger suggests, is now understandable as a constructed entity; and plausibility structures can be seen to apply to almost any system of belief, in any time period, whether it is Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, communist, or a belief in UFOs (Berger, 1990, p. 42). However, in a situation in which a wide array of competing worldviews exist, the once taken for granted social reality is compromised. Being fraught by instability and uncertainty a situation of “acute crisis” develops, Berger argues, that stems from the general implausibility of religious beliefs and practices, as they appear in a modern context (Berger, 1967, p. 124).

Due to the pluralization of modern society, and the emergence of competing religious and secular worldviews, “a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality” has occurred (Berger, 1967, p. 127). In this pluralistic climate religious worldviews are forced to compete with alternative conceptions of the cosmos, some religious and others that are secular. This has resulted in a synthesis of many beliefs systems, including the scientific and religious, into what may be interpreted as attempts by New Age individuals to construct coherent and plausible spiritual wholes.

1.5c Arguments Against Secularization

Wilson's (1982) definition of secularization argues that religion ceases to be a significant system for the ordering the social. However, this does not guarantee that all modern people have acquired a secularized consciousness (Dawson, p. 69). The question of when, or under what circumstances does a person adopt a secular worldview, rests upon a couple conditions. David

Martin (1978) argues that whether or not secularization occurs in a society is dependent upon both the character of a given religion, and the societal context in which it finds itself (Martin, p. 24). Martin holds that religion does best in a social milieu characterized by a differentiation between religion and the state, and in a sociocultural pluralism that is respectful of difference and facilitative of inter-faith competition. This may explain why New Age and other forms of religiosity have found such fertile ground in the US, e.g. due to the separation of church and state that has existed as a defining feature of US national identity since the nation's inception.

Despite his earlier views, however, Berger declares that secularization theory is not supported, and that the world is “as furiously religious as it ever was” (Berger, 1999, p. 2-3). As mentioned above processes of modernization have provoked powerful counter-secular movements, such as Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. However, in lieu of a religious monopoly (e.g. Islamic theocracy in Iran), or complete sectarian withdraw (as with the Amish), in order for an anti-secular religion to enjoy long term success it must maintain a balance between rejection of, and adaptation to, modernity (Berger, 1999 p. 11, 5). Although modern society does not conspire to eradicate traditional religion, it generally fails to provide the conditions conducive for its social reproduction (Dawson, p. 71). Whereas the bricolagic nature of new religiosities may in the long run prove to be more adaptable sorts of spiritual systems, because of their variegated nature, that is isomorphic to modern societal differentiation and specialization.

However, due to the breakdown of plausibility structures, urban industrial societies have undermined the once taken for granted certainties of social existence. Since this is an uncomfortable, if not intolerable condition for most people, Berger argues that any movement, whether religious or not, which offers the promise to provide or renew certainty, will find a wide

reception (Berger, 1999, p. 7, 11). Berger contends that “the religious impulse, a universal drive for meaning that transcends the restricted space of empirical existence in the world, has been a perennial feature of humanity” and that it “would require a mutation of the species to extinguish this impulse” (Berger, 1999, p. 13).

1.6 A Phylogenetic Analysis of Religion

1.6a The Nones

The basic human questions which religions purport to answer such as, why are we here?, why should I be good?, and what happens when I die?, are also encountered and interpreted by my subjects using their spiritual systems. The beliefs and practices they embody are a reflection of how they go about addressing these time immemorial concerns. However, these are also balanced against what may be a new question, or at least one that is able and likely to appear more frequently, “well why do I need a religion or spirituality at all?” There is a modern assumption that there exist scientific, i.e. secular, answers to these questions. Part of the dilemma for New Ager is that they not only have many *religious* systems from which to draw their personally arrived at conclusions regarding the meaning of existence, but also *non-religious* ones. Thus, holding a spiritual adherence at all must now be questioned. What sort of rational justifications must a New Ager entertain in order to legitimate their spirituality?

Analysis of new spiritualities often focuses on what individuals do. But one may rightfully ask, can a type of religiosity, so indeterminate that it could be anything, legitimately be classified as a religion? What does it mean if a person is free to choose their spiritual beliefs, values, and practices? Is this distinguishable from a person who does the same in terms of their political affiliations or hobbies? Does it become a meaningless label if one's “religion” is simply

reduced to a collection of one's personal moral and ideological tastes? In other words, is a religion of everything a religion of nothing at all? Because one can draw materials from any religious canon, but also from secular and scientific sources, does New Age spirituality simply dissolve into a rarified form of individuality, and not religion? Or are its beliefs and rituals so watered down that they become the lowest common denominator of religion?

New Age guru Terence McKenna summarizes the quandary in terms of separation and belonging, and as a negotiation of one's individuality amidst an apparent whole:

The irony of humanity is that our individual uniqueness is very real and very important, on one level, but on another level it's fairly illusory. We are all Unique. And we are all the Same. It's a 'coincidentia oppositorum', a Latin phrase meaning 'coincidence of opposites'. You have to hold these two antithetical things in your mind at once, "Unique & Same", in order to correctly perceive the proper level of ambiguity that's resident in Reality. It ain't simple, folks.

According to Mark Juergensmeyer, the dominant religion of Southern California is currently the Nones. A "None" is a person with no identifiable religion, who is however a non-atheist. The perspective of the Nones is a religious one, Juergensmeyer argues, even though it is nameless, and too diffuse to categorize (EIR conference, University of Pittsburgh, 2016). He defines it as a kind of post-humanism: an identity that moves beyond the secular humanist. None-ism is perhaps a non-religious way of conceiving of oneself, which surpasses the secular notion of individuals as embodied creatures limited by their physical bodies. In other words, it extends the definition of a person into metaphysical conditions. It is not, however, the same thing to suggest that individuals have souls, and will someday join their god in an afterlife.

1.6b Post-Humanism

To help examine the meaning of a post-human body, let us use a more obvious, down-to-earth example of this phenomenon. Maintaining an avatar in cyberspace, on Facebook for example, or some other type of virtual reality environment, involves occupying a place with a

non-material body. Plenty of individuals who identify as secular participate in such disembodied existences. Virtually all of my informants maintain an online presence as well, and regard it as a domain where they can express their spirituality. For them it is no more a spiritual or mystical space than is the physical world. According to my informants the whole of life, wherever it is occurring in the moment, is a spiritual domain. Being trans- or post-physical may or may not be religious.

Juergensmeyer's nones may be a new religious paradigm. However, such general classificatory categories seem too broad and sweeping to be useful as anything more than merely generic labels. And so it seems we must look for other metaphors, for the kinds of human expression that can provide insight into the phenomena under question. For example, labels such as "New Age" or "neopagan" may be useful terms for denoting a spiritual *genus*. From a phylogenetic perspective, beginning with the most general classifications for forms of life, a *kingdom* could be equated with the category "religion," representing divisions such as atheism, traditional religions, shamanism, and secular humanism. Specifying religions by type, such as Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Judaic would by this analogy be similar to *orders* of religious phenomena. While denominations or sects of each of these divisions could further be considered analogous to a *class*, such as *class mammalia*, *reptilia*, *aves*, etc., which are equivalent to Catholic, Protestant, and Baptist within the Christian *order*. A *genus* would then be a further specification within a *class*, such as different forms of mammals, e.g. canines, felines, primates, etc. And finally a *species* would denote a singular type of organism. However, even at this level of genetic resolution, each species houses a vast number of individuals who, from a superficial glance, may look identical. Yet each member of the species harbors unique characteristics making them completely original in themselves.

And so, returning to our classification dilemma regarding the complex of cognitive, behavioral, and social processes occurring under the general heading of “new” or “alternative spirituality,” this form of religiosity, even at its broadest levels, is distinguishable from traditional religions. Although it contains some elements of Christianity, it is not Christian. Although members may subscribe to beliefs involving karma and reincarnation, it is not fully Hindu or Buddhist. It may thus be placed at the level of an *order*, alongside other large religious complexes. And so yes, it is a broad spectrum of beliefs and behaviors. On the level of a sect (designated by the above classificatory scheme as a *class*) within alternative spirituality we have Theosophy, Occultism, New Age spirituality, and neopaganism. Wiccans and Druids each represent a *genus* category within *class neopagan*, and within each of those would be different species of Wiccans for example. Also on the level of *genus* within *class New Age* would be New Paradigmers, who are a more contemporary and regional incarnation of the former. The two share many of their core beliefs and traits, just as mammals share many common features that join them together within a *class*. However, what is at the level of *species* in this analysis of spirituality?

New Age is a religious class which contains various subdivisions, New Paradigm-ism being one. Each homogenous group, and individual practitioner, are therefore a species of religiosity unto themselves. Each person, as the creator of their particular collections of beliefs and practices, is analogous to an individual creature possessing idiosyncratic characteristics, that distinguishes itself from other members of its species. Thus, while this study is directed toward a broad category of religious phenomenon, it will nevertheless be focused on a local manifestation of it, e.g. the Peaceburgh spiritual community. But more than that it will endeavor to be sensitive enough in its resolving power to be able to highlight each individual, with their respective

qualities, how they encounter challenges, solve problems, in other words how they *do* this religion, and what they add to the whole. Taking into account the creative mythology, or spiritual personality of each individual will provide insight into the phenomenon as a whole.

1.7 Do People Need Religion?

Peter Berger has argued that the most successful religions of recent times have “engaged with and sought the transformation of modern society as a whole. He described them as “dripping with reactionary supernaturalism” (Berger, 1999, p.4). Berger was speaking primarily about fundamentalist types of religions. However, what he said can be equally applied to New Agers. Immersion in supernatural or paranormal phenomena, making millenarian messianic notions that humanity is on the verge of a paradigmatic shift in consciousness, and the turning of the Aquarian Age, support Berger's contention that “there is no reason to think the world of the twenty-first century will be any less religious” than what has gone before (1999, p. 12).

Luckmann adjusts the definition by pointing out that secularization represents a crisis for institutional forms of religion, and should in no way “serve as a yardstick for assessing religion in contemporary society” (1967, pp. 44, 91). Talking about contemporary religious life Grace Davie suggests that, “like so many features of post-industrial or postmodern society – is not so much disappearing as mutating (1994, p. 198).

Is religion, in the wake of modern secularizing processes, a vestigial structure in the process of vanishing from the social body, as is the appendix from the physical body? If the answer is no, and if religion cannot be dismissed as simply atavistic, then what are we to make of it? If religion is not merely a substitute for the lack of a secular scientific education, to what then is it due? To answer this question, Michael York (1995) suggests that, in addition to reactions

against the social anomie created by secularization, humans have a biological propensity for experiencing both ordinary and altered states of consciousness, and cannot tolerate “ecstasy deprivation” (York, 1995, p. 5). This notion could be classified according to the organismic and/or psychical deprivation categories according to the Glock and Stark (1965) model of religious causation.

Weber seems to concur with York, arguing that, due to technocratic secular rationalism, which increasingly denies modes of meaning making that extend beyond the calculable and efficient, humanity is incrementally impoverished through being unable to accord religious ideas any significance for culture (Weber, 1992, p. 183). These ideas support Berger's assumption, that a quest for meaning forms a foundational component of human existence. By posing a sacred cosmos, religion renders the world meaningful, and humanly significant (p. 65, Dawson). If this is undermined, as secularization theory contends, a “crisis of being” is the result (Berger, 1967, p. 100).

These statements all seem to suggest that humanity simply *is* religious. Clearly there is something about being human that gives rise to religious phenomenon. One assumption that seems to be built into secularization theory is that, due to having access to a modern education, which fosters a scientific understanding of the world, members of society will become increasingly secular in their worldviews. A kind of evolutionary epistemological change will happen, and as a result religion will disappear. This assumption contains a further one: that religion has only existed due to a lack of accurate knowledge about the world; and that any form of religiosity, whether in the past or present, is the province of backward or incorrect thinking. Religious beliefs and behaviors are interpreted from this perspective as mistakes of the past, to be rectified by science. Under this view humanity is conceived of as having evolved out of a

religious mode of knowing the world, and religion is likened to a dead language: an obsolete, or inadequate knowledge system for understanding the real. However, as mentioned above, this is not the case, as religion is still very much alive. But do religious and/or spiritual beliefs and behaviors exist among scientifically educated people?

A quantitative study conducted by Eckland, Sorrell, and Park (2011) surveyed 2,198 tenured track faculty in the natural and social sciences. Subjects were drawn from biology, physics, chemistry, sociology, economics, psychology, and political science departments from the top 21 elite research universities in North America, and included 275 in-depth qualitative interviews as well. It found that 68% of the scientists surveyed considered themselves spiritual to some degree. For some of these individuals, spirituality was even said to have sometimes crossed over into their scientific work, providing them with an added insight (Eckland, Sorrell, & Park, 2011, p. 562). The other 32% maintained a rigid boundary between science and religion, and held what the researchers described as a narrow view of religion that consisted mainly of evangelical Christianity (Eckland, Sorrell, & Park, 2011, p. 561).

Scientists who viewed the boundary between religion and science as more porous were able to recognize important distinctions between various forms of religion and spirituality. They could acknowledge key differences between monotheistic religions and Buddhism for example, and the latter was often described by respondents in positive terms. (Eckland, Sorrell, & Park, 2011, p. 561). While commenting that conventional religion often acts as an impediment to science, (evangelical Christianity was mentioned) spirituality, it was said, has the ability to influence science in positive ways. Those subjects who viewed science and religion as having no conflict were further able to make a distinction between “different kinds of truth, with science grounded in empirical truth, and religion in meaning” (Eckland, Sorrell, & Park, 2011, p. 560).

In light of this data it stands to reason that religion is not restricted to an epistemological function, and cannot be conceived of as only a phenomenon of faulty or unscientific thinking. Because of its persistence into modernity, there must be something else about the human experience that necessarily requires it. But what accounts for the social reproduction of religion? Since it does not seem to be going away either, how does spirituality survive? Dawson asks, “if religiosity is not being engendered or transmitted through social structures and institutions, by what means will future generations become religious and thereby stave off religion's decline and eventual demise” (Dawson, p. 94)? So far as I am aware, no one has conclusively identified the societal processes and social dynamics that will ensure the continuing presence of new spiritualities in contemporary society. Of course, evaluating this problem depends upon where one draws the line for what is to be considered spiritual, and what is not. Recreational activities such as surfing, fishing, golfing, and skiing have been called “spiritual,” though examples such as these may represent merely a subjective valorization of “things that are special to me” (Dawson, p. 93). Even so, perhaps looking for religion within modern contexts using traditional definitions alone, or images of what religion is supposed to look like, may only serve to conceal religious phenomena.

1.8 Or Do They Need Spirituality? Re-enchantment?

From what has been stated above, spirituality may be considered as a postmodern response to the social dislocations produced by modernity. Spirituality is a way of rebalancing or settling instabilities produced by time-space compression, induced by rapid and escalating technological changes (Harvey, D., 1990). It is a modern phenomenon, and a form of self-healing. It equates to applying a metaphysical balm to the wounds produced by the massive

social, psychological, and ecological upheavals that industrialized society has unleashed on people over the last two centuries. Paradoxically what modernity has taken away with one hand, it is able to restore with the other. As cultural forms are lost or displaced, new ones emerge to take their place. In the present case, as traditional religious modes of being become untenable for many, alternative forms of spiritual life are created to take their place, to fulfill the needs religion once supplied. In what almost seems a natural process, to ensure species homeostasis, modernity consoles for what it took by offering to reinvent what it has discarded.

Keirnan Flanagan (2004) argues that spirituality illuminates facets of culture that other concepts cannot supply (Flanagan, p. 5). It fulfills the cultural needs of the moment. York advises caution, however, as to whether or not a “re-sacralization” process is actually under way. He suggests the possible need for a post-secular theory, due to the inability of secularization to explain increasing religiosity in the US, or the presence of the New Age movement itself which involves spirituality among secular people (York, 1995, p. 29 n6). Turner (2009) accords with this view, emphasizing the de-institutionalized, or post-institutional nature of New Age spirituality (Turner, p. 188). I will return to the theme of sacralization in chapters three, five, and eight, as parts of discussions exploring modern notions of the sacred that occur within contemporary political attitudes, ritual structures, and the commodification of spirituality in everyday life.

1.9 The Need for New Interpretive Categories

Finally, “as we are observing the emergence of a new social form of religion,” unless new methodologies and theoretical approaches are utilized by sociology, it risks misunderstanding the character and implications of this change (Luckmann, 1967, 104-5). In

response to the relatively recent discovery of extra-institutional forms of religiosity, sociologists of religion are realizing a need for new interpretive categories, in order to capture the “rapidly shifting cultural and religious landscapes in which spirituality has emerged as an unexpected and pervasive phenomenon” (Flanagan, 2007, p. 17). Because of their ability to detect and interact with micro-level processes, qualitative approaches seem ideally suited for studying new spiritualities. The mutability, amorphousness, and diffuseness that marks these forms of culture requires a method that is equally as flexible and adaptive. But also because this phenomenon is not structurally amenable for quantitative analysis. For example, if one wishes to study an NRM such as ISKON (also known as Hare Krishnas), all they need to do is get permission from the temple president, pass out questionnaires to temple residents, and expect a 90 – 100% return. Clear membership boundaries and cooperative subjects should allow one to acquire highly accurate profiles on Krishna devotees with a minimal amount of energy expenditure. Compare this situation to that of New Agers, most of whom do not display their beliefs as openly as Krishnas do. Alternative forms of religiosity are often socially “invisible” (Luckman, 1967), many existing exclusively within private settings. By contrast Krishna temple groups are concentrated communities of individuals, with clear boundaries separating members from non-members, who are moreover readily identifiable by their characteristic yellow robes, tilaka painted foreheads, or shaven heads. New Age membership is less obvious. Many professional people, for example, tend to keep their unorthodox spiritual views “in the closet” in order to maintain a low profile (Lewis, 1992). This sort of a stance does not permit easy access for quantitative measures of analysis.

While polls aimed at assessing spiritual affiliation have been conducted, the results are often contradictory because of categorical indeterminacy. For example, on polls designed to

determine one's religiosity, people who are spiritual are often missed due to being lumped in with the secular mainstream, and labelled as 'not religious'. It has been discovered that those who call themselves spiritual and not religious, which according to RAMP (European Religious and Moral Pluralism) project data equals 12 percent, might have been classified as secular if a particular question had not been asked (Dawson, p. 88). Deciding these sorts of classifications largely depends on the variables for what is considered New Age, or spiritual, and there is no unified set of criteria for determining this. Also, at its more diffuse extremities, New Age beliefs and practices have transgressed taken for granted boundaries, and infiltrated sub-communities not typically associated with alternative spirituality. For example in America many members of Christian denominations practice yoga, consult astrologers, and believe in reincarnation while still believing themselves to be good Methodists, Presbyterians, or Catholics (Lewis, p. 5). But this does not make them New Age in any definitive sense.

Lewis (1992) states that "it would be nice to have at least a little empirical data with which to shore up our speculations" about the boundaries of alternative spirituality (Lewis, p. 11). That is a perfectly reasonable aspiration. In the mean time, however, there is room for cultural interpretive work to be done in this area of sociology. If nothing else this approach offers the chance to utilize Wittgenstein's 'family resemblance' model of analysis. (Kemp, p. 79). Through gaining a sound understanding of representative small scale New Age ceremonial groups, which could be achieved locally and exhaustively, a sense of the movement as a unified phenomenon may be attained. There is in fact the need for many such smaller scale studies which, taken as a whole, could satisfy Lewis' desire for a 'little hard data'. However, Geertz does make it clear that ethnographic findings are not necessarily privileged, just particular:

The important thing about anthropologists' findings is their complex specificness, their circumstantiality. It is with the kind of material produced by long-term, mainly (though not

exclusively) qualitative, highly participative, and almost obsessively fine-comb field study in confined contexts that the mega-concepts with which contemporary social science is afflicted—legitimacy, modernization, integration, conflict, charisma, structure, ... meaning—can be given the sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely *about* them, but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively *with* them” (Geertz, 1973, p. 23).

Chapter 2 Methods

2.1 The Interpretation of Culture

It should not be surprising that anthropologist Clifford Geertz confines his analysis of religion to mainly its cultural dimension. The centrality and importance that the conceptual category “culture” holds for the social sciences can be roughly equated to that of gravity for physics, disease for medicine, or evolution for biology (Weiland, 1982, p. 785). Thus its study and analysis should be of the utmost relevancy for the sociologist of religion, inasmuch as religion is a cultural phenomenon. But how is the category culture to be defined? In “Mirror for Man” Clyde Kluckhohn (1985) provides over a hundred definitions for this term that include: a way of thinking feeling and believing; a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems; a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior; a precipitate of history; a transmitted pattern of meanings; a storehouse of pooled learning; a total way of life of a people (Kluckhohn, 1985). Geertz presents what he calls a semiotic conception of culture: “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). The remainder of this section will be an elucidation of this perspective, and how it can be applied to the study of modern spirituality.

In his review of Geertz's interpretive cultural theory, Jeffrey Alexander (2008) outlines some of its key assumptions, arguing that “interpretation is central for the human sciences because the inner life is pivotal for social action and collective subjectivity alike” (Alexander, 2008, p. 158). He goes on to define the 'Strong cultural theory' as “a theoretical analysis of the cultural dimension able to cope effectively with those aspects of social and psychological life in which religion (or art or science or ideology) plays a determined role” (Geertz, 1993, p. 125).

Proponents of this perspective argue that interpretation is currently, largely due to Geertz's influence, the favored mode of cultural analysis, having eclipsed 'theory' as the dominant epistemological paradigm. Geertz denounces abstract theorizing, going so far as to say that pursuing a general theory for the analysis of socio-cultural phenomena is nothing short of “meglomaniac” (Geertz, 1983, p. 4). Abstract theorizing, of the sort which dominated the social sciences for most of its history, may permit only a very general conception of culture, e.g. as diverse solutions to universal problems. However, it is conceivable that theory can also arrive at general “grand abstractions” by way of singular, or particular facts, for example, by seeing individual human beings “as representative of certain distinct categories of persons, [as] specific sorts of individuals” (Geertz, 1973, p. 363). Conceivably, this perspective could be applied to an analysis of the types of personalities that inhabit new spirituality culture, in which the sorts of commonalities Geertz alludes to may be observed (e.g. distinct categories of personality types present among the holistic milieu, such as guru, mystic, culture cop, etc.). What is needed, according to Geertz, is a way of “describing and analyzing the meaningful structure of experience apprehended by representative particular persons of a members society at a particular point in time—in a word, a scientific phenomenology of culture” (Geertz, 1973, p. 364).

2.2 Meanings

Mats Trondman (2008) highlights Geertz's turn towards meaning as the foundation for the Strong program's focus upon interpreting culture. Geertz believed that the meanings of symbols are capable of being understood as are the atomic weights of atoms, “as culture patterns, ordered clusters of significant symbols” (Geertz, 1973, p. 363). Religion, or for that matter any

ideology, is considered by Geertz to be an internally complex cultural system, something which provides a general conception of the meaning of life for any particular social group.

Any cultural system that is taken, however, as the internal structure of a specific world, a religion, a language, or the arts for example, must also be understood in terms of its relation to the wider symbolic structures, i.e. in mainstream society. In “Religion as a Cultural System” Geertz defines culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbolic forms by means of which humans communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about an attitude to life” (Geertz, 1993, p. 89). Trondman (2008) adds that culture cannot be reduced to the social, material, or personal dimensions of life, however the autonomy of culture is secured because meaning is taken to be central for human existence. Trondman argues that people rely on symbols and symbolic systems to such an extent that they are necessary for their “creatural viability” (Trondman, p. 207). In other words culture, as an “intersubjective world of common understandings,” serves as an extrinsic source of information upon which humans must rely for their very survival. By this definition culture (extrinsic knowledge), which is composed of systems of symbolic knowledge, compensates for a lack of genetic programming (intrinsic knowledge) that other species have as a means for their survival (Geertz, 1973, p. 92). Religion, politics, and the arts have their own demarcated cultural structures; and the importance that cultural sub-systems have for the individual or group is “as a source of general, yet distinctive conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them” (Geertz, 1993, p. 123)

However, Geertz argues that persons, structures and events are external to cultural patterns, and it is only by “passing through” cultural systems and structures that processes such as persons, structures, and events can be given a specific lived form of meaning. In this understanding of passing through cultural systems and structures, it is impossible to dissociate

individual agency from cultural order. Life and meaning-making are not simply reducible to a given order only, and cultural acts are not enacted without particular beliefs, plans, aims or patterns. That is, such acts do not unfold at random (Trondman, p. 208). Simply put, Geertz suggests that his subject is “the informal logic of social life” (Geertz, 1973, p. 17). This statement hints at the manner in which cultural forms manifest within the processes of everyday life: it is from use in social life that cultural forms derive their meanings, and not the other way around. In other words, cultural meanings do not exist outside of the human agents who make use of them, which includes the meaning of the individual agents themselves! (Trondman, p. 210).

Some scholars believe the need for a Strong program in cultural sociology has arisen due to the fact that, for most of its history, sociology was dominated by “culturally unmusical scholars,” and Geertz answered the demand for “cultural musicality” (Alexander, 2008; Smith, 2008). Focusing his discussion on Geertz's conception of cultural analysis, Alexander (2008) delineates some further assumptions of the Strong program's approach towards apprehending cultural reality and its structural features:

- Proposition 1: Social structures do not exist objectively.

Alexander states that “social scientists do not have real objects to work with. Rather we begin with what our interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those” (Alexander, p. 162).

- Proposition 2: Actors do not have interests as such. Interests are performative achievements.

Like symbolic interactionists before them, Strong theorists such as Geertz are concerned with the unpacking of performed meaning (Geertz, 1983, p. 29). Social roles are conceived of as emerging within particular horizons of meaning, or games. Games, argues Geertz, are little

universes of meaning that possess rules in which some things can, and cannot, be done: “seeing society as a collection of games means seeing it as a plurality of accepted conventions and appropriate procedures—tight airless worlds of move and countermove” (Geertz, 1983, p. 26).

Mapping out what these rules are for ceremonial groups would constitute one purpose for doing their ethnography. For example, consider the performances of a shaman or 'chakra balancer' as being necessary for the maintenance of the practitioner's credibility. Because there is not much in the way of say formal institutional certifications which proves a doctor or teacher to be a master of their field, holistic practitioners must project an exceptionally convincing image of expertise through their cultural performances. A lack of mainstream social capital, such as a medical doctor possesses, may result in a professional insecurity that is only balanced by open displays of 'spiritual capital', and could explain the preponderance of the 'spiritual ego' within the holistic milieu (Cuda, 2013). Though of course doctors and teachers, as well as “spies, lovers, witch doctors, kings or mental patients are [as much as any social position] moves and performances” (Geertz, 1983, p. 30).

- Proposition 3: social structures are at the same time cultural structures (Alexander, p. 162).

Terms which Alexander provides to define a cultural structure include “public code,” “cultural category,” “stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures,” “structure of signification,” “pattern of interworking meanings,” “symbolic structure,” and “symbolic form” (Alexander, p. 162). As semiotic constructions, culture structures are composed of binary codes, such as “values and disvalues” (Alexander, p. 163). An example of cultural binaries can be found in Geertz's analysis of Moroccan poets. In these displays of public poetry, communications by the poets to their audiences are marked by “half ritual song” and “half plain talk,” which Trondman calls

“profaned sacredness” (Trondman, p. 212). The Moroccan poet “inhabits a region between worlds, that is he exists between the discourse of God, and the wrangle of men” (Geertz, 1983: p. 109), and so there is both a sacred and mundane aspect to this poetry, which reflects the two major modern worldviews: the religious and the secular.

Within New Age culture the “this-worldly” vs. “other-worldly” perspectives, i.e. materialist eco-spiritual vs. post-material “ascensionist” spirituality (Ivakhiv, 2001), illustrate a similar sort of ideological polarity. Other binaries include “healing” and “toxic,” the importance of “experience” over that of “beliefs,” the importance of developing “the self” and goals of nullifying “the ego,” and like the Moroccan poets, notions of sacred and mundane. But also, as if in anticipation of having an unwanted scheme of cultural binaries imposed upon them, the prominent theme of non-polarity has emerged in recent years which seeks to go beyond polarities such as good and evil. I will return to a more detailed analysis and interpretation of these dualities in chapters six and seven, by considering how they manifest in popular new spirituality texts and discourses.

2.3 Culture Complexes as Units of Analysis

Culture, defined as “complexes of symbols” and their abstracted meanings, make up the social patterns which form “that inter-subjective world of common understandings into which all human individuals are born, in which they pursue their separate careers, and which they leave persisting behind them after they die” (Geertz, 1993, p. 92). It is this sort of widely shared system of reality that serves as a blueprint for a 'way of life'. Specific intrinsic meaning systems exist for any given culture, but are highly generalized within us in terms of how they work. They are the humanly produced, factually existing cultural structures that are more or less internalized

and shared by members of a particular social group, and make up the three defining aspects of the Strong program's focus mentioned above. In other words, a cultural complex is the total system of 'water' the fish is in, but cannot ordinarily see. For new spirituality groups in the US and Europe, it is Western society itself that makes up, at least initially, the cultural ground of its members. But then spiritual practices, which are largely geared towards achieving self or group transcendence, may be concerned with getting oneself out of this inherited cultural water.

However, a question which may have been looming in the distance now becomes apparent: where exactly, or how, does religion fit within an overall cultural system? Is it one part out of many that comprises a whole, a part that may be more or less prominent depending upon which particular culture one is talking about? Or can the meaning of the word 'religion' be interchangeable with that of 'worldview', as a belief complex woven invisibly into the core of a society, that serves as a way of ordering social reality, whether that is for the medieval Christian, Trobriand Islander, or scientific positivist?

For the purposes of this discussion, let us equate religion with worldview. In modernity religion as a cultural system must compete with the secular cultural order. The modern individual is then confronted with at least two macro-level, often contrasting worldviews, that they must somehow make sense of. This creates within them a duality, and even a multiplicity, given the pluralistic environment of contemporary society in which a multitude of simultaneously held cultural perspectives must coexist. Recalling the Strong program's assumption of there existing a semiotic binary inherent in cultural value systems (Alexander, p. 163), the dualities inherent to Cartesian epistemology (e.g. mind/body, subject/object, good/evil, etc.), and to the modern Western perspective in general, may be explained as a response to the two cultural worlds in

which a Renaissance scientist and philosopher found themselves: the religious and the newly dawning secular one.

Characterizing this duality as a sort of ideological splitting, one that has its roots within Renaissance Europe, as one that produces a phenomenon of cultural schizophrenia, could hold the keys for decoding the meanings of modern spiritual discourses. For example, much of New Age spirituality may be interpreted as a response to the divide created by Cartesian dualism (e.g. between the individual and the group, nature and culture, the empirical and the subjective), which has resulted in the social fragmentation and spiritual deadness characteristic of modernity. This explains the New Age mission of “re-enchantment” that is concerned with reconnecting divisions in the world, and includes repairing the split that has occurred between the “egoic self” and the “true self” (Haynes, 2009, p. 55). This spiritual objective, of undoing duality, essentially creates the New Age value of “holism,” that can be defined as “an inclusive, meaning-centered, experience-focused paradigm that emphasizes the intrinsic connectedness in life” (Haynes, 2009, p. 55). Within this cultural system the egoic self is the one marked by a dualistic perspective that sees only a world of separate things, including itself from the rest of the world. The true self from this perspective would then be a non-dualistic, post-Cartesian way of seeing that enables one to re-integrate their experience of existence back into a holistic worldview.

In summary, pursuing cultural interpretation requires that social scientists focus their attention on the processes of symbolic formation. Some key questions pertaining to a study of New Age phenomena, which may be addressed by this manner of study are: what aspects of the conventional or mainstream cultural whole become illuminated, or activated for New Age individuals and groups, and in what ways, by engaging in culturally alternative spiritual practices? What are the connections between the two culture complexes, the mainstream and

spiritual? And what happens when someone breaks with their inherited culture? If the largely invisible cultural milieu, into which one has been socialized, becomes at some point antagonistic or inimical to their sense of self, does it become more visible? Can the transcendental experiences, towards which New Age mysticism aspires, be interpreted as a system of procedures designed to allow its adherents to see through the usually hidden structures of culture, which include forms of power and social control? If so, what becomes of the individual who pursues this alternative religious course? Do they become further alienated and fragmented from others in society, causing an intensification of social anomie? Or is the result simply the creation of new counter- or sub-cultural collectivities of similarly disposed individuals?

2.4 Methods for Getting at Meanings

To see social institutions, social customs, and social changes as in some sense “readable” is to perhaps alter our whole sense of what interpretation is. But how are we as social scientists to conduct an analysis of cultural meanings? According to Geertz this is done by taking 'meanings' as the conceptual structures which humans use to construe their experience. As mentioned above the Strong theory perspective argues that religion, ideology, or the arts as cultural systems cannot simply be reduced to descriptions of religious beliefs, political coups, or pieces of art (Trondman, 2008, p. 204). In other words, religious culture is not about cults and customs, but the structures of meaning through which people give shape to their experiences, (Geertz, 1993, p. 312) and may be visible to the researcher as cults and customs. However, Geertz maintains that cultural analysis should be about “guessing at meaning, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from better guesses;” and not discovering “the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape” in an abstract way (Geertz, 1973,

p. 20), as if it is always already there in its entirety, only needing to be explored and catalogued once and for all. Moreover cultural meanings are always changing, although the manner in which people do cultural meanings, which gives shape to their experience, may be understood to be similar across cases.

2.5 Textual Analysis

Interpretive readings of culture aim to understand the convictions, feelings, ethics, dramas, and patterned texts of meaning that give life to society. One way of doing ethnography, according to Clifford Geertz, is to read our field data, the observations and actual empirical social events, as if they were a text: “the analysis of cultural forms is parallel with penetrating a literary text” (Geertz, 1973, p. 448). Ultimately what we have from our informants are stories of one sort or another. The notion that we, as cultural observers, can get into the heads of others is mistaken according to Alexander's (2008) reading of Geertz. As scientists we do not really have access to a person's subjective experience of the world. We cannot completely know what they are thinking, or the ways in which they conceive of reality. What we do have empirically, however, are cultural structures: “these are the social texts that are simultaneously the source of individual subjectivities and their expression. We do not have access to subjectivity or consciousness” (Alexander, 2008, p. 161).

To read culture in this way Geertz contends that we need “a science that can determine the meaning of things for the life that surrounds them” (Geertz, 1983, p. 120). We do not have access to another's thoughts, but we can observe that which surrounds it. Psychologist Carl Jung (1986) advocated a similar methodology for the study of the mind. He argued that the mind is present in all of its works: art, cultural artifacts, the structure of mythological stories, music,

mathematics, and in the blueprints of cities (Jung, p. 309). Present within these physical manifestations are the minds of their authors, in the form of archetypal structures that lend themselves to analysis.

Applying this method to the sociology of spirituality, the researcher should begin by analyzing the narratives of particular groups or communities. For example, of importance is the way language is used by the groups in question, including the specific meanings of terms, and the ways in which they are deployed through interactions between members. The following is a representative sample of some of the more prominent New Age discourses: “we are all gods in training,” and that “humans create their own reality in every moment” (Amarasingam, 2009, p. 283). Another popular view is that human consciousness is evolving, and that once a critical mass of humanity becomes similarly aware or enlightened, the remainder of the species will “spontaneously evolve” to join the vanguard in the New Age of Aquarius, in which the earth will be transformed into a “New Eden” (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 43). Stories such as these need to be examined using the Strong program's assumptions about cultural texts. Doing so can shed light upon how their authors experience their meanings. For instance, how do individuals live with such ideas? What do these theories about human existence mean in the course of their everyday lives? How do individuals act upon or use these discourses, in both mainstream and holistic or spiritual milieus?

An outsider can only guess at the meanings of such statements, and how they are experienced by members. How does the researcher climb inside the mind of the individual or group that holds such a view? Perhaps it is only through occupying the 'spiritual habitus' of the individual, that one may come at all close to understanding the meanings of these narratives. By participating in the experiences of a small ceremonial group for example, one is able to share in

their cultural artifacts, to use them in situ with members of the group. Learning and speaking the language of the other gives an outsider access to its meanings. Cultural meanings can be experienced first hand, and subjectively inhabited. Doing this gives cultural researchers unparalleled phenomenological access to their focus groups. In other words, meaningful symbolic structures provide a mode through which they can be expressed and understood.

Geertz argues that the voice of sanity sounds the same in any given cultural context. Whether the text being analyzed involves quantum mechanics or the New Testament. There is a “natural-ness,” or “of course-ness” about the respective beliefs or practices of a group, that constitutes a “simple wisdom” available to its members (Geertz, 1983, p. 85). Any social milieu will have a notion of common sense, defined by what a given knowledge community has made as the authoritative story about the real (Geertz, 1983, p. 84). However, looked at as an example of text analysis, “doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound, but in transient examples of shaped behavior” (Geertz, 1973 p. 10). Speaking about how a work of literature brings out the social history and moral imagination of a culture, Geertz asks, “how does collective fantasy color collective life?” (Geertz, 1983, p. 40).

2.6 Ethnographic Methods: The Value of Doing Qualitative Research

I once had a quantitatively oriented social researcher remark to me, “Ok sure, you could go out and talk to people, but if you really want to understand social phenomenon a macro-level approach is required.” I agree that using demographic information tells us a lot about the general shape of a social landscape. For example, we can learn how many individuals consider

themselves to be religious, or what percentage of working mothers are republicans. However, talking to people is how we as humans experience our existence, unless of course a person's sole means of communicating with others is based on a processing of raw numerical data. While a quantitative analysis can provide a general picture of a large-scale social structure, to understand how it works on an everyday level, which is where people actually conduct their lives, a qualitative approach is critical. Because much of human experience is based on personal social interactions, and is mediated by talk, it seems to me that the best way to approach the complexities of social phenomena is to study it at a level appropriate for its nature. It is through talking with people that we gain access to their subtle thought processes, and how they think about their experiences of such and such. How do people express themselves to others in social situations? People live on the everyday micro-level, and so this is where the analysis should be based. Thus, interviewing individuals to acquire their personal stories, to learn what they care about, and who they spend their time with and why, is where my study is rooted. And observing and participating alongside my subjects has afforded me a phenomenological understanding of their lifeworlds, and how they operate within them as social agents.

My informant's stories are communicated in “the narrative mode [that] is contextually embedded and looks for particular connections between events. The connection between the events is the meaning” (Richardson, Laurel, 1990, p. 13). Accordingly, I will focus analytical attention upon aspects of my participant's texts that harbor meaningful connections, and that yield interesting analyses and discussion. As such this study is not so much based on quantitatively testable hypotheses. I will not be measuring for example what percentages of people believe in what, or how many times a week a certain ritual is performed. Rather it is an ethnographic study of culture that concentrates on particular themes, ones I gauge to be

important, or that hold the potential for revealing aspects about this phenomenon that are possibly obscured at first glance, but are nonetheless salient among my study participants. In other words, I will be examining features of this religiosity that I consider to be both interesting and noteworthy, but which also highlight members' core issues and concerns.

However, an interesting question could be to determine what kinds of people are being drawn to this type of religiosity. Or to note who stayed for longer periods, and who came and went. But would I then be forced to consider qualifying what types of persons exist? If so I would need to set up a classification scheme that stratifies people by their personality traits. I would then have to correlate these with among other things occupational choices, childhood experiences, as well as parental data, all framed in terms of religious outcomes. I quickly realized that interjecting methods of this sort into a qualitative study is dubious at best. Rather than undertaking a social-psychological project of placing individuals into personality categories, and correlating these with group participation levels among different types of groups, I approach each individual as a unique species, with their own motivations and reasons for which groups they joined, and how long their participation lasted. This is not to say that I failed to notice any trends in terms of group membership or ways of believing. These will be discussed at length, but I regard my informants as being symptomatic of the total social milieu under study. Also the range of spiritual beliefs and practices which they display are held in common with others in this cultural cluster, both locally in Pittsburgh, and from what I have discerned from reviewing the literature on this subject, with individuals in other parts of the world as well. However, this study is focused exclusively on people who practice alternative forms of religion and spirituality in the Pittsburgh and surrounding areas.

All generalizations are based on recurrent patterns in the data gathered. So for example,

when I quote from a particular interview, it generally represents common interview themes. Because interviews are semi-structured, not all interviewees volunteered all themes. However, I do not discuss themes or processes that are not commonly shared by the majority of participants. And while this study makes no claims about universal human truths, the ethnographic accounts it provides I hope will allow at least a glimpse into a historically particular and significant socio-religious phenomenon, one that gives a voice to individuals who are otherwise silenced. If nothing else it is an opportunity for a culturally marginalized population to share its collective stories.

2.7 The Merits of Value Free Ethnography: Emic versus Etic Assessments

According to Paul Atkinson, ethnographic study should give clear and precise reports of a culture. Academic studies should seek to distinguish themselves from other types of books written about a subject, such as emic accounts which provide interpretations that may be meaningful, but are limited by the constraints of a particular cultural perspective. A professional ethnography therefore “makes claims that this is an especially appropriate representation. The genres of ethnography give readers and writers exemplary texts against which they can evaluate such claims” (Atkinson, 1992, p. 29). Ethnographically generated texts thus provide expectations of what a social world should look like. I will endeavor to provide an analysis which is taken from an etic position outside of my informants', but at the same time attempts to capture and reproduce an emic, or insider's point of view.

Doing this sort of work for any length of time leads one to realize that, “the boundaries of the field are not given. They are the outcome of what the ethnographer may encompass in his or her gaze; what he or she may negotiate with hosts and informants; and what the ethnographer

omits and overlooks as much as what he or she observes” (Atkinson, 1992, p. 8). Moreover, the field does not exist independent of the work of an ethnographer, but rather consists of what may be written and read about it. Choices are made about what to include and exclude. In this way, a text is constructed out of the raw data of an ethnographic experience. My account will not be a perfect rendering of a way of life. But I hope it is good enough to deliver some of its key features, thus enabling my readers to have at least the foundation for an understanding.

The concepts, meanings, and definitions that appear highlighted in this study issue largely from my informants. Wherever possible I will let their words and sentiments speak for themselves, to which I will apply analysis, discussion, and interpretation. If it appears that I am giving a white-washed account of some phenomenon, I would urge readers to recognize that this is the way in which individuals within this cultural milieu think and speak about it. That is the stance of virtually any person who identifies with a given religious tradition or faith. The beliefs and practices to which one adheres are generally held in high esteem, and is why one adheres to them in the first place. If it seems that I am favoring one religious perspective over another, i.e. neopagan over Judeo-Christian, it is because my informants feel this way. Any person who belongs to a religious system, almost by definition favors it over and against all others, and is arguably why they are a part of it, and not another. But this analysis does not aim to suggest that any religion or tradition is better or worse than any other. Nothing about any system, religious or otherwise, will be taken here as inherently good, bad, positive, or negative, proper or improper.

However, if an examination of some belief or value seems biased, it may not be. For example, when pointing out that monotheistic systems are largely hierarchical and patriarchal, and that new spiritualities are more decentralized and non-biased in terms of gender, it is not the writer's intention to favor either of these structural conditions. Neither is the carnivalesque body,

because of its playful appearance and indulgent aspects, assumed to be superior in comparison with the more reserved classical body. Adjectives like “playful,” or “patriarchal,” possess meanings and associations that are often value laden. They may also be arbitrary. However, what can be reasonably stated about ideologically based forms of culture is that, one may be more ecologically oriented than another, or in fact biased against feminine perspectives. In some cases my informants do argue for the merits of their belief systems against what they see as the failings of a contrary one. In these instances I hope the reader will realize that, though I present these perspectives as data derived from informants, I do not attach myself to either end of any sort value judgement, but rather offer an objective analysis and discussion of such views.

For example, use of the word “magical” to describe aspects of one's beliefs might evoke thoughts and feelings that are pleasant, and that for some connote positive meanings. While for others using this term to define a way of thinking, or an approach to life, may be abhorrent and unthinkable. With any piece of written work, data, or even empirical phenomenon, value judgements are to some degree inescapable and impossible to avoid. It is part of being human to project meanings onto our experiences, and to impose moral and ethical sensibilities onto phenomena that hold no such things. What is good is good for us, what is useful has utility for us, what is harmful is harmful to us. I cannot say that within this analysis there is absolutely zero perspective, or a complete absence of value laden statements. What I can say is that I am cognizant of the possibility of these potentially obscuring the analysis of my data. Therefore whenever possible I will point out, analyze, and expose value judgements when and where they appear. Because they are inevitable, especially in studies of religion in which values and moral conceptions often lie at the center of what is being examined, spending time interpreting them, whether from my own ideological perspective or those of my subjects, may not be time wasted.

And may yield profitable insights that increase our understanding of whatever is under analysis.

I am not an expert in Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, or Buddhism. Where these other religions are referenced in the text is for the purposes of comparison to my informant's type of religiosity. Contrasting new spiritualities with these other helps to show its distinct qualities. I know enough about their basic features to do this, but also insofar as my subjects incorporate aspects of these other types of religion into their own, they are necessary as reference points.

I thus mainly reference traditional religions as sources of previous types of spiritualities upon which my subjects draw for their materials. However, in addition to eastern philosophies which constitute a large influence, there is a body of western philosophy and literature that also holds some of these themes. I cannot adequately engage with this material in the present work, it is perhaps beyond the scope of this thesis. But it offers a rich source of material for a further study. However, I will provide examples of this literary legacy where it has especially influenced and shaped modern social science.

2.8 Defining Otherness

The discourse of the “other” in modern literature is now a thoroughly pervasive feature within anthropological and sociological texts. How otherness is defined, from a postmodern perspective, is based on criteria specific to particular socio-historical traditions. For example, in early Renaissance discourses the ordering intellectual system was largely religious, where otherness was often coded in terms of “pagan,” “heathen,” and “demonic.” During the enlightenment otherness was framed as conditions of “ignorance” or “superstition,” and within 19th and 20th century anthropology it was labeled “primitive.” What forms of otherness exist within the discourses I am examining? And how is otherness defined within a New Age,

neopagan, and/or New Paradigm milieu?

The guiding perspectives that inform this culture are, as has already been stressed, multifaceted. The wide range of beliefs and practices that inform the cultural spaces under analysis, the synthetic nature of spiritual world views, which incorporate religious and scientific intellectual frameworks, makes almost anything permissible. So what positions are antithetical to the New Age in the way that occult paganism was, and still is, at odds with Judeo-Christianity? The subjects of my study are the “others” from the point of view of modern anthropology. So the otherness identifiable within this culture are largely its own members. They subscribe to belief systems that are *other* in comparison with both mainstream society, and traditional religions. From the point of view of a New Ager, however, a muggle, or non-magical or disenchanted person, would be considered an other.

In this analysis, I will be privileging those who have been ideologically marginalized by mainstream discourses. Individuals who identify as New Age or neopagan are often depicted in secular news media and mainstream film as either idealistic dreamers, spaced-out hippies, devil worshippers, or just mentally deranged. Moreover, there is an historical legacy in the west, as individuals who practiced spiritualities outside of traditional religions were eyed with suspicion and contempt. There are also taboos associated with this culture, that are both sexual and religious in character. These themes will be explored in chapters focusing on ritual and structure. But as a result of the maligned views sometimes directed at new spiritualities, secrecy has often been the default position among members. And so whenever possible, and for the purposes of decentering my authority through the telling of their stories, I will be allowing my informant's words speak for themselves. I will attempt to provide an objective account of my informant's beliefs and activities, while the interpretations I bring to them I hope will be as interesting for the

reader as they were for me to experience at first hand. Quotations provided from informants are derived purely from the interview transcripts, and have been unaltered except for the removal of words such as “um,” “ah,” and “you know” that appear frequently, but do not add anything substantial to the discussion.

2.9 Maintaining Marginal Status

Within the Peaceburgh community I am a “limbo member,” someone who understands and empathizes with the groups under study, yet retains an alternative perspective. For the most part this status was acceptable, and most participants welcomed my presence, especially when I was introduced to them by an insider. However, I have noticed that among groups with which I had a passing familiarity prior to undertaking this study, because I am present for reasons beyond group goals, I am viewed by some as being different. Other researchers have conducted interviews at the neopagan community Wisteria (discussed below in chapter’s three and four) prior to myself, for example. Most members were aware of this presence. In the course of communal activities most members either forgot about it, ignored it, or got used to it and accepted it. Yet some responded with puzzled disdain.

For example, the Wisterian shaman, who among other things led sweat lodge events, is also an outdoors enthusiast in everyday life, perhaps indistinguishable from others who avidly enjoy backpacking. Before participating in his lodge newbies are required to take an hour long class. Various aspects of the lodge were explained, and the tone of this meeting seemed very much like what would be encountered in say a preparatory class for mountain climbing. It was delivered from a very pragmatic and instrumentalist perspective. The leader reminded me of personalities types I have encountered in the backpacking community: a veteran outdoor expert,

specialist, and survivalist who was well versed in the physical terrain. Only in this case inflected by neopagan values and beliefs. He knew of the sociologists who came to Wisteria for the purposes of doing fieldwork. When that individual's name surfaced, and probably because he realized this was in part what I was doing there, he sort of chuckled. He was discussing the goals of the sweat lodge, which included some notions involving earth-spirituality, and then remembered that there may be other kinds of goals or expectations, referring to the sociological, and said “yeah there's that, ok whatever.” He was accepting of my presence, but from the slight mocking tone in his voice, one could infer that he was poking a little fun at it. But also from his perspective, since he was after all an expert, that whatever the sweat lodge has to offer he already knows. And so he could not identify with this other motive, i.e. to undergo a sweat lodge for the purposes of gathering social science data. Perhaps viewed from a shaman's perspective sociological inquiry is not a pure, spiritual, or appropriate sort of goal with respect to his practice. Therefore, he may question the validity of such a position, and because he does not share it, presumably thinks it of little value to himself. But he tolerated me as a guest. Others in the local scene were also polite and accommodating as religions generally are to new and potential adherents. However, some members looked upon my presence as suspicious, misguided, and possibly even antagonistic.

2.10 Grounded Theory Reflections

One of the most enjoyable aspects of doing qualitative research is the almost magical emergence of unintended consequences. For example, I did not originally set out to create a chapter based upon *Alice in Wonderland*. It just emerged spontaneously out of my data and analysis. The themes contained in the *Alice* story appeared in my interview transcripts as things

my informants cared about. That is the remarkable thing about doing grounded theory research. The significance of this discourse, and how it connects to the lifeworlds communicated by my informant's, was revealed only via the research process itself. I did not assign any special importance to Lewis Carroll's books prior to undertaking this study. Nor could I have predicted how much they mean to my subjects as adults, in terms of their spiritual cosmologies. While I could say that the *Alice* stories work remarkably well as metaphors for describing spiritual seekership, the truth is that it surfaced so frequently throughout my interviews, to not use it seemed an oversight. The themes present in Carroll's writings are eerily aligned with aspects related to my informant's brand of spirituality, which is probably why they are so predisposed towards the *Alice* texts, as a meaning-making mythology.

2.11 Results

American audiences seek closure. We are a solutions oriented culture, and we crave definitive conclusions (Wolcott, 1990, p. 56). This should come as no surprise, as most scientific research tends to emphasize presenting significant results. However, qualitative studies may not be appropriately disposed towards providing concrete solutions to problems. They raise questions, puzzle over meanings and mysteries, and may offer interpretations that are useful. But a qualitative analysis and discussion of social phenomena may not always supply unequivocal answers.

There is the way the world *is*, and what some think it *ought* to be. My subjects, while pondering their beliefs, almost invariably offer diagnoses of what they perceive to be society's problems, and provide moreover just exactly what is required to fix the problems. Probably any qualitative study has this issue. Harry F. Wolcott states that when studying people in any milieu,

a researcher inevitably runs into the “what we need around here is” perspective of their subjects (1990). I will try to be descriptive without being prescriptive.

2.12 Summary of Purpose

My dissertation is a culturalogical study of “new spirituality,” a quasi-religious subculture active in the Pittsburgh area, known to members collectively as Peaceburgh: A Peaceful Gathering of Hands, or “PGH” for short. The community is composed of dozens of groups of varying size, in which individuals tend to hold multiple and overlapping memberships in a sort of nested structure, with inner and outer levels of belonging, commitment, and involvement. Approaching this milieu ethnographically required gaining access to somewhat unconventional social situations, some of them secluded micro-societies that practice forms of spirituality involving psychedelic and/or group sexual experiences.

The study is composed of ethnography, participant observation, and literary discourse analysis. My fieldwork focuses on small groups that operate largely in the Pittsburgh area, but includes some larger intentional communities that are connected through member's contact. My introduction provides in-depth treatment of this type of religiosity, where it is defined relative to other kinds of religion, as well as on its own terms. I provide a comprehensive literature review that allows an overview of the field, and presents the most compelling aspects of new spiritualities, and situates these within the sociology of religion as a whole.

My chapter on methods explains why I have chosen to use qualitative research techniques as a way to approach this subject. Alternative, often referred to as New Age, spirituality has been described as a diffuse and variegated phenomenon (Dawson, 2011; Kemp, 2004; Sutcliffe, 2003; Shimazono, 1999; Raschke, 1996; Wood, 2009) making it difficult to study. However, using a grounded theory approach to local and specific examples of this multicultural phenomenon, I

have gained an understanding of this dynamic system of inter-subjective social processes. Participating alongside my subjects, sharing in their spiritual experiences, and applying to them a rigorous empirical observation and analysis, has enabled me to render intelligible the otherwise opaque and shifting structures of meaning embedded within individually synthesized collections of beliefs, practices, stories, and discourses. Following this methodology from October 2013 through the Fall of 2015 I completed 25 (~1.5 hour) semi-structured interviews with members of the Peaceburgh and Wisterian communities. These interviews were largely conducted in public settings such as coffee shops and library quiet rooms. A few interviews were held at the homes of informants, and my Wisterian informants were all interviewed on site, during festival events. I also acquired, in addition to observational data, shorter conversations with other members where I was able to get quick answers to pressing questions and themes frequently reported in my longer interviews.

I begin my data analysis by examining the social structures that characterize new spirituality groups, partly by comparing them with more traditional forms of religion. What sorts of leadership do they exhibit? What sorts of communities do they create? How do norms function within these communities? How do individuals negotiate their positions within community structures? And how do these forms of religiosity reproduce themselves? These are some of the questions that are raised.

I next look at how rituals operate in both individual and group settings. This chapter describes and explains some popular varieties of New Age and neopagan ritual structures, and what they mean to practitioners. Differences between group and individual rituals are explored. I also examine the material culture of new spiritualities, which includes sections on art making and

aesthetics. Analysis will show how members attempt to put into tangible form their religiosities that are otherwise subjectively experienced and largely invisible.

The next chapter, entitled “re-enchantment,” is focused on the fantasy dreamscapes that members have created to contain their spiritual practices. These include a neopagan intentional community, replete with fairy shrines, magical gardens, and pirate coves, and a shamanistic community in which Native American style sweat lodges and medicine ceremonies are performed. This chapter explores the meanings of spiritual goals, liminality and play, as well as how the body is practiced in conjunction with values and beliefs.

In a chapter on texts I examine the popular discourses that permeate these subcultures. This includes an analysis and interpretation of spirituality concepts and beliefs, as well as bona fide mythological forms that, while having some relation to religious myths, exist in a class by themselves. Meaning-making among my study participants will be explored, which involves how beliefs are created and maintained, and how plausibility structures operate.

This will lead into a chapter on what it means to be a spiritual seeker. Because they appeared spontaneously during the course of my interviews, I chose to utilize the *Alice in Wonderland* stories created by Lewis Carroll, as a medium for understanding the phenomenological and subjective nature of new spirituality seekership and questing. This chapter includes a section on what my informants refer to as 'psychonautics', a term that derives from 'astronaut'. However, instead of the exploring outer space, the psychonaut journeys into the recesses of their own psyche, via entheogenic substances such as peyote, ayahuasca, or lsd.

Finally, I consider notions of healing from a spiritual point of view. Unlike subjective and ritualistic activities, that are in many ways a retreat from the bustling nature of modern life, some spiritual practices have become conjoined with economic processes. Yoga, meditation, and

various forms of holistic therapies have, over the course of the past couple decades, entered into the mainstream. Issues such as 'the commodification of spirituality', in which individuals and groups attempt to conform alternative spiritual practices into profitable outlets, is a contentious issue within alternative spirituality circles. Questions such as “is it ok for people to make money through providing spiritual experiences?,” or “should this (spirituality) be kept separate from economic considerations?” need to be addressed. This analysis can help us understand how modern individuals are able to negotiate compromises between their spiritual beliefs, and the social and economic demands that come with living in contemporary capitalist states.

While no one has direct access to another's thoughts or subjective experiences, we do have their words. It may seem odd to analyze mystical or transcendental experiences. Or even that this constitutes data at all, insofar as it is fundamentally inaccessible. I do not pretend to share all of my subject's thoughts and experiences. I do, however, have their comments, so I can address how my informants think about these experiences, and what sort of spiritual significance they accord them. Themes highlighted in this study are not necessarily discussed by every informant. But where attention is given are themes that occur commonly in this subculture.

2.13 Research Questions

Some of the questions that helped shape this study, but also emerged from its implementation include: What are new spiritualities? What motivates a person to participate in them? How do new spiritualities compare with traditional religions in terms of ritual practices and social structures? For example are they hierarchical and centralized, or individualistic and decentralized? Are they matriarchal or patriarchal? How does gender function within the Peaceburgh spiritual community? What sort of groups exist within this milieu? What are the group dynamics of various ceremonial groups? What does membership mean within various

sorts of groups? How do individuals maintain the boundary between group and self? How is community defined? How does competition surface within groups? How are beliefs rationalized during the course of everyday life challenges? What sort of cultural spaces permeate this milieu? How is the body viewed in this form of religion? What sort of rituals are practiced? How do my subjects use spiritual discourses to interpret their life events? What sorts of experiences are common among members? And what are meaningful spiritual experiences?

2.14 Social Science as Magic Lantern

Basically, the study aims to discover and explain what members of new spiritualities are doing, and why they are doing it. However, the analyses and interpretations are less about proving hypotheses, and more about presenting certain kinds of worldviews. In other words, I am not setting out to prove anything necessarily. I do not intend to support or disconfirm any specific argument once and for all, in any definitive kind of way. It is more as if I am holding an alien artifact up to a light, in order to reveal facets of it that were previously in shadow and not visible.

What I offer is a glimpse into a way of life that for many may seem strange, or even nonsensical. If this presentation appears superficial to some readers, perhaps it is. Because my informants draw religious material from so many sources, the resulting synthesis of beliefs and practices, although colorful and novel may be, when compared with older and more traditionally rooted forms of religion, superficial by comparison. The expression “out on a limb” may be an apt metaphor to employ. One can posit more established forms of religion as the roots and trunk of a spiritual tree, upon which new spiritualities are at best far flung branches. Resting at the very tips of these branching limbs, like new growth buds, are the individuals who are its

representatives.

Unlike older and more traditional religions, whose canons have been well ironed out and ritualized over the course of centuries, new spiritualities are far more incomplete. This phenomenon is composed of mosaics of individuals who are still in the process of discovering and working through what their beliefs and rituals should be. It is unfinished, indistinct, malleable, and reflexive. Its social structures are still in a state of flux. Those who choose to leave behind what is already established must move into new territory. And like any type of settler they must map out a course, choose a destination, and define the parameters of what they intend to build there. Pioneering new forms of culture is a creative process. Like the artist who takes raw materials from what is available and already exists, social engineers must shape previous forms of culture into a form that reflects their vision. Rather than facing a blank canvas without any instruction or perspective, they take cues from where they have come. They carry with them a cultural heritage, and a cache of values, norms, and ideals that they must reshape to create their new worlds.

The chapters cover a lot of territory. But they do provide the salient and indispensable features of this type of religiosity. Every theme under investigation is pivotal for understanding this way of life. To not include art-making, or the concerns my subjects harbor over commodification, would be to miss critical components of their worldviews. To leave out rituals or mythological beliefs would be to give a skewed and incomplete account of their spiritual-religious experience. Chapter headings are mainly due to the themes that emerged in my interviews, and define what is of importance to my informants.

The task of presenting a culture study today may be more analogous to what early 20th century anthropology saw as its primary goal. A classical anthropologist would go somewhere

exotic and, with words and images, capture a way of life that is ordinary or commonplace within its own milieu. Yet to outsiders, such as westerners, appears as strange and incomprehensible. Thus, the anthropologist would describe, define, and explain these curious artifacts to distant audiences, far from their source. I am doing what Peter Berger infamously refers to as “culture shock minus geographical displacement.” (Berger, 1966). I am showing something exotic to people, however, I am doing it by staying at home. It is as if I found something odd in a neighbor's backyard. After a careful study of the thing, using the appropriate scientific means, I figure out what it is. I then have the task of explaining the otherwise inexplicable object to its unwitting host. That is essentially what I have done with this study, and I hope that the reader experiences the same joy of discovery that I have had in doing so.

Chapter 3 Religion and Structure

I begin my data analysis by examining the social structures that characterize new spirituality groups, partly by comparing them with more traditional forms of religion. Questions that are raised include: what sorts of leadership do they exhibit? What sorts of communities do they create? How do norms function within these communities? How do individuals negotiate their positions within community structures? And how do these forms of religiosity reproduce themselves? Some of the themes discussed in this chapter will also surface later in other sections, as for example within ritual structures.

3.1 Institutional vs Organic Structures

Every religious organization has some degree of formalism or institutionalization. But how does this relate to a religion's day-to-day functioning in terms of creating social integration, value transmission, deviance minimization, and structural reproduction? (Dawson, p. 45) Almost invariably my informants have argued that having “structures” within religious systems tend to create negative barriers that serve to block individuals from achieving their spiritual goals. The structural aspects of a religion that endow them with power, and the possibilities for reproducing themselves, such as hierarchical organization and societally integrated institutional forms, are typically viewed by sociologists as strengths. Yet these are the very features my subjects reject:

There's a hierarchical bureaucratic aspect to religion, to organized religion which has affected the amount of spirituality [it has], that is I think directly [inversely] proportional (Interview with Marco)

According to Marco, a forty-four year old ex-librarian, and long time Peaceburgh member, the more formal structure a religion possesses, the less spirituality it contains. This

statement quietly sums up the differences between religion and what is being called spirituality by my informants. The remainder of this chapter will be an elucidation of this seemingly benign and unremarkable statement. Most of my subjects agree that religions contain elements that are spiritual. But what makes them different from other forms of spirituality? One subject asserted that the differences between religion and (their brand of) spirituality lie in “what is relatively organic versus what has been institutionalized.” It seems this person believes that traditional religious institutions are an abstract and artificially organized form of religiosity, while her own spirituality is more related to “organic” qualities, i.e. it is more grounded and earthly, what Peter Berger refers to as “this-worldly” (Berger, 1967). Organic can also indicate amorphousness, which in this case can mean something free of form, free of artificial structures.

Marco agrees that traditional religions contain elements of spirituality that are perhaps even analogous to his own, such as standing in awe at the mysterious origins of the universe. He amplified his response suggesting “there's always spirituality in any kind of thing that is looking for higher meaning, that's looking to connect people with each other and with the higher source.” However, due to their largely patriarchal and hierarchical social structures, he asserts monotheistic religions are “less spiritual.” When asked how this manifests itself in terms of actual social processes, another Peaceburgh member commented that the organizational structures common to traditional religions create barriers between people:

that's always been my major problem with organized religion, it's the do [and do not], it's the dichotomy it's the irony of it, you have to get so into the one thing but to the exclusion of all others, so that you have to say another's way is wrong (Interview with Owsley).

Marco echoed this statement, and went on to define structural barriers as forms of ideological rigidity and narrowness:

I don't know if you're talking about Coptic Judaism or Orthodox Judaism, because once again they are steeped in something where like a born-again Christian, they are so firmly entrenched

that theirs is the way, when they look at somebody else who might have the same amount of spirituality, pagan or something like that, somebody who reveres the moon and the earth, they don't make that connection with that other person, because they let this ideology and this hierarchical thing get in the way, and that's really kind of sad.

Pushing further the question of what sorts of differences exist between the two culture realms, traditional religions and spirituality, I asked “do the sorts of barriers, such as exclusivity of beliefs or practices, also exist within the alternative forms of spirituality?” Marco answered probably not, emphasizing that alternative or New Age spiritualities are inherently different from religion. Pressing him to explain further, he hinted that organized religions, and Western culture in general, have a history of looking for answers and solutions to problems outside of themselves instead of inside. For example in the past,

I think things were simpler on the outside and more complicated on the inside. And now things are more complicated on the outside and simpler on the inside.

He provided a few examples of how things have become “simpler,” asserting that “we've dumbed ourselves down, we medicate ourselves if we get overly emotional about things, it's like you can't show too much emotion, or you can't be too far outside the box or people will start talking or asking questions.” For Marco the negative backlash against individual eccentricities, and the numbing of curiosity and emotional expression in everyday life, in part defines both religion and mainstream society as being different from spirituality. We talked about this issue in more depth as the interview progressed, and Marco gave additional comments to characterize these differences. He argued that the mainstream world presents him with barriers that block certain forms of self-expression. Also it does not have the sort of social structures, or norms for interacting that he sees as conducive for being in touch with others on deeper levels:

we're living in the kind of society where you just don't really share too much information with anybody unless they're friends and what not, and so it's sort of like “hi how are you?” “Good and you?” and that's pretty much, you know we're living in the “thank you have a nice day” society.

Moonflower, a twenty-five year old neopagan who I interviewed during the Summer Solstice festival at Wisteria, called this idea of mainstream society the “muggle world,” i.e. the everyday social world that she has to interact with economically (see section 3.10e below). But within which she does not feel fully free to express herself, especially in terms of her spiritual beliefs that she argues run counter to the “normative structure” (Interview with Moonflower). From my informant's perspective, in everyday muggle society people maintain what appear to be superficial levels of connection with each other. It is not so much that people are choosing to have shallow interactions because they are un-magical. But given the available options for interacting socially, it is easier for people in modern societies to resort to quick exchanges of polite gestures, ones that do not take up a lot of time or energy. Individuals are therefore not burdened with the responsibility of always having to relate the complexities of their life stories. Such brief encounters excuse people in a fast-paced world from having to communicate deeply felt emotions to every single person they encounter. The tacit agreement we all seem to make, in the interest of simplifying our public interactions, is to keep things light, and to maintain a 'no strings attached' level of social commitment, in case we need it.

In *Metropolis and Mental Life* Georg Simmel (1903) captures this impression with his portrayal of a modern metropolis. He suggests that in a city, the informal and emotional, perhaps illogical relationships between people that are based largely upon individuality and personal idiosyncrasies, have been displaced in favor of a more quantitative and intellectual kinds of social exchange. An atmosphere of depersonalization is created within cities due to the fact that social relationships therein tend to be negotiated mainly through a numerically oriented money market, in which there is cultivated a more rational and calculating egoism (Simmel, p. 12). Furthermore “the calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money

economy corresponds to the ideal of natural science” (Simmel, p. 13). Thus the values of positivism, utility, and materialism having become the dominant ideologies in modern society have resulted in a 'clockwork orange' type of social structure. That is, an artificial, precise, mathematically measured and governed existence that is above all else practical, and obsessed with punctuality and certainty at the expense of more natural organic qualities such as ambiguity and spontaneity, which are perhaps too impractical to survive within the scheme of a metropolis and its notions of progress. From this definition of life then we must accept that the larger span of human existence, which is informal and indigenous, and characterized by personal, intimate, and spontaneous processes is, from the perspective of the modern rational citizen, an “ill-afforded waste of time” (Simmel, p. 13). An objective specimen of life is thus created, which must necessarily rule out all subjective human concerns such as emotional bonds, spirituality, sentimentality, and arguably morality, because these social factors are unpredictable, and ultimately do not lend themselves to capitalist profit making.

Whether or not we accept Simmel's characterization of modernity, being socially detached is a sensitive issue for individuals in a spiritual community. Aware of the tensions produced by curt interactions, Peaceburghers will often go out of their way to establish what they feel are deeper and more thoughtful sorts of connections with others. I have observed members greeting others with extended super-hugs, and practicing a “staring exercise,” that entails looking into another's eyes for a prolonged period “so that we can really see each other.”

3.2 Structure and Power

I interviewed Moonflower in her vendor's tent at Wisteria, in late June of 2014. She identifies as a polyamorous housewife, and maker of mead, candles, and other crafts, and whose

husband hosts blacksmithing workshops during festival times. The two of them can be seen during the day in their vendor tent, selling various products, or showing curious onlookers how to make swords from scrap pieces of iron. She also acknowledged the notion of internal versus external perspectives that Marco raises above. However, she perceives this dichotomy as a technique of control and repression by institutions, that manifests itself within patriarchal cultures as the regulation of bodies, but also as economic pressures. The non-conformism of her spirituality is experienced in part as a release from the controls of the dominant culture many feel themselves trapped in:

I think that a lot of people are experiencing the dissatisfaction from various causes, their sexual practices are being highly regulated, the economy really sucks right now, and people don't have a lot of autonomy in their jobs, patriarchy sucks, you know people are suffering for all of these reasons, but maybe don't really understand the source of their suffering, and so I think that most folks have been trained, through traditional religions to look for some sort of solution outside of themselves, instead of within themselves. I think that's the biggest difference (Interview with Moonflower).

This individual moreover framed the outwardly oriented structural perspective as a manifestation of hierarchical monotheism, which she asserts is an example of a “Salvationist” religion, i.e. one in which humans are inherently flawed, and need to be saved by an external power. She rejects the structured path to salvation, or enlightenment, that she insists underpins the sort of Christianity she was raised on. Her mantra of “we don't need a god or a savior” clearly seeks to shift the locus of power away from hierarchical institutional authorities, and accords well with New Age forms of religiosity, in which individual agency is emphasized. However, this form of personal empowerment via spirituality could be perceived as a threat she argued, and not only by religious authorities:

This is why people are afraid of Satanism, it's because that's very much like we are our own gods, we are the people in control of our lives, we don't need anybody else, and like I don't identify with Satanism in any way, but it's still like that's the thing that people seem to hear the most: is that we don't need a god or a savior.

To be simply godless might be forgivable from the perspective of religious authorities. Being an atheist, for example, is not necessarily antagonistic to adherents of mainstream religion. And since most atheists equally do not believe in other deities, they are not necessarily viewed as religious threats. However, because Moonflower's spirituality operates beyond the bounds of conventional religious structures, but is still in religious territory, it is eschatologically dangerous, and thus frequently condemned she believes. In other words, by denying God's authority over one's eternal soul or spiritual essence, automatically casts one as evil by default.

The oppression and dehumanization of individuals, in the form of unyielding dogmas and institutional bureaucracies that seek to control beliefs is why, according to my informants, traditional religion is less spiritual. And to show defiance in the face of accepted forms of social control may categorize one as a religious deviant, which in the above example amounts to placing one in league with the devil or other dark forces. The exercise of power over individuals, i.e. how a person is subjugated by a power structure in the form of rules, religious laws, or commandments, may also equate to deterministic barriers, insofar as one's ultimate spiritual destiny is decided by it:

here's what you have to do to get to Heaven or whatever. And here's how you reach enlightenment, and you have to follow these steps, and pay these people, and spend this amount of time to save yourself, and yeah that seems absurd to me, it's an abuse of power (Interview with Moonflower).

Peaceburgh informant Aryana, a forty-three year old university teacher who lives in Regent Square with her two young sons, also marked the difference, suggesting that “religion is something created by man.” Her use of the male gender in the statement below may be deliberate. From her experience, it seems that the rules, structures, and institutions common among organized religions, such as the Catholicism in which she was raised, tend to be

dominated by a patriarchal perspective that has historically repressed the feminine kind of spirituality, as many of my informants have also argued:

Where I think with religion there's rules that you have to abide by to kind of fit into that community to be accepted or that you have to follow, you know that are manmade, or created by man.

According to these statements religion is artificial (i.e. man-made) while presumably her spirituality is considered natural. As I understand this point, because spirituality emanates from within the individual, it is more genuine or authentic. Moreover, it takes root spontaneously, and follows an organic pattern of growth rather than being imposed upon one externally or by force. Being largely a personal and subjective phenomenon, it is ordinarily not an abstract belief system constructed outside of a person's direct experience. Nor is it governed by centralized authorities as some organized types of religion are. My informants rather see their spirituality more as an extension of nature's life energies. They are, in other words, unvarnished expressions of religious/spiritual impulses, as opposed to something written down as a law that must be dogmatically adhered to in order to avoid negative social consequences.

And sometimes people blindly follow those [rules] even though they may not resonate with them. Oh! (Interview with Aryana).

Like many of my informants Aryana was raised within a monotheistic religious tradition, and did not enjoy being forced to abide by its dogmatic prescriptions. She argued that traditional religions typically have rules, which distinguishes them from her kind of spirituality. Peaceburgh member Star seems to share Aryana's dissatisfaction with mainstream institutional structures:

There are a lot of rules, [and] I think you have to fit into a certain form, like a mold, they want you to fit into a certain standard by following rules. I think that's kind of our common society, eventually we're supposed to fit into [it], they mold us and we have to follow these rules and laws, and I feel like religion goes right along with that. [They both possess] governing structures, where I think that with [my] spirituality, I wanna say that you are the master of your journey or your life.

Part of what these members value is an individual's right to choose their beliefs and practices. Both disfavor a religious authority having that power over them. Star equated religious passivity to being a kind of zombie, which for her means unawakened, “Like I think that idea [of a] zombie is where that comes from, that we walk through life kind of asleep, and just going through this mundane life” (Interview with Star). Aryana expressed a related idea, that “spirituality for me is action, it's not something abstract, it's action based.” This notion is embodied by her practices which are active, and include running and outdoor pursuits, and agrees with the general approach to alternative spirituality which emphasizes practices over beliefs. It is a practical approach to life based in the here-and-now, that is direct and unmediated by authorities, and not overly concerned with conserving structures or rules from earlier time periods. Most of my informants have respect for past ritual structures, especially ones that are ideologically aligned with their own, such as the animism or paganism of traditional and indigenous societies. But they do not display the same sort of emphasis that monotheistic religions place upon history, and conservation of religious traditions:

You're here now and so it's about what you do now that matters. I don't know about yesterday or tomorrow, but now (Interview with Aryana).

Loki, a journalist and editor of the Pittsburgh based magazine “Point of Light,” who is also one of the founding members of Peaceburgh, drew a distinction between religion and spirituality, in terms of the type of dialogue that occurs between adherents, and what they are adhering to:

Religion is a set of guidelines about having a conversation with the divine. Spirituality is actually having the conversation, no matter what structure you use [...] We embrace some religions that we're comfortable with, but its very much more about having the conversation, and part of that conversation with the divine is also recognizing the divine within each of us, and trying to draw that out of a person as well, have that conversation with another divine being, so I was trying to help that other person radiate their own divinity.

Loki's notion of a conversation reflects Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative interaction, which he argues must be symmetrical and non-coercive if it is to yield understanding (1984, p. 392). The conversation is moreover entered into freely, and occurs between equals. In other words, new spiritualities are not about submitting oneself to the prescriptions or judgements of an all-powerful god. Loki states: “what separates us, what's the norm for the Peaceburgh community, is that we know that we don't need religion to have the conversation.” When notions involving power emerged in my interviews, usually of institutional power being exerted over individuals, informants were quick to list the aspects of formal religions that they perceived as being responsible, such as hierarchy and patriarchy, etc. Upon being asked where power exists within alternative forms of religion, (for example 'how does power show itself there?') notions of personal agency were enlisted:

It's in us, it's in the interactions that we have with other people, it's in the work that we're doing, the power's here. We have the power to create what we want to see in the world, and you know we're not waiting on somebody else to come and do it for us (Interview with Loki).

This statement evokes aspects of prefiguratism, or the notion that individuals practicing alternative spiritualities seek not to follow, but to create the types of worlds they wish to live in. This will be discussed below in greater detail. However, before doing that I would like to continue the analysis of religious structures, and what they mean to my study's participants.

3.3 The Structural Barriers of Institutions

The organizational dimensions of a religious institution pertains to its concrete structures and formalized processes. From goal setting to finance management to conflict resolution and identity maintenance, formalized organizational processes determine priorities, channel resources, and entrench authority (Dawson, 2011). When asked if her spirituality could be

considered a form of religion, one of my Wisterian informants Persephone mentioned that she in fact belongs to a formal church association, Unitarian Universalist. Moreover, that she actually went to school and trained to become a minister of this faith. She explained that she belonged to (until very recently) a non-traditional, very eclectic form of Christianity she called “Inter-spiritual.” For example, this group routinely incorporates aspects of Buddhism and Sufism in the form of meditational exercises, and well as hosts pagan ceremonies. I later discovered that several of my subjects also maintained an affiliation with this Church. They explained it is not uncommon to find pagans present at the church, because it is very ideologically open and welcoming, e.g. they do not frown on differences in sexual orientation or religious belief. Yet, even though ideologically more open than other forms of Christianity, the organizational structures Persephone encountered within this faith still presented her with troubling concerns:

So for example Unitarian Universalists will consider themselves often to be different than organized religion, like they kind of hold themselves to be somehow different because they're non-dogmatic, and non-creedal. But to me, now looking at it from the perspective that I have, it's so institutionalized, it's no different from any of these other religions. I mean there's something to be said for organization, but I think that you can over-organize, and become attached to [it], like you might not be attached to your beliefs, but you sure are attached to this way of doing things.

This informant exclaimed that she loves studying religion, and practicing different things, “I have great respect for all of the world’s major religious traditions, but I think they tend to get pretty fucked up when they’re institutionalized.” She amplified her statement by stating that, even though the UU Church is far more liberal than either Catholicism or Evangelical types of Christianity, its organizational structures and ways of doing things were simply too oppressive for her to continue within it. During our discussion, she related how horrible and extremely troubling a realization this was for her. She had after all moved her and her husband all the way to Cleveland for a job opportunity, working as a minister in the church. And so, it was not a flippant decision for her to leave this group. She was fairly committed to her situation, however

she stated that after a period of trying to adapt, while “suffering tremendously,” she realized that she was simply “not cut out for this stuff.” She concluded the account by mentioning that, during her exit interview, she was glad when the director of the program called herself an “institutionalist.” This admission by the church authority confirmed in Persephone the feeling that she did not belong with this organization. Thus her “quest” as she called it, for a spiritual home, was reinitialized.

Her story accords with many of my subject’s comments regarding structure, and how it can get in the way of accomplishing one's spiritual goals. It seems clear from Persephone’s statements that spirituality, as it is understood and practiced by my informants, is incongruous with institutional structures:

I think, where it get's screwed up it doesn't usually have to do with the actual spiritual practice of it, it has to do with everything, the whole institutionalization of it, the whole structure that's built around it.

As a way of responding to the dilemma of ideological exclusivity, another individual suggested that her strategy has been to “take the philosophy [and] reject the hierarchy” (Interview with Moonflower). In her case she identifies strongly with Thelemic philosophy, but she does not appreciate the manner in which it is practiced in the OTO (Ordo Templis Orientis: a theosophical order affiliated with neopaganism), because of the hierarchical structure of its groups and rituals. She incorporates its philosophies and practices into her life, while discarding the structure of for example the ranking system, in which individuals are stratified according to milestones achieved. Its organizational structures are similar to the sorts of badges one receives in organizations like the Boy Scouts, or even the military. Clearly what is being rejected by my informants are the organizing principles of a religion, and not necessarily their philosophies. Marco, Aryana, and others have adopted a “believing without belonging” position, as a way to

bypass the hurdles of religious exclusivity (from Interview with Niffer).

3.4 Structure versus Anti-Structure

Peaceburgh member Loki reinforced these notions, stating that organized religions are a bit *too* organized and rigid for him. Nevertheless, he went on to explain that organizational structures are useful within religions, because they can serve as containers for an otherwise unfocused or undisciplined spiritual expression. Traditional forms of religion encourage social cohesion, insofar as they conduct the ceremonies, rituals, and rites of passage necessary for orienting people within and around a religious milieu. These structures help facilitate the social aspects of a religion. But then, according to this subject, “the structure wants control.” This person had a historically informed worldview, and interpreted my interview questions from this perspective. He contended that initially, early in the life of a given religion and during its formative period, individuals are able to explore their spirituality in a group context, and with semi-autonomy:

The spirituality says “you have ultimate control,” and so then the religion comes together and it creates a structure, and has a *hierarchy*, and then that hierarchy becomes jealous of this other thing, this spirituality coming through it, that gives people self-autonomy (Interview with Loki).

According to Loki's definition, a religious structure emerges as a vehicle for particular sorts of experiences that are resonant with an adherent's spiritual aims. However, it then becomes a stifling obstruction, insofar as social structures inevitably produce people who become attached to them. At this point my subject cited a few relevant quotes from what he called “Esoteric Philosophy,” a form of Gnostic Christianity made popular by Alice Bailey and other millennialistic Christ-aquarians during the first half of the 20th century (Bailey, 1925; Hanegraaff, 1996). Also associated with the “Mystery Schools,” these teachings are claimed to

be derived from nascent Christianity, as originally practiced by Jesus and the Essenes it is argued:

- “Beware the castle you build for yourself today for it will become your prison tomorrow,” and
- “Evil is only good that has outlived its usefulness”

Joseph Campbell seems to agree, stating that “the wicked thing about collective faiths, whether they be prehistoric or historic, is that they all, without exception, pretend to hold encompassed in their ritualized mythologies all the truth ever to be known. They are therefore cursed, and they curse all who accept them, with what I call the “error of the found truth.” They set up against the revelations of the spirit the barriers of their own petrified belief, and therefore within the ban of their control mythology, as they shape it, serves the end of binding individuals to whatever system of sentiments may have seemed to the shapers of the past (now sanctified as saints, sages, ancestors, even gods) to be appropriate to their concept of a great society” (1968, p. 389).

Loki continued in this vein, asserting that:

The Esoteric Philosophy are the core spiritual teachings that started every single religion on the planet, but that every religion eventually turned on it and attacked it, because again it outlived its usefulness, it thought that the structure became more important than the information coming through the structure.

It is clear from the statements above that structure is something to be avoided, as an intrinsic danger built into religions, that can potentially undermine an individual's spiritual goals. Driving his point home, Loki suggested that religious institutional structures sooner or later become overbearing and stifling barriers, keeping individuals from having spiritual experiences. When questioned about what he saw as the major differences between religion and spirituality, he mentioned the joint problems of rigidity and hierarchy inherent in traditional religious forms.

But he also displayed some anxiety over whether modern alternative spirituality movements will also inevitably coalesce into a “structure,” that becomes more important than the spiritual experiences it is designed to create and allow for:

I think it was we wanted no structure, because we just had this inherent understanding that structure would eventually lead to, and this is another one of those esoteric understandings, it's like you crystallize a structure to hold things together, but then after a certain point the structure becomes more important than the stuff you're holding together (Interview with Loki).

Will the groups and communities, in which so many of my subjects seek belonging, eventually create stable social structures? If so will they over the course of time expand their spheres of influence? And when they have grown powerful enough, and enough adherents become attached to them, will they at some future point assert themselves against their founder's teachings, and stand in the way of their original intentions? Will their organizational structures rigidify to the extent that they become as dogmatically binding as Loki argues “all the religions on the planet” have thus far done? If so, is it structureless spaces my informants seek in which to house their group practices? But what does this mean? What does that look like within this form of culture? Can structurelessness be compared with notions of leaderlessness that exist in other types of social movements? To answer these questions, we will look at what individuals (Marco, Loki, Gem, Niffer, Moonflower, Xaena, etc.) are doing within spiritual communities, and note if definitions of structurelessness emerge empirically, from out of my informant's words and actions.

3.5 Structureless-ness and Spiritual Anarchism

One way my informants defined structurelessness is through communities arising spontaneously, and coming together around elective affinities. One informant voiced this idea in

his definition of New Age:

It was pretty clearly laid out over a hundred years ago that the new spirituality would be kind of what you just described is circles of people would come together, and they would have no name, no structure, no form, no agenda other than to just sit together as a community and learn more about spirituality, and practice any techniques they came across. That was predicted in like the 1890s (Interview with Loki).

The way he differentiates structural elements within spontaneously arising communities is that they are a result of *free association*. This is in accord with scholarship on new religious movements that shows that things formerly referred to as cults, or looser forms of religiosity, often emerge spontaneously, coalescing around a charismatic leader for example (Kemp 2004; Campbell, 1972). Although there do exist leaders within the spiritual communities under study, e.g. elders, shamans, and other sorts of spiritual life coaches, for the most part individuals are structurally on a more equal footing, even with authorities. So the freely emerging associations occur largely among equals. Whereas a cultic leader would typically devise a communal structure that is essentially hierarchical, whether this is within an idiosyncratic form of Christianity, as in the case of a Jim Jones or David Koresh, or a religious system as in the case of Krishnaism or Scientology. However, among Peaceburghers and other alternative spirituality communities, the structure is a shared creation by freely gathering participants:

Free association is a natural yearning of inward, it's a natural [as] it comes from within, but it's a calling to find other people who believe the same thing that you believe, we believe, and so we naturally find each other, and because there is no structure that supports this, we create our own structure (Interview with Loki).

Another Peaceburgh informant Niffer described it as a kind of spontaneous convergence of large containers of non-denominational, non-limiting, non-discriminating, pro-diversity, pro-community, [and] pro-imagination, and there is definitely a need for this between people.” For Gem notions of structureless-ness seem to be intrinsic to her spiritual community at Wisteria. They are embodied in the sorts of freedoms that come with “being outside, and not being

restricted by the pressures of the normative society in terms of very simple things like having walls around you, it's a chance to sleep outside. But it's also a safe place to shirk norms of clothing and dress and behavior, sexual identity, gender identity, and state of consciousness.”

That being said however, once a group does form, Peaceburgh groups such as OM or the Owl Tribe, and a structure is erected, what happens next? Once a group's specific activities are designated, its meeting times are scheduled, and its mission statement decided upon, do they become in any way binding? When this is already established, so that when a new member arrives and are submitted to them, what happens? Do pre-existing group structures interfere with the personal aims of individuals?

With a few exceptions, I have found that these group structures are seldom very rigid or binding. Where they do exist, they are usually adjusted to suit the needs and interests of currently attending members. The problem for new spiritualities is less that a structure is too rigid, or that it interferes with an individual's goals or spiritual rights, but that it continues to exist at all. Groups such as the ones affiliated with Peaceburgh not only exhibit transitory membership, but are themselves often temporary. However, it is interesting to note that while many of these spiritually inclined associations exist only temporarily with new ones appearing all the time, such as the metaphysical meetup group “Beyond Books,” it does seem that the groups tend to be composed of the same individuals.

In general, my informants tend to emphasize qualities such as flexibility over exclusivity, and autonomy over authority. It is largely believed that the reasons for exclusivity and hierarchical structures, inherent within traditional religions, are to serve as forms of control over their adherents. But many also seem to be saying that 'structure' is the inevitable result of any group forms of spirituality.

3.6 Holism and Structure

The structures of traditional religions encourage deindividuation, a state in which a person loses their sense of individuality in a group situation. Whether in the East or West, one is urged to relinquish their selfish desires, greed or avarice, and dissolve their egos in order to serve the community. However, within the New Age ceremonial milieu, an individual's personal goals are often permitted greater latitude for expression. For example, members are expected to acknowledge and respect another's personal journey. This group ethos can be observed in certain neopagan ideals such as “the Wiccan's Rede” which states, “An it harm none do as you will” (Harvey G., 2011, p. 38). In these contexts one is permitted to have their own experience, and to freely explore their spiritual goals, so long as they do not interfere with others doing the same.

Yet there are also goals that necessitate shifting from an egocentric to an ecocentric perspective. Transcending one's ego is an important part of being on a spiritual path, and this is true for traditional religions as much as it is for new ones. Learning to let go of one's attachments, whether these are fears or desires, is often stressed as a core spiritual goal within Buddhist thought for example. Predictably prescriptions that stress deemphasizing egos appear in group milieu, where they are likely to cause the most trouble. Where an emphasis upon collectivism exists, there is a corresponding de-emphasis of individualism. Diminishing the ego, and merging one's consciousness with others or with nature, has become a popular trope in the holistic milieu. Tied to this are informant's notions of harmony and heightened awareness. Connected to ideas of holism are notions of mysticism. For example, meditational practices often have goals of achieving transcendental or mystical states of being, in which one moves beyond their small personality to join a larger or cosmic whole.

This is another thing that all of us Peaceburgher's recognize is: there's no difference between mind and body. We are one solid unit of mind, body, emotion and spirit, *there is no separation* whatsoever, there's no separate system, that's what holistic is all about (with Loki).

Mind and body are, within this worldview, meaningless concepts by themselves. My informant gave an interesting definition for 'holistic':

Everything is part of a big whole so we see our lives, our energy field, our planet everything we see is a whole, so it's a holistic view. If you want to have a conversation rather than just revere the structure, [that's] how we have the conversation.

For Loki holism is defined as a conversation, which he earlier explained as an individual's direct communication with spiritual forces and energies. By “revering the structure” he means to appreciate the aesthetics of something, for example acknowledging beauty in a person or a work of art. In this case a belief or ritual can be revered as separate artifacts. Its aesthetic qualities can be studied and enjoyed. But for Loki that is not a holistic experience. In other words, if the structure has been abstracted from the spiritual process, it is no longer a spiritual process. Similar to the notion that clapping with one hand is not possible, or that it takes two to create a dialogue.

3.7 Intersubjectivity – Self and Group

But in many respects spirituality is experienced by individuals separately, through isolated behaviors such as reading occult literature, doing yoga, or meditating at home alone. An individual may be perfectly content to keep their level of spiritual involvement at this personal level. However, many in the holistic milieu attend gatherings, meetings, workshops, and participate in various forms of ritual activity such as sweat lodge ceremonies. These venues thus offer spaces for the sharing of subjectivities.

The need for people to establish, or rebuild, supportive communities has been addressed by sociologists partly as a response to modern conditions of social anomie. What has not been

discussed thoroughly is how these new communities are not simply fulfilling basic communal needs that have been lost. Contemporary spiritual communities, though they may provide some of the same sorts of functions and experiences that medieval ones did, possess a distinctly original character. The modern individual, although biologically, psychologically, and socially similar to people from earlier historical periods, is a new and unique species of humanity that could only exist in the modern age, insofar as they have been shaped by its cultural environments. An example of this is the heightened emphasis placed upon having subjective experiences, particularly with respect to individual spirituality, which has become increasingly privatized. What is subjective is often experienced in isolation. But the need for a situation that permits the sharing of subjectivities, perhaps a unique form of communality, may be a dominant factor in the development of modern spirituality groups.

Berger argues that an individual's subjective certainty in their religion depends on cohesive social support (Berger, 1990, p. 138). The absence or weakness of social support undermines subjective certainty, when for example the individual is confronted with a plurality of competing worldviews. This may be largely true with respect to membership within a traditional religion. Adherents are given particular scripts to follow, specific rules, beliefs, or codes of conduct, and where deviance occurs it is met with corrective measures.

By contrast new spiritualities, insofar as they contain a multiplicity of synthetic worldviews, are each of them unique. Even to the extent that each individual is the master of their own personal religion, and no other. Therefore, the opposite of what Berger alleges above must be true for the New Ager. Namely that an individual's subjective certainty about their own spirituality is increased, or only even emerges as a subjectively constructed, one of a kind belief system, that stands on its own authority and sovereignty. Individual spiritualities thus require no

external validation. This of course does not undermine social cohesion, as this quality surely exists in New Age type groups. But the causal relationship between the two is the reverse of what Berger argues it seems. In the case of New Age forms of religiosity, first comes the individual's spiritual identity, of which they are the central authority and creator; and then a collective of perhaps similar spiritual perspectives which seeks a communal expression, that may or may not form, possibly around an individual. This is especially the case for mystical practices such as occur as the result of meditation, entheogenic ceremonies, and even yoga which are all based in subjective experiences. But identity formation can also occur via peer interactions. Individuals often join groups to find forms of fellowship that are missing from their mainstream lives. Learning and growth can and do occur communally within a holistic milieu.

3.8 Entering the Spiritual Wading Pool: Groups and Membership in Peaceburgh

Groups have meaning as an anchoring force: they orient us in an otherwise strange and indifferent universe. Many members referred to their community belonging as a kind of tribe. An example is given by Moonflower:

When I came here and found this, I made an immediate life decision to come and be here, because this is what I was looking for my entire life. Again that goes back to being around people for the first time that I felt I could relate to, that I felt understood me in a way that I've never experienced before.

When questioned about their spiritual goals, the one that invariably surfaced among informants is to find like-minded people:

as I was learning this stuff and becoming inspired by it, and seeing it change parts of my life it was really hard to not feel, in the place where I was, that anybody really got it. So, I was really burnt out from trying to create topics of conversation, and get people interested in that to have one, but yet it still felt like you had to exude all this energy to try and explain these things. So I appreciated coming here and seeing people that were already open to these things, or who already had these kinds of experiences, or practicing the same things (Interview with Xaena).

Repeatedly one of the primary aims for participants, and part of their overall spiritual quests, is to find kindred spirits along the way. Also finding belonging occurs via free association, or in the language of my informants, as synchronicities: the metaphysical connections that happen between people and situations that are meant to be connected. This is a shared discourse among Peaceburgh members and Wisterians. This spontaneous emergence of elective affinities can be summed up as a free-association of like-minded individuals who share similar goals. How this occurs, according to members, consists of:

- being already open to these things, and
- to be looking internally as opposed to externally for a natural call that comes from within.

In addition to finding a spiritual home or community is that once you do, it becomes a support system that not only enables one to fulfill their personal and group goals, but helps the individual maintain and continue their spiritual quests. Groups thus serve as navigational instruments that insures individuals stay on their course: “so community to me is very important because it helps keep you on the path” (Interview with Persephone).

Twenty-two year old Xaena provided an example of how fluid and branching religious memberships function in a holistic milieu. She described her involvement in groups as a developmental process. She began her spiritual quest in her home town, a small rural community in mid-western pa. When she moved to Pittsburgh she eventually encountered the Peaceburgh community, where she made friends with individuals who shared her interests. Through her contacts there she began attending events at the local Krishna temple. There she realized her true calling, and where she was supposed to be in terms of religious affiliation. She has since deepened her involvement within the Krishna religious organization. In our interview she explained that Krishnaism offers her a more meaningful type of fellowship than do the more

diffused forms of belonging that exist among other spiritual groups. This is partly due to the fact that Krishnaism is a more formal type of religion, that provides for her a total cosmology, one that encompasses every fiber of her being she explained. Whereas her participation in Peaceburgh was fun, partly because it was new and exciting, and partly because such groups are less available in her hometown where she rarely had contact with anything like it. However, it was also somewhat superficial or rudimentary she explained. She described the Peaceburgh community as being a sort of spiritual wading pool: a place where one could stand in the shallow end of spiritual waters. It served to put her in touch with the sorts of experiences she was seeking, and types of people with whom she shared similar beliefs and interests. But it eventually became obsolete for her.

Xaena's notion is similar to the idea that groups are like training wheels. They offer temporary support by allowing one to participate in practices such as meditation, until one develops their own sense of balance and expertise. With the ability to stand on her own two feet as it were, she was able to shed the training wheels, and embark upon her own spiritual ride without the need of external group supports, enabling her to find her new religious base. Thus Xaena's early membership in the Peaceburgh community served as point of contact, through which she could learn about other local forms of religiosity, while having the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of groups. Through experimenting with different sorts of groups Xaena was able to try on different spiritual garments so to speak, until she found one that fit. Over the course of time her memberships evolved from looser and more informal kinds of belonging, to a more committed way of life. In other words, through a deductive process, of moving from general to more specific forms of religiosity, she found her true spiritual path: "so it's more general, and then it gets more specific as you find where your interests are aligned."

3.9 Tension Between Self-Autonomy and Community

It is clear that New Agers seek self-autonomy in the expression of their spirituality. It is equally clear that such individuals seek a community in which to share values, experiences, and a collective sense of self. These communalistic needs are often modeled after those of premodern societies, ones involving tribal rituals and/or Eastern mystical practices. Perhaps the decline of community precipitated by the shift towards society in the modern period (Dobbelaere, 2006, p. 143) explains the desire to seek out and establish holistic communities. However, the tension created by these contrasting impulses, of individuals wanting to belong yet be independent, must somehow be worked out.

Due to the emphasis placed upon self-autonomy, self-initiation is considered to be a valid and effective alternative for spiritual seekers who want to progress at their own rate, without pressure from teachers, gurus, or other forms of authority that are typical of more organized forms of religion (Bloch, p. 10). 'Be your own guru' is more the accepted ideal for New Agers and neopagans: "the time has come for each person to find his/her direct and unmediated relationship with spiritual forces" (Bloch, p. 10). Although even within a largely egalitarian group, different levels of knowledge and/or ability may manifest as displays of status that could result in anger, resentment, or jealousy among members (Cuda, 2013). However, because a purely leaderless social group is probably not possible, it is likely that some kind of power dynamic and structure will have to emerge. Let us take a moment to analyze the types of social structures and processes that tend to occur among new spirituality groups.

3.9a Structural Variance Among New Spirituality Groups

Some researchers consider neopaganism and New Age to be distinct phenomena (Harvey, G., 2011; Bloch, 1998; York, 1995). In many ways the two share similar interests, goals, practices, and collective identities. However, it is useful to regard neopaganism, typically marked by smaller and less hierarchically organized ceremonial groups, as being one branch upon the New Age tree. According to journalist Margot Adler neopagan groups are often self-created and homemade. They seldom have gurus or masters, and few have temples or wellness centers, but rather meet in the woods, parks, people's apartments, or houses. In contrast to most organized cults, or other well financed NRMs such as ISKCON or the Unification Church, money rarely exchanges hands, and entry into these groups occurs through network connections that could rarely be described as a form of conversion (Adler, 1986, p. 3 cited in York, 1995, p. 100). Moreover, neopaganism is mostly anti-authoritarian, in contrast to cults and NRMs, in which a sense of collective responsibility may be stronger. Smaller groups are also less structured, and represent more local sorts of communities that are “formed for mutual aid and sustenance [that] should break apart when those needs no longer exist, or are being met in different ways” (York, 1995, p. 101).

The fluctuating nature of the membership in small, spirituality oriented ceremonial groups is such that participants generally show up when they want to, and virtually anyone is welcome. While the first attribute can be applied to more organized forms of religion as well, the latter condition is often not so. Also in the case of a tight-knit community church, although participation is not mandatory (at least not in the present era), a person with irregular or scant attendance may be subject to feelings of resentment or disapproval by others of the church community, while for a typical New Age group this is unlikely.

Adler argues that the real question is whether such loosely based communities could survive for more than one generation. However, this concern could be equally applied to virtually any local and informal anarchistic association. New spirituality groups can be categorized as forms of anarchism because they are basically experiments in spirituality culture among civil society participants, that are organized outside of traditional religion, “voluntarily through various institutions, groups and informal networks, which form a theater of non-state oriented methods of collaboration, mutual aid, and dissemination of common ideas and conceptions of civilized [here spiritualized] social life” (Bamyeh, p. 71). But because of their non-hierarchical structure and loose membership, small groups like these could lose cohesion over time, and may not last more than a generation. However, Christina Steyn (2007) has found that during her coverage of this phenomenon, New Age organizations in general have become stronger since the early 1990s. New Age centers organized around individuals have in fact disappeared she notes, but new ones have emerged to take their place, a process in which a transfer of ownership, or power, has occurred (Steyn, 2007, p. 270).

Moreover, intentional forms of community may prove to be sustainable structures that would allow New Age spirituality to perpetuate itself indefinitely. Modern eco-communities such as Findhorn, which began as a hotel managed by millennialistic “spiritual seekers,” have essentially the same functions as monastic communities did in earlier eras. They are created spaces in which life is lived in ways that differ from the social mainstream. Both are examples of spiritually oriented enclaves where cosmic concerns are interwoven with the mundane rhythms of domestic life, and serve as monastic sanctuaries in which people may seek solace from the outside world (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 67). Contemporary New Age intentional communities such as Findhorn, and Esalen in California, may thus be interpreted as a sort of cultural bridge,

connecting the past with the present, insofar as they are structurally and functionally analogous to medieval religious communes.

But are these structures meant to last longer than is required for meeting the current needs of the people who form these groups? Presumably contemporary ceremonial groups are serving some useful function for members, offering social, psychological, or spiritual guidance. They arise, it could be argued, naturally and organically in response to member desires, providing types of experiences that are not available in their everyday lives. They may also act as sanctuaries away from stressful life situations, and offer remedies for social anomie and economic necessity.

3.9b Sacralization

Thomas Luckmann (1990) has argued that, with the decline of traditional religion, there remains the need for civil society to sustain some form of religious belief in the contemporary world. However, a fundamental change in the character of this expression has occurred wherein the “great transcendencies” emphasized by traditional religion, which dealt with other-worldly matters involving life, death, and the afterlife, has transitioned to “little transcendencies” which are more concerned with self-realization, self-expression, and the “this-worldly” concerns of everyday life (Luckmann, 1990, p. 129). Examples of little transcendencies might include purchasing a new car, moving into a new house, completing a creative project, or even getting a haircut, all of which involve small but significant life changes. Thus as transcendencies have shrunk, according to Luckmann, from great ones that were collectively shared, to “matters that are important to the privatized, partly egoistic and hedonistic, partly ecological, symbolically altruistic individual become sacralized” (Luckmann, 1990, p. 138).

Additionally in recent times, there has been a shift away from religious notions of a transcendent divinity, to a more grounded conception of the sacred in social phenomena. As a response to modern disenchantment, the sacralization of everyday life is evidenced by the trend towards implicit, invisible, and quasi-religions (Luckmann, 1967; Hunt, 2005). In his book a “Rumor of Angels: Rediscovery of the Supernatural,” Peter Berger (1990) also places modern notions of the sacred in the mundane, here-and-now, secular world of everyday life. It is to be found in play, humor, hope, and a sense of justice he argues (Berger, 1990, p. 181). For example, Graham Harvey (2011) explains the widespread neopagan belief in the “God and the Goddess” (Wiccan deities), as one that sends the individual back upon themselves. In other words, neopagan beliefs are grounded in practices which locate the divine in the mundane human world of food, drink, sex, humor, sadness, desire, constriction, and ecstasy, and not in an escape from this world into an other-worldly Heaven or Nirvana, as is the case within traditional forms of religion (Harvey, 2011, p. 38).

For Bourdieu all powerful social institutions behave like religions, wherein the sacred is equated with social legitimation (Rey, p. 9). He goes so far as to say that modern sociology of culture is a “science of the sacred” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 8). Charles Lemert (1975) contends that religion may be applied to the ordinary social when what is held as sacred comes to reify a way of life or culture (Lemert, p. 193). For Lemert modern notions of the sacred are equated with seeking a meaning, or a moral dimension in one's existence, beyond the material satisfaction one might achieve as a consumer.

Taking up the question of how religious forms of reification are socially reproduced, Stephen Hunt (2005) asks, what are the long-term prospects for sacred constituencies? He argues that syncretistic forms of belief and practice, and individual expressions of mysticism “would be

hard to sustain over generations, since personal belief systems would have to be re-invented again and again, and mystical experiences experienced anew” (Hunt, p. 169). As the result of privatization, the New Age individual's unique and personal spiritual system, created over the course of a lifetime as a way for that individual to cope with the demands of their particular existence, would essentially be lost when they expire. Successive New Agers would then have to more or less start over from scratch. However, according to Margaret McGuire (2008), what epitomizes modern spirituality in the holistic milieu is a profound interconnectedness and experiential subjectivity, which she suggests illustrates just how personal religious expression is linked with collective experience and expression (McGuire, 2008, p. 221). It is these intersubjective interactions that may ultimately serve as the link for the transmission and continuance of new spiritualities and notions of the sacred.

3.10 Reproducibility: Statics and Dynamics

3.10a Syncretism and Fluidity

New Ageism, in one form or another, has been active since at least the early 1960s, with earlier incarnations occurring throughout the 19th century. In various forms it has continued, evolving and adapting as the societies in which they were nestled changed over time, in much the same ways as other religions have done. But it is also a faddish sort of religiosity, which is predictable insofar as new spiritualities are individually rooted, synthetic, and syncretistic. Spirituality is moreover something that is always in “process,” just as the self is always a work in progress. But because fads are inherently short-lived, some religious expressions may disappear over time, to become replaced by the next wave of new forms. Does religious stability require a conservative and standardized collectivity? In other words, how does anything that is not

conserved survive? Does faddishness undermine a new spirituality's likelihood for reproducing itself?

What seems to be the pattern for many groups is that they coalesce spontaneously, sometimes around charismatic individuals who seem to have their fingers on the contemporary spiritual pulse. For potential members new groups appear as colorful as their creator's personalities, and can be appealing insofar as they allow for experimentation and syncretic tailoring. Moreover, they are often formed to address the immediate needs of members. Inherently faddish, spirituality group culture creates itself around whatever topics or practices happen to be hot at the moment. Members are in dialogue with various media, books and internet, that serve as a continual source of new content and current fashions, but tend to be short lived. For example, I have noticed that when a group's novelty wears off, perhaps when it is no longer new or fun, but turns into work, or as one informant put it “becomes a hassle,” it ends for them. And then it is off to the next exciting adventure for the seeker of spiritual thrills. Noticing this pattern, members tend to explain it away by stating that, “well groups are designed to serve temporary purposes. They aren't meant to last forever, that's religion.” My informants are aware of this fickleness, and accept it as part and parcel of what it means to be on a spiritual path. Buddhist concepts such as impermanence, that emphasize how life is fleeting and ever changing, are highlighted, and used to justify the malleability of their faith, and their indefinite connections to it.

By contrast the reified social structures that make up traditional religions and societies, which are arrived at via collective processes, are somewhat fixed or rigid, and must be to insure their continuance. Consequently, their systems of values, beliefs, and norms are far less amenable to quick changes when compared to a person's spirituality identity that can perhaps be

more easily re-invented. People routinely experience growth, and so do their beliefs, practices, and morals. In this way a spirituality of the self is like an autonomous perpetual motion machine, which presumably would only terminate with the end of the person's life. Also, the extraordinary measures that societal and religious systems must take in order to maintain themselves is merely part of the individuals' natural, day-to-day existence and self-maintenance. New spiritualities are thus far more fluid forms of religiosity that lend themselves to constant change, and tend to move in step with modern processes of change.

In either case, because New Age spirituality is a form of religiosity characterized by self-authority, which negates any other form of moral or spiritual authority, Durkheim's notions concerning the maintenance of modern society must be reexamined (Dawson, p. 44). For example, do new spirituality groups display less social cohesion and solidarity among members than an analogous traditional religious group, such as a Christian church community? One might expect to see less cohesion, and more internal conflicts and dissension among New Age group members than in their Christian counterparts. This is predicted because individual members, due to the self-governing aspect of their religiosity, are less disposed towards submitting themselves to a collectivity, or any authority other than themselves. Since it is one's subjective experience that matters most in spiritual pursuits, even a New Ager's group perspective may be deemphasized, and individual relationships may be more strained as a result.

3.10b Politics, Karma, and Prefigurative Change

Within the culture I am observing there is an ideologically strained combination of forces at work. The bulk of my informants, and individuals I have observed at both Peaceburgh and Wisterian events, have spoken at great length about the need for change. They are critical of

mainstream environmental policies, gender politics, and eating habits. If they could sum up the outside world in a word, it would be “sick.” In terms of diet and relating with the natural world, my informants are very much in support of efforts in favor of changing society. Yet at the same time there is, at least among some of my informants, a kind of religious fatalism that paralyzes their will towards social activism. I believe this attitude is rooted two ideas: that the universe has a fundamental order to it, and that things happen for a reason. This is a basic feature of both religious and secular cosmologies, and it may make little difference whether such a balance exists between good and evil, karmic forces, or Newtonian laws. Spiritually, however, individuals must find their place within this balance, and that can involve accepting one's lot in life. From an eastern perspective one's karmic position, or level of moral and spiritual development, governs an individual's actions, but also accounts for the state of the world as it currently exists. More or less all of my subjects to some degree acknowledge and subscribe to the belief that a person, and the world as a whole, are where they are due to karma. For some any attempt to alter this balance is viewed as misguided. Rather it is believed that the enlightened person accepts it as it is with equanimity. The way this puzzling combination, between activism and fatalism, gets sorted out is largely an individual matter. If one person sees fit to fight for social change, that is as it should be, for it is *their* karma. While if another person resigns themselves to things as they are, that is only fitting for theirs.

However, “the inherent nature of religiosity and the concrete practices of religious institutions make religion both unable and unwilling to contribute to radical social transformations. Furthermore its alienating character and privileged institutional status leads religion – both unwittingly and intentionally – to agitate against such change ever taking place. On both counts then religion is the enemy of those in need of social change” (Dawson, p. 41).

Though they enjoy many advantages over newer religious movements, traditional religions struggle in changing societal environments. They find it much harder to evolve and adopt novel structures as quickly and easily as newer groups do who do not suffer under the inertial weight of inherited structures which are, by their nature, more resistant to rapid modification. Loki's assertion, that organized religions tend to interfere with achieving progressive social goals due to the rigidity of their institutional structures, seems to support Dawson's (2011) claims. It could explain why some individuals have chosen to abandon organized forms of religion: to seek for types of spirituality that are more ideologically flexible, and in step with their goals involving social change.

Yet many individuals interested in changing societal power dynamics are not religious. If one were to engage in ideological splitting, progressive liberalism tends to be more aligned with secular atheism, while political conservatism is usually connected to religious orthodoxy (Tönnies, 2009, in Seeing Ourselves, edited by Macionis and Benkoraitis). Of course, membership in a traditional religion does not disqualify a person from having forward-thinking views, or engaging in social activism. But there does seem to be, among the politically progressive or liberal minded, a distaste for organized religion, and a propensity for secularism.

However, it would be misguided to argue that one must be an adherent of some form of alternative spirituality in order to be fighting for environmental justice, or indigenous people's rights. My subjects represent perhaps one type of social activist, and so if anything this is the story of how they do their particular form of activism. Although sharing more or less the same social, economic, and environmental goals as their secular counterparts, the methods and forms their activism assumes are different. For example, their politics are more prefiguratively oriented. Peaceburghers and Wisterians are more interested in creating the sorts of communities

and accompanying values, that rather give expression to the changes they would like to see occur. They make efforts to practice their activism by doing and living it within their everyday lives. And the way this differs from secular prefigurativism, and/or secular anarchism, is that the variety of prefigurativism displayed within the Peaceburgh community involves and reflects their spiritual values.

3.10c Community vs Society: Glocality and the Importance of Place

Durkheim saw indigenous cultures as living laboratories of social and religious evolution. He describes religion “as system of notions by which individuals imagine the society to which they belong and their obscure yet intimate relations with that society” (2001, pp. 170-1). What can this definition of the origins of religion tell us about modern, non-institutional forms of spirituality? Both types of societies (indigenous and spiritual anarchist) seem to be constructed of flexible social structures. Another thing is that my subjects are keenly aware of indigenous cultures and their religions, and have in part adopted these into their beliefs and practices.

Dawson (2011) contends that, “through everyday involvement and social interaction, and subject to the overarching demand of societal forces, individuals experience life as derived from and dependent upon something outside of and greater than themselves. Modern people know this something to be “society,” whereas “primitive cultures attribute their feelings of derivation and dependence to supernatural forces or entities perceived to give rise to, rather than originate from the social world” (Dawson, p. 44). The difference between the religiosity of “primitive” cultures, and the “earth-based” spiritualities of modern individuals, thus involves structural location. The contemporary spirituality practiced by my subjects is based in a micro-milieu that exists on the *margins* of society. Whereas indigenous religions presumably took shape communally, and

occupied a central position in their host culture as a *mainstream* form. Both are local expressions of unique cosmologies. In the case of the indigenous it was separated by distances, but joined together by commonalities such as egalitarian hunter-gatherer lifestyles, and the common struggle to survive, and according to some genetic predispositions (Durkheim, 2008; Bastian's elementary forms versus ethnic forms in Campbell, 1959, p. 32). In the case of my informants, while they do have a locally inflected form of religiosity, that is flavored by the particular groups and individuals from the areas surrounding Pittsburgh, their beliefs are in part informed by discourses that transcend their immediate locales. They are therefore part of a 'glocal' expression of beliefs and values.

Peaceburgh spirituality is, however, shaped by regional interests. These include environmental issues located near Pittsburgh, such as shale fracking, and the oil cracker plants currently being planned for the area. But there is also the notion that Pittsburgh's three rivers are a unique geographical feature on the earth, that hold special properties that exist nowhere else on the planet. Yet New Age and neopagan discourses, not to mention religions such as Buddhism which serve as an ideological basis for much of their beliefs and activities, are of course global texts. Loki remarks on this idea as a confluence of energies that culminates at the Point (Point State Park in Pittsburgh, PA where the Ohio, Monongahela, and Allegheny rivers meet):

the Point has been used as a place of worship and meditation for thousands of years. And just like that spot in your house where you meditate all the time, when all you have to do is go over and sit down and go right out because it's so saturated with that energy.

Here Loki mentions the unique qualities of the Point, while also relating it to a spot in one's house. Most of my informants maintain an altar of some kind in their homes. These serve as special places in which to meditate, pray, or practice healing rituals. These places in one's home have concentrations of spiritual energies resulting from the energy work that is done there.

Similar processes have occurred at the Point, e.g. thousands of years of worship and meditational activities, that have endowed it with spiritual meaning it is believed. It is a way for individuals to connect what happened in the past with what is happening in the present, and to join public or communal locations with one's personal space.

My spiritual teacher at the time was studying under a Himalayan guru named Baba Je, Papa Svec Baba was his name ... he told me later that as soon as his foot hit the ground when he got out of the car he said, "you people are blessed to live here, this is a very special place.

The two spots are unique, both the individual's idiosyncratically constructed altar space, as well as the geo-spiritually rare confluence occurring at the Point. Yet the two are connected metaphysically. Loki further compared the rivers in Pittsburgh with those in India and Africa, insofar as they all contain geologically important properties. He added that there are only two major rivers in the world that run from south to north: the Nile and the Monongahela, and at the end of each of those rivers is a major city that changed the world. Also, any point at which two rivers converge, Hindus consider to be a sacred place. For example, the spot where the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers come together is Allahabad, arguably the holiest city in India, which Loki claimed is a mirror image of Pittsburgh. This "is where the biggest spiritual event in the world happens, Maha Kumbh," a mass Hindu pilgrimage that occurs every twelve years, attended by hundreds of millions, holding major astrological significance.

He added that "this two-hundred-and-fifty year veneer of white history does nothing to eliminate or counteract that thousands of years of meditative energy that happened at the Point." He went on to link Peaceburgh to a New Paradigm creation myth, founded on the ancient Mound Builder's civilization at Meadowcroft in Pennsylvania. These mysterious peoples were, according to a visiting guru, connected to the Mayan and Aztec civilizations via pyramids in Mississippi, which weaves these religiously potent places into the spiritual history of Pittsburgh,

thus explaining for them why it is such a sacred city. This kind of mythical inflation, of the individual with the cosmic, the local with the global, also occurs in my informant's discourses concerning extraterrestrials and entheogen use, that I will be thoroughly addressing in chapters six and seven on new spirituality texts. But let us continue our analysis of community by considering further its meanings.

3.10d Prefigurativity Within Neopagan versus Non-Pagan Alternative Communities

Thirty-one year old Gem, a computer programmer working in Pittsburgh, defines community as “a complete reality break. Festivals become their own social reality, which is what attracted me to them almost immediately. I mean there is a solution for all of those [economic] problems, there's barter, there's like a huge amount of people that are here at the festival who couldn't afford to pay to get in, so they're volunteering, and they're like valuable contributors to the community.” Another Wisterian describes her experiences within alternative communities:

I had an incredible experience living in a housing collective in college with some friends of mine, and it was very powerful because we were composting, we were brewing beer, we were living very minimalistically, very DIY. We would host parties, and people from the university who didn't really have any sort of contact for that would come and I think walk away with a little bit better understanding (Interview with Moonflower).

Of course, farming and brewing beer do not require having neopagan beliefs. But what does it mean to be a neopagan who brews beer or creates permaculture? How are they doing it in ways that differentiate themselves from others who do these things? If you brew beer, but also believe that fairies exist, or that crystals have magical healing powers, what does this do to the act of brewing beer?

My husband and I are polyamorous, and we have been dating a woman who is also poly[amorous]. She and her partner are the only poly non-Pagan couple I've ever really interacted with, and I was actually really excited about that in the beginning. But it's honestly causing some problems, because I see that her goals and her lifestyle do not line up with what I feel is most important to my life, and once I realized that it's become a lot harder to interact

with her because, you know she's a good consumer, she's good at going to work and being a part of that normative cycle of things, but is less open-minded than I maybe thought, or at least less flexible.

According to Moonflower tensions between herself and mainstream society are less about contradictory practices, but rather seem to involve a clash of world views. For example, the conflict she is having with her polyamorous partner-couple is over mismatched ideologies. The problems in her relationship do not lie with any particular sexual practices, or with the structures of polyamory. But the differences, according to her, stem from being spiritual versus non-spiritual, that in this case equates to holding neopagan versus non-Pagan perspectives, that are not aligned. The behaviors are the same, whether its practicing polyamorous sex, making beer, or being an environmental activist. They more or less involve similar instrumental or procedural norms. Therefore, it is not the actual behaviors that are divisive. A Christian and a neopagan will probably bake cookies and shop online at Amazon in fundamentally similar ways. Whatever differences exist between the two may be simply cosmetic, similar to cultural differences such as language, dress codes, or the idiosyncratic differences that exist between individual behavioral traits. But in terms of what it is they are actually doing, whether it is making beer, or shopping at the grocery store, they are acting in functionally identical ways. So what is different?

Perhaps perceiving the world from a religious perspective casts a kind of glow upon it. Things that might be seen as ordinary or mundane from a secular perspective, are sometimes given unusual or extraordinary meanings from a spiritual one. I have observed this in the way Peaceburgh individuals speak about things such as nature, food, and sexuality. And coupled with this is an emotional outlook that often shows itself behaviorally. For example, during potluck events Peaceburgh members will make it a point to acknowledge the importance and significance of something in one's life, such as food, and to offer thanks for it. Because it is perceived as

sacred, as is all of life. Taking the time to stop and consider what are viewed as ordinary life processes, and paying homage to a deity for them, is a hallmark of most religious and spiritual dispositions. Moonflower's non-spiritual poly friends do not approach life in this way. By not showing a deference for things that she regards as sacred, they inadvertently offend her neopagan sensibilities. Rather her non-Pagan associates carry on with their day-to-day existences as part of a muggle routine, and therein lies the mismatch. Between spiritual and mainstream perspectives there exists an ideological split, rooted in notions of sacred and mundane, which diffuses itself into everyday life practices. The incongruence consists in part over whether life is viewed as ordinary or magical.

3.10e Muggles vs the Magical

According to many of my informants there exists a tension with mainstream culture. This occurs even among ideologically compatible progressive and/or liberal elements, that are nonetheless referred to as “muggle,” or “normative” society. In the *Harry Potter* book series a muggle is a person who lacks any sort of magical ability, because of not being born into the magical world. Muggles also do not have any magical blood. The term is often used in a pejorative manner within the books, and among study participants. Since it refers to a person who is a member of the non-magical community, muggles are simply ordinary human beings, rather than being witches or wizards. In the *Harry Potter* books, non-magical people are often portrayed as foolish, sometimes befuddled characters, who are completely ignorant of the wizarding world that exists right under their noses.

Philosopher José Ortega y Gasset provides an apt characterization, illuminating for the current discussion, of an ordinary modern person (or muggle). They are described as a practical

person who is in touch with conventional realities:

The plain man very sensibly thinks that all the bad things happen to the hero through his persistence in such and such a purpose. By giving it up, he could make everything turn out well and, as the Chinese say at the end of a tale, alluding to their former nomadism, could settle down and raise many children [...] The plain man, incapable of heroic acts, is ignorant of that stream of life in which only sumptuary, superfluous activities take place. He is ignorant of the overflow and excess of vitality. He lives bound to what is necessary and what he does, he does perform. He is always impelled to act; his actions are reactions (1961, pp. 154).

Additionally “in normative society people are afraid of death, and aging is something to be avoided” suggests Moonflower. The importance of recognizing and honoring elders is something that surfaces frequently. Within the neopagan intentional community at Wisteria, the ceremonial events held by the Native American Church, and New Age milieu there is a conscious effort to remember to show respect for the elderly, perhaps because ageism is such a prevalent form of discrimination in western societies. To explain my informant gave the example of the triple goddess. A common pagan symbol for change, the triple goddess is composed of three figures: the maiden which represents the child, the mother who is the adult, and the crone who symbolizes the elder. The goddess is a major figure of worship, and while each of the three exist as distinct forms, similar to the Christian trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, each are expressions of the same deity.

Also “patriarchy is not a thing here, people are very aware of those issues, like homosexuality and queer gender expression, all of those are totally accepted here.” In terms of gender, postmodern ideals concerning gender fluidity and normativity certainly have traction within the culture I am examining. Especially among women there are democratic ideals involving gender equality, and liberation from patriarchal power structures. But there is a strong emphasis placed upon the pagan goddess which highlights the feminine. In other words, there does not seem to be any agenda in support of androgyny, so femininity is not suppressed. For

example, women display body hair on their legs and under their arms, which they see as natural. This is also commensurate with notions of the carnivalesque body. However, at the same time they generally wear their hair long and loose, wear dresses, and enact feminine scripts in terms of their body language and manner of speech. They simultaneously align themselves physically and spiritually with femininity that is in fact a manifestation of goddess worship. They seek equality with men, but at the same time wish to hold onto gender norms which traditionally have been associated with both matriarchal and patriarchal cultures. What they believe matches more closely with a matriarchal culture matrix, where a person born female had high agency, yet was able to embrace what they believe are archetypal feminine attributes, what Jung termed “anima” (1959, p. 54).

But as a type of counterculture, spiritual enclaves such as the neopagan festivals occurring within intentional communities, and the practices they house, can largely be categorized as cultural mutations. They contain relational forms that act as catalysts for social change:

Spirituality is what is helping create alternative social norms, it helps to create new symbols for what's important, it helps create a set of common language and common perspective. So it's almost like a medium in some ways, which I think is what spirituality is for most societies actually, it's a way of teaching people how to think about the world, and so I think that spirituality here [in Wisteria] is very much the same in that capacity (Interview with Persephone).

Persephone believes spirituality culture is a medium essential for creating these alternative worlds. Norm altering practices, such as using language differently, practicing polyamory openly and collectively, participating in rituals and other societally unconventional forms of embodiment, i.e. positioning one's body in unusual ways with respect to others (e.g. formal rituals, the staring exercise, cuddle puddles), speaking in unusual ways (using illogical forms of dialogue, e.g. neurolinguistics-using one's senses to tune into the sensate world), talking

like children, and engaging in play. All of these behaviors, practiced within the context of a large group or community, are about creating new norms. Yet she was quick to point out that normlessness in itself is not necessarily spiritual.

According to Moonflower within a traditional religion gods are created by humans to “validate the world they want to make.” Referencing a deity, she explains, is a way for people to authorize the creation of new norms: “I don’t reckon people have a frame for how to create new social norms without there being some sort of go ahead from the gods.” There is thus the need to receive cosmic validation for what one does, to make sure that what us humans are doing accords with the wishes of a god. It is an attempt to connect human affairs to a divine macrocosmic structure.

3.10f Social Change

But new spiritualities are not so much invested in the status quo, sectarian movements, or submitting themselves to charismatic kinds of authority, whether they are human or divine. They do not fit the mold of a church, sect, or cult as defined by Bryan Wilson (1970). They generally subscribe to a predominantly transformative set of dynamics, as opposed to conservative ones. Yet if neopagans or New Agers mainly enact their counterculture within isolated communities, how do they mean to affect the outside world with their practices? How can researchers gauge the kind of transformative actions they do or do not facilitate? Is this something that even interests them?

You know it's fine to talk about dragons and faeries and angel dust, but ah “what are you doing practically in the world, you know who are you helping, what wars are you stopping?”

Loki has noted that for their spirituality to make a difference, adherents must outgrow their youthful idealism. He and others see the need for more concrete actions in the world, that

include forms of social activism. For example, he is interested in raising awareness around issues such as health care, maintaining a healthy diet, and standing up against environmental threats:

It was real clear that the only thing that was going to change things was a general raising of consciousness. And that's what we always believed, and that's why we did it, but it had to be practical. So myself and a lot of people we just moved in that direction. There's still plenty of people who are just out in the faeries and playing with the flowers, and that's great, it's a phase I think, a stage of development.

Notions of timelessness and peaceful resignation pervade new spirituality discourses.

These are Eastern types of sensibilities, largely derived by my subjects from Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. There is a desire to create sanctuaries away from the world's troubles, Edenic zones where constructs such as time and money have less importance. Many who are immersed in new spiritualities seek quiet and remote spaces in which to pursue their spiritual practices. These are ideal conditions for those who seek peace and solitude, which includes individuals committed to other religions as well. They are conducive for deep meditation, yoga, and thoughtful contemplation. Among my subjects this includes deep immersion into nature, however this is often coupled with a withdraw from worldly issues.

Joseph Campbell was writing his major works of religion and mythology (*The Masks of God: Primitive, Oriental, Occidental, and Creative Mythologies*, volumes. 1 – 4) during the tumult of the 1960s. He witnessed the civil rights movements, the women's movement, the Vietnam War protests, and the overall countercultural explosions that were taking place during this period. Responding from his religio-mythological perspective, Campbell remarks “there is no time, no place, no permission—let alone encouragement—for *experience*. And to make things even worse, along now come those possessed sociopolitical maniacs with their campus rallies, picket-line slogans, journalist ballyhoo, and the summonses to action in the name of causes of which their callow flocks had scarcely heard of six months before—and even those marginal

hours that might have been left from study for inward growth are invaded, wrecked, and strewn with daily rubbish” (1968, p. 374).

Campbell observed the clash between New Left activism and hippy spiritualism. He responded to it by drawing contrasts between instrumental and transcendental ways of approaching life's hardships and injustices. He is critical of both the reactionary anger of social movements activists, and the pacifistic exhibitionism and narcissism of the flower children. Stereotyping the former he states, “for some life is a misery that should never have been.” If only the corrupt and illegitimate class of rulers (i.e. Bourgeoisie class) had never risen to assume their forms of power, we all of us in the modern age would not have had to suffer, at least not so much. Of course, the solution is to challenge these forces wherever one can, to alleviate the mass suffering in the world today that they have unleashed due to their greed and corruption. The method is geared towards changing the rules. After all this is the way of social movements: to square off against those with power, to force their capitulation to activist's political, economic, and environmental demands.

However, for individuals pursuing a more prefigurative course of action, the answer lies not in meeting force with force, nor in combatting the institutions responsible for social injustices that operate in the world. Rather it is to create a world apart from the mainstream power structures that have been designed, configured, and implemented in the interests of Bourgeoisie capitalism. Rather than manufacturing a political revolution to overthrow existing forms of power by force, the way forward, at least among those involved in communal and intentional living, is to erect microcosmic societies. To live their change in an everyday manner. This has been the course for many of my subjects, who have chosen to withdraw from what they feel to be an irreconcilable way of life. Their critique of states, corporate power, and injustices

are more or less the same as those who are invested in social movement oriented processes. And indeed, some of my subjects wholly support and participate in various sorts of movements, from Occupy Pittsburgh to public hearings and meetings held over the dangers of Marcellus shale fracking. However, for the majority of individuals immersed in spirituality culture, whether it is due to their pacifistic dispositions, or simple lack of interest, they wish to remain out of that fray. Or because they are too busy creating alternative systems for living off the grid, they do not have the time, nor the inclination to participate in such instrumental politics. But also, because they believe that through doing their spiritual work, whether it is meditating, or holding festivals oriented around imagination and libertine values, they will bring about a collective *evolution* of humanity by way of a spiritual inertia.

An example of this way of thinking about social change can be observed in the lyrics to a song by the British pop band The Police, in which the straightforward political, military, or economic avenues toward societal improvement are portrayed as ineffectual:

Spirits In The Material World

There is no political solution
To our troubled evolution
Have no faith in constitution
There is no bloody revolution

We are spirits in the material world
Are spirits in the material world
Are spirits in the material world
Are spirits in the material world

Our so-called leaders speak
With words they try to jail you
The subjugate the meek
But it's the rhetoric of failure
We are spirits in the material world
Are spirits in the material world
Are spirits in the material world
Are spirits in the material world

Where does the answer lie?
Living from day to day
If it's something we can't buy
There must be another way

We are spirits in the material world...
(Spirits In The Material World lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC).

But there are individuals committed to deliberate and concrete actions, aimed at a restructuring of the material world. They have a vision for society, built according to values commensurate with environmental and spiritually informed goals. These can be observed, perhaps in a nascent form, in music festivals such as Burning Man and Woodstock, and in neopagan communities such as Wisteria.

3.11 Festival Space: Norms, Liminality, and Prefiguratism in Temporary Communities

3.11a Liminoid Life

Although it could be argued that this type of spirituality is in an early stage of new religious formation, this would be hard to prove, because it would almost certainly require hindsight from some future point in its development. A more likely notion is that alternative forms of religiosity are always present, and may indeed have resulted in many of today's religions. But their significance may not be in whether or not they eventually become a mainstream religion, rather that such liminoid spaces are creative zones in which new cultural forms may take shape, and continually feed cultural development in any historical period. Thus, new spiritualities are not necessarily a means to some definite end, but a process that is an end in itself.

Gem's conception of festival space embodies prefigurative ideals. She states "I feel festivals are very critical because it allows the group that's gathering to create the kind of world

they want to see for a short period of time, and you get to drop all your outside roles and responsibilities, and really manifest like the life that you want to be living.” Communities are also about creating a space, and as described by Moonflower's, they are “a very intentional magical act as well helping to maintain that space with a group of people.” For example, “helping create a garden space for part of the children's program feels really important because creating a space where there's like other people can find that spiritual respite that I find so critical.” These notions moreover encapsulate Victor Turner's (1982) sense of *communitas*: the joy at having achieved a belonging, which for some are an antidote to the ill effects of societal pressures, often resulting from economic or patriarchal forms of oppression.

For Gem and others, the meaning of festival space is also about “community, being outside, [and] not being restricted by the pressures of the normative society.” While Marco defines community as “coming together on special times of the year (ritual days) sharing rituals and to connect with past civilizations and cultures via participating in their ceremonies.” But because “modern life is very spartan and rigid in terms of sleep schedules and work schedules,” there is the need for an alternative structure, that provides what Gem called “sustenance.” This involves having more leeway in terms of how individuals practice community, and “what is ok in terms of being normal out in public, and even who it's ok to talk to versus who it's not ok to talk to, and so in that place [Wisteria] those rules are loosened or totally discarded, and they get a chance to see who they would be, and what life would be like, if we didn't have those rigid structures.”

Gem's comment illuminates one of the critical values present in communities such as Wisteria. The sort of identity work that occurs within festival spaces is only possible because there exists the freedom in which to experiment with oneself. One can be something different,

even if only for a brief time. During a fire dance, for example, members will at various points gradually join an ever-increasing circle of dancers as they move around the fire. Many will over the course of the evening remove their clothing, or paint their bodies to highlight some part of themselves. They will move in sexually expressive ways in front of hundreds of their peers, doing things that only a few hours earlier they might not dare to do. Individuals will bare themselves, and expose aspects of their personalities that rarely have an opportunity to manifest in the outside world. Societal prohibitions, and standards of decency, normally operate to discourage individuals from exploring these sides of themselves. There are also consequences for carrying acts of deviance beyond ordinary society's tolerance levels. But places like Wisteria provide insulated micro-habitats where such things are possible. It is a chance to discover something out about oneself, and to be someone new.

Gem defines norms in terms of the sorts of bonds that hold her community together:

I think it's how any norms function when you get people together. They create bonds by creating their own language and their own shared understanding, whatever is around whatever comes up, whatever they talk about. In a lot of ways it's how Judaism has functioned pre-writing, before there was ready access to paper it was this ideology: no matter where they were in the world, even if they were separate from each other, it was something that bonded them together, and I think that because these pagan festivals happen, and there's not a ton of pagans out there, they intentionally will build those languages and references that gives them a sense of meaning, so that no matter where they are, away from festival they're still together.

But because these are places where almost anything a person desires is permitted, can neopagan spaces be regarded as perpetual liminal zones? A liminal phase, insofar as they occur within traditional societies, are periods in-between other well-defined stages of life, such as between childhood and adulthood, or the engagement period in between a person's being single and married. Liminality is also a time of experimentation, with one's sense self for example. It is a chance to explore other ways of being, or other forms of embodiment, which diverge from a society's mainstream. A liminal stretching of one's identity can include experimentation with

gender, or with norms having to do with what is considered proper attire. The dress code policy in effect during festival events at Wisteria is “clothing optional.” Nudity is permitted, and members can routinely be observed enjoying the space in a “sky clad” condition. Polyamory is also frequently encountered, where the norms regarding relationships between significant others are more flexible when compared to ordinary society.

However, the question becomes, since more or less anything is permitted (one constant being that do whatever you like, but do not interfere with or curtail another's experience and right to do so), are these norm-less cultural spaces? What are the norms for behavior here? How is the norm 'do what thou will' negotiated here to ensure that individuals are not stepping on each other's toes? There is a lot of ground given to personal expression, especially for what neopagans believe to be trivial matters, such as clothing styles and use of explicit language. But then again these are viewed as behavioral rights, and are considered sacred by the community. Thus they are not so trivial, even though Wisterians might feel that one's choice to be nude does not harm others, and is not a threat to the integrity of the social order. Although it may be in mainstream American society, where such public displays of freedom are in fact illegal.

Neopagan communities are virtually the opposite of Durkheim's example of the monastery, in which he famously argued that even within such a purposely good, benign, and harmonious society deviance would necessarily occur. This functionalist concept suggests that deviance, rather than being a mistake to be corrected, or illness to be cured, is an inevitable part of any normally functioning society. But the question here becomes what is deviant in an environment in which deviance is largely and consciously embraced and tolerated? Leaving festival grounds, especially while intoxicated, is frowned upon. Taking pictures of people without their permission is also considered taboo. Wisterians did not appear to appreciate

attempts to objectify their explicit bodily displays. But rather than trying to define what deviance is, let us first consider what is normal. In other words, how are norms established in places defined by “intentional non-conformism,” as Gem describes it?

3.11b The Significance of Space in Liminoid Communities: From Fairy Shrines to Pirate Garbage Collectors

Wisteria is a nature preserve, occupying 200 acres, and host to thousands of festival attendees each year. However, it is also a corporation (<https://www.wisteria.org>). A community trust owns the land, and one can buy shares in the corporation in order to have joint ownership in it. She stated that “different parts of it have been bought and sold several times now.” But one thing is clear, hippy haven or no, “they're there to make money, that festival occurs to make money on some level. They hold multiple festivals every year, and each one is between one hundred and fifty to two hundred dollars, sometimes more.”

In terms of management, a lot of it is very informal Gem explained. It is a sort of collaborative conversation, for example every festival has a main planner, and then everybody else kind of helps out. “To some extent they do [jointly produce the events], it depends on the festival because there are multiple events held on that space, and each festival has its own lexicon of meaning there, sort of set of symbols that are common among participants”

The community is composed of several smaller groups. Examples include Tent City, a flamboyant coven of Pan worshipping fire dancers, a sweat lodge group, and the Pirate's Cove. They all share the space together, and participate in each other's events freely. Most members attend the massive Paw Paw drum circles and fire dances that occur adjacent to Tent City every night during festival times. There are workshops that cover the whole gamut of New Age and

neopagan philosophies, from Wiccan gardening to crystal healing. There are theme related vendors selling everything from homemade mead to candles and swords. The festivals host staged performances involving professional musicians that tour the country. There are also special spots, such as the Druid's mound, and the Fairy Shrine, a magical garden adorned with sacred objects, and a magical labyrinth constructed of candle lights (see Figure 1 in Appendix D). All of these serve as locations for both personal and collective rituals.

Some follow-up questions that I had about these structures included: Who decides what's appropriate for the space? What sort of process determines whether or not things, such as Demian's sweat lodge, gets to be there. Who decides? Is it a community decision? Do things such as the Fairy Shrine grow spontaneously? Or are they planned in a committee prior to their appearance? Do they start small and grow organically through an individual's inspiration? Or are they jointly produced in the way that a bridge works is designed and built by a city planner? When I asked informants how these things begin, who decides to create a Fairy Shrine for instance, the answers were often the same.

Well the [Fairy Shrine] started out as a cute little thing, and kind of expanded into this wow, big garden that you can walk through. It grew every year because people would come back and bring more things and build it (Interview with Gem).

Community structures are usually introduced by individuals as creative projects. So they tend to emerge spontaneously. Typically they start small and grow. A lot of the decision making is done informally, but "it's a collaborative conversation." Interests such as having a candle labyrinth, doing permaculture, or offering pottery making or blacksmithing classes, involve themes that appeal to the collective. They are individually conceived, but jointly developed. For example, one member had an interest in doing Native American sweat lodges as part of the main festival. He spoke to the owners of the land, and they agreed in a committee meeting to give him

the go ahead to construct his lodge. He now occupies this territory. Both he and his family and friends camp there, and jointly manage that part of the space where the lodges are held. Another example is the Pirate Cove, which began as a visiting renaissance group:

So the pirates were doing a festival rotation among different renaissance fairs, and they came to Wisteria one time to do their thing, and just on their own they just started taking people's garbage. (Interview with Gem).

From that time on it has been their assigned role. In exchange for this service the pirates, which includes dozens of individuals, are permitted free access to all festival events that otherwise have ticket costs of up to \$220. Returning every year to perform this service has transformed the pirates into a familiar feature on the land. They have carved out of the festival space a substantial territory for themselves, the Pirate's Cove, in which they hold their own rituals, performances, and specialized attractions.

That's how they get everyone in for free, is that in the morning every morning they say, [in a pirate's accent] "Ah bring out your garbage," so then their whole troupe started volunteering to do that at Wisteria, and it just became a habit. But they weren't always there.

What began as spontaneous act in time became a tradition. But still I could not help but contemplate this arrangement further, in terms of social status and image. I kept wondering about how Goffman's theory of impression management would work in such a situation. In my mind I imagined that at first, whether out of financial necessity, or to make a neighborly gesture, the troupe agreed to perform trash removal. It was perhaps viewed as a fair exchange, to make up for ticket costs. But then over time, would the pirates come to resent the fact that they are now garbage men? It was difficult to shake the typical image of trash collectors, and the stigma they carry in our own society. After thinking about this for a moment, I asked her whether or not the pirates suffered any image problems as the result of being the town's garbage collectors. Gem stated:

but they did it because it's a different kind of space, it's an alternative space and garbage collecting is viewed differently maybe.

I mentioned that garbage detail is usually not something anyone wants to do, whether it is in normal society, or in say the military. My informant did not seem to share my trouble or concerns. She merely said “things are different in the space.” Thus, what appears one way in the outside world, looks different on the inside. Within the festival space members share a common situation. In other words, participants share certain fundamental needs such as requiring access to bathroom and shower facilities. In ordinary society individuals are more or less left to account for these things on their own. But in places like Wisteria, there are common concerns such as trash removal, and festival goers are not generally responsible for such things, as they are in their personal lives outside the space. The need for such services becomes a pressing concern to the collective, but also to the owners who have a vested interest in maintaining the space. Rather than allowing individuals to determine how they go to the bathroom, or deal with waste, it made sense to have a basic universal system.

The stigma attached to collecting garbage in mainstream America, and the fact that it is not a very highly coveted position, seems to be deactivated within the festival space. Garbage collection is a vital service in both societies. However, while attending festivals at Wisteria members share similar conditions, and see the need for it. Having friends and fellow attendees on your same level doing this is welcomed. A sense of camaraderie exists, and a general pitch-in attitude, perhaps observed at other kinds of campgrounds. For example, people who are out enjoying a nature experience are perhaps more in a vacation type mode. They are not immersed in the hustle and bustle of daily life, without a moment to spare. Fellow campers will share food and company, whereas in the city this collectivism is deemphasized. City dwellers do not usually volunteer to buy strangers a hot dog on the street, but around the campfire a neighborly attitude

persists, and food is freely shared.

3.11c Social Experiment vs Societal Quarantine: How Furrries and Neopagans Do Deviance Differently

We discussed the character of festival goers in greater depth, addressing what kinds of people the events seem to attract. Gem stated that:

a lot of them are living in cities, a lot of them are practicing nature based beliefs, or are agnostic, or some sort of secular humanism, and with neopagans I think they are just trying to hangout in nature, I think it's that simple.

Moreover “a lot of them are creative eccentric types.” These are people who find companionship and kinship in places that “encourage eccentricities,” places in which “spontaneous creativity is valued,” and where “abnormal” or “pathological” behaviors are welcomed rather than being stigmatized or quarantined as they typically are within ordinary society. While discussing the nature of Wisteria's alternative culture, and of individuals having the opportunity to play roles different from those in ordinary life, an interesting comparison emerged. Similar to the pirates of Wisteria, the group known as Furrries also practice an unusual form of cosplay, in which they dress up in animal costumes. However, my informant argued that subcultures such as these, which operate in the midst of conventional society, are often viewed as deviant. Even though tolerated by the mainstream, Furrries are nevertheless viewed as weird, abnormal, and even perverse. Gem argued that when compared to the sort of deviance expressed at Wisteria, what Furrries do is practiced in an “obsessive” way. Because the Furry cultural expression is marginalized by the mainstream, but also occurs within its spaces, it has become molded into extreme form of practice.

Gem explained this is because unlike Wisterians, who have a dedicated space to contain

their activities, the Furies must make do with temporary containers such as convention centers, or virtual online spaces, to collectively experience their culture. Their gatherings are thus forced into artificial habitats, analogous to a space ship that provide its occupants with temporary artificial gravity and life support. Contained within their cultural capsules Furies are construed by normative society, and perhaps even by themselves, as fetishistic. Whereas within Wisteria similar types of behaviors, because they are welcomed and operate among other unconventional cultural expressions, are free to develop and be practiced in more open and unadulterated ways. They are not forced to conform to a restricted outlet. They are not packaged in any particular way to suit the boundaries of conventional society. At Wisteria neopagan ritual displays, festivals, and other events are free to be authentic, so their meaning and social structures are self-determined. They have developed and occur in an atmosphere conducive to their forms, and are not shaped by any external forces as might be the case in the outside world. Gem stated that the Furry practice is:

quarantined and it's also really very focused, whereas [at] these festivals a lot of people just experiment with that and many other things in a general sense, without needing to go to the obsessive lengths that something devoted to a specific fetish would be.

Both groups represent cohesive social enclaves in which norm-bending behaviors are shared and practiced together as part of a collective. But the Furies are viewed from within the context of normal society as being obsessional or neurotic, their performances and identities being associated with fetishistic behavior. Whereas Wisteria is perhaps less of an extreme aberration from the surrounding mainstream, and more a mini-society with a cultural milieu that is tolerant of a wide range of behaviors and performances.

Another difference is that neopagans are more secretive. They are not looking to draw attention to themselves from outsiders as Furies often do. In some ways they are not as focused

and uniform in their interests as are Furies, and much of what they do is not so unusual from the standpoint of mainstream culture. There is not a single specialization, such dressing like animals, which signifies a more narrow range of interests. At Wisteria there is a wider variety of interests, and a greater cultural dimension, that includes entheogenics, Druidism, Wiccanism, environmentalism, Native Americanism, Orientalism, Celticism, Tolkienism, and Crowleyism to name just a few. As mentioned above it is an eclectic set of beliefs and philosophies which informs neopagan and New Age spirituality practices. And the community at Wisteria is generally open to all kinds of eccentric displays. Yet there are some commonalities such as the references to pagan deities, nature, and Western European mythologies, however, there is a lot of variation on these basic themes.

3.11d Safety Comes First and Dress Like a Priest if You Must

When asked, 'what is the basic purpose of Wisteria?' the common answer was that members want a safe space, "to keep it a safe experience for everybody." A place in which to experiment with oneself, away from the sorts of dangers encountered in the outside world, such as the police or other societal threats. Communing with nature, practicing earth based spiritualities, and having a secluded, worry-free environment in which to pursue for example ritualistic use of entheogenic substances, is of paramount interest. Gem stated that members can also:

play around with ideas of non-monogamy and ideas of non-monotheistic religion, and ideas of gender identity, and various arts, and even sciences. They talk about edible plants and that sort of thing, but yet you don't have to go to a polyamory convention.

But in a community where deviance is the often goal, what qualifies as deviant? Since members go out of their way to adamantly protect the right to self-expression, they are

exceedingly tolerant of what qualifies as deviance in the outside world. Wisterians draw the line at physical and sexual assault. This basic code is exemplified by the phrase “do what thou will and harm none.” Making the space safe, both sexually and physically, is of primary concern. All throughout the festival there is a security detail, in which trusted veteran members take on the responsibility of insuring participant's safety. During a festival, I observed the security officers driving throughout the community in golf carts, seeing to it that everyone was ok. They also have a first aid station where members can receive basic medical assistance. Gem argued that these sorts of norms are “a universalist sensibility,” that includes not harming others, and observing another's right to pursue their goals unmolested.

When I asked what are considered norm violations, my informant responded that there is a wide latitude in terms of experimentalism and free expression. Gem reiterated the notion that threatening others with physical and/or sexual harassment is not tolerated. She also stated that dressing like a priest or a nun would be viewed as deviant within the space. When pressed for an explanation, she stated that “because it's [the priest's clothing] restrictive, it's the opposite of what they're there to do.” Gem explained that for an individual to be cloaked in traditional religious trappings would be perceived as antagonistic, because historically that religion has condemned paganism, and the occult beliefs that participants embody. In other words, the values and symbols of Christianity are at odds with neopaganism. Also the priest's cassock and nun's habit represent restriction, or repression of sexuality, and are stifling to individual expression. However, she was quick to point out that:

it would be deviant, but a nun could walk there safely, and it would get maybe like “why are you doing that?” but nobody would criticize the choice, whereas if I were to walk bare breasted into Catholic mass, that would be problematic, they would kick me out.

As we discussed notions of deviance and the common good, ironically Gem went on to

argue how morality is universal: “You could argue that but you could also say that there are things that are just common to humanity that predate the Bible, and the Bible just like made those formal.” While pondering the comparisons between neopaganism and traditional religions, in terms of mores and codes of conduct, we stumbled into a discussion about how norms are universal. This seemed to strike a chord with her. She argued that norms of decency and respecting another's rights predates monotheism, but that they claim to have a monopoly over them. She went on to explain how Christians demonized the bacchanal, suppressed nudity and playful sexual expression among its adherents, and framed pleasure itself as wasteful, indulgent, and generally evil. Moreover, nature has been cast as sinful:

we have created a system that dehumanizes people, but that's considered holy, that's considered doing God's work, whereas going out and being in nature, and enjoying humanity as it is, and accepting and tolerating, and practicing non-judgement and empathy is considered you know sinful.

Whereas subscribing to “muggle capitalism” as she put it, and “sitting in a cubicle” working at a mindless job, while slowly dying from the soul crushing monotony is considered “holy, and doing God's work.” She went on to argue that social ills such as “dehumanization” and “destroying nature” are all acceptable within the current societal paradigm:

In that dehumanization process we've also seen the rise of pollution and like the water supply, and melting ice caps, and over fishing and the death of coral reefs, and all of these things and we need to survive, and people who come from the earth faiths tend to be concerned about that, both because they're faith focuses them on nature, but also just from a pragmatic standpoint. Whereas the monotheistic religions would just accept that as God's will, and part of the impending apocalypse where they all get to go home and have their heaven.

For individuals like Gem spirituality equates with “having the human experience in a natural setting.” She stated this as the goal rather than going to an afterlife, which is often the goal for traditional religions. Gem offers us another way to distinguish between religion and her brand of faith. Among traditional religions there is often a delayed gratification in terms of

reward and salvation:

I mean to me salvation is comparable to saying “oh it's perfect, it's going to be perfect at some point in the future,” whereas pagans look at it and say, “there's plenty of reason to have joy for things as they are right now.”

Gem's comment exemplifies a this-worldly type of religion, one that celebrates the physical experience in the here-and-now. As opposed to an other-worldly gaze that looks forward to enjoying paradise in an afterlife. This point has surfaced numerous times during my interviews. The bases for their respective mores, of the Christian versus the neopagan, seem to be structured and justified temporally. In other words, these two forms of religiosity exhibit an ideological separation in terms of when the fruits of their spiritual labors are actually enjoyed. For traditional religions, it is usually a question of living in proper accord with a prescribed moral code. Adherents are offered salvation as a reward for 'good' behavior, rather enjoying oneself in nature now. For neopagans and other earth-based spiritualities, the reward is experienced in this life, as sensual pleasure for example. And if one believes in reincarnation, the same goes for future lives, where rewards and punishments occur, as always, in accordance with one's karma.

However, read from the perspective of Abrahamic religions, we perhaps have an added meaning for the Garden of Eden: a prehistorical, pre-Biblical playground for humanity. By this interpretation neopagans seek a return to a more innocent state of humanity, where nudity was not a sin, where people were allowed to be themselves without worrying about how others judged their actions.

But Gem was quick to point out that it is not perfect:

it's important to realize that even as these people attempt to create a space where these ideals can be realized, that those spaces are also flawed, that sexism still happens, that people still behave in ways that are falling short of the ideals that they are hoping to espouse.

Forms of elitism are also present, as exist among New Agers as well, where for example some have notions of “superior enlightenment.” Within the community one might encounter “born again pagans,” a pejorative term used by some informants to indicate peers who may be inflexible in their beliefs, and “take themselves a bit too seriously.” Seeing one's spirituality in black and white terms, in which there is a right way to do something like a ritual, and a wrong way, tends to arouse suspicion among most members. Gem argues that in some ways neopaganism and other new spiritualities are simply religions cloaked as non-religious spiritualities. They are just as susceptible to hypocrisy and corruption as are others, despite the objections of hardcore adherents.

She explained that some members are moreover reactionary, in terms of their ideological perspectives and stances with respect to alternate worldviews. For example, Gem argued that members often rebel against traditional forms of religion, going to great lengths to define and justify what they are doing as being different from monotheism. But then she claimed they are not acting from an authentic place. Rather they are reacting to something, such Judeo-Christianity, in which they had a bad experience. The trouble, she suggests, is that their values and beliefs are in part being shaped by the very things they are trying to overcome. They are therefore structurally intertwined with 'religion' whether they like or not. When asked 'what do you believe in?' She responded “my own subjective experience,” which is consistent with my other informant's positions.

Chapter 4 Spirituality and Re-enchantment

4.1 Religion and Subjectivity

Thomas Luckmann (1967) believes the problem of individual existence, caused by the emergence of modern society, to be fundamentally religious in character. The disappearance of socially fabricated symbolic universes, of the sort religions provide, has created a crisis of meaning for modern humanity (Luckmann, 1967, p. 12). Due to the differentiation, pluralism, and societalization of modernity (Dobbelaere, 2006, p. 144), Luckmann argues that as individuals are released from the binding constraints of traditional religious systems, they are increasingly left to rely on an autonomous sense of self, and also private resources, such as family and friends which support it. In this new, increasingly post-religious and anomic social landscape, individuals inevitably create highly subjective meaning systems that are directly tailored to a range of idiosyncratic criteria, and involve self-expression and self-realization which Luckmann calls forms of “invisible” religion (Luckmann, 1990, p. 137).

With the privatization of religion, what was once a mainly communal phenomenon has, due to the pluralizing effects of secularization, mutated into essentially independent micro-social processes of spirituality. According to Peter Berger, “religious realities are increasingly 'translated' from a frame of reference of facticities external to the individual consciousness to a frame of reference that locates them within consciousness. Put differently, the *realissimum* to which religion refers is transposed from the cosmos or from history to individual consciousness. Cosmology becomes psychology, history becomes biography” (Berger, 1967, p. 167). Released from collective expectations, modern individuals are guided rather by subjective criteria and immediate experiences geared towards personal fulfillment, as opposed to societal or group

commitments (Dawson, 2011, p. 127).

Stephen Hunt (2005) argues that pre-industrial societies displayed less complex and more undifferentiated life cycles (Hunt, p. 69). During this time religion was largely a communal affair, and a significant portion of ritual practices revolved around the completion of socio-cultural milestones, e.g. rites of passage marked by community imposed expressions of religiosity along a standardized life course. However, due to the cultural fragmentation and differentiation of modern existence, there are no longer such simple distinctions. For example, an expansion of the liminal phase that separates childhood from adulthood has occurred (Erikson, 1966, p. 27). This change has essentially created the transitional life stage of modern adolescence, marked by an extended period of social experimentation (e.g. an exploration of deviant behaviors) that is instrumental in the formation of an adult identity. Insofar as identity contains within it values, beliefs, and practices, it should come as no surprise that modern forms of religiosity are bound up in this experimental process of identity formation. The modern person, by this understanding, would be expected to 'try on' various forms of religious belief and practice in their quest towards creating a religious identity, insofar as one is not having it handed to them as part of an already established communal norm, a one size fits all religious notion of self, imposed from above.

Modern life is consequently reduced to a series of individual choices and projected plans for the future that may have little community significance. For example, Stephen Hunt argues that rites of passage in Western societies have become mostly optional, as they are no longer compulsory aspects of social existence (Hunt, p. 71). Though “there may still be coming of age or retirement parties, these are hardly of great social or religious significance” (Hunt, p. 72). Dobbelaere (2006) goes so far as to say that societalization has destroyed communal life, and

socio-religious artifacts such as rites of passage have in effect lost all meaning (Dobbelaere, 2006, p. 144).

However personalized it has become, society still demands the subordination of individual self-interests to the collective interests of a social whole, and social techniques are required to accomplish this imperative. Individuals are expected to recognize secular authorities, such as the police, obey laws, and comply with economic norms. By contrast religion provides social cohesion, in part by posing transcendental authorities to which individuals are willing to submit themselves, often in ways that are counter to their interests. Traditionally religion in the form of a god, priest, or church serves as this authority, insuring social obedience and solidarity between individuals. In this capacity religion interprets the cosmos, gives meaning and sense to the social world, and provides affective (if not intellectual) reassurance about the order of things (Wilson, 1976, p. 267). As a result of modernization the unexplained is, however, no longer a mystery, but is rather, from the point of view of a scientific cosmology, an “as yet unsolved problem” (Dobbelaere, 2006, p. 144).

4.2 Modernity and Disenchantment

Max Weber has argued that, in addition to producing new conceptions of a sovereign self, the post-Enlightenment legacy of intellectualization and rationalization has in effect emptied the world of its divine character, dispelling all of the mysteries and magical forces, and spiritual and ethical meanings once provided for by religion (Weber, 1958). Consequently, life is perceived as a complex series of pre-planned events that must occur in a linear progression. Moreover, the world has been covered over in concrete, no longer conceived as a magical place infused with divine personalities, but is a harsh landscape composed of meaningless chemistry and random

physical processes. For many, involvement in religion and/or spiritualities is a way to cope with the social anomie that comes with living in a society that reduces subjective life experience to an objective mechanical process.

Literary critic Hans Bertens (2008) argues that post-Enlightenment romantic poetry is, at its base, a response to the dehumanizing effects of secularization. He suggests “for [T.S.] Eliot, natural and organic unity that is missing from the modern world and that we ourselves have also lost with the advent of scientific rationalism and the utilitarian thinking of industrialization – the 'dissociation of sensibility' – is embodied in aesthetic form in poetry” (Bertens, p. 12). He goes on to say that “literature as a liberal humanism takes the place of religion,” e.g. Eliot's *The Metaphysical Poets* (Bertens, p. 20). According to this thesis as secular cosmologies displaced religious ones, individuals pursuing post-enlightenment forms of spirituality found themselves increasingly within the realm of a literary, non-institutional and non-religious ecstatic experience.

Because it is a transcendent medium, poetry opens an avenue of escape from the uncomfortable polarities and splits within the self, “because of its internal organization – its formal structure – a poem created harmony out of opposites and tension, presenting a vital alternative” to life in a hyper-rational secular order (Bertens, p. 17). This new way of practicing self-transcendence therefore underlies a core aspect of modern spirituality, who's goals include finding ways to restore a lost organic unity and social harmony, between self and group, humans with the natural environment, culture and nature, and is encompassed in the postmodern response to time-space compression (Harvey, 1990). Similarly, participation in neopagan and New Age or New Paradigm beliefs and practices offers to many the possibilities for a spiritual re-enchantment of their lifeworlds. Research questions related to this theme, that have guided my

ethnographic fieldwork include:

- Why do some individuals seek to 'magicalize' their lifeworlds? Is it out of boredom (i.e. disenchantment) with their everyday lives?
- How is re-enchantment practiced?
- How does re-enchantment become embodied? I.e. what is a re-enchanted body?

4.3 The Carnavalesque Body vs the Classical Body

One way to understand re-enchantment is to consider how it is being embodied by its adherents. For example “the carnivalesque body is the ecological body, a body that is forever interacting and exchanging with the environment, bringing in solids and fluids at the top and sending them back out again at the bottom,” which stands in contrast with the “modern sense of individualism [that] encourages us to see our bodies as sealed off from others and from the natural world with a host of consequences for what we regard as dirty repulsive, as polite, scary, and even what we regard as humorous” (Bell, 2012, p. 158).

Since the 1960s, counter-cultural 'hippies' emphasized a more natural body style, and rebelled against mainstream standards of beauty and hygiene. This acceptance of the natural body and its ecological interconnections with the rest of the environment is also emphasized within neopagan communities. This attitude is typically accompanied by a carnivalesque atmosphere of sensuous bodily indulgences: displays of sexuality and primal behaviors such as participating in forms of dance which often involves hundreds of people playing music (mostly drums and flutes), consumption of intoxicants such as alcohol and/or other mind-altering substances, and 'playing' around a large fire, in some cases naked. At Wisteria women are also routinely topless, and show underarm and leg hair. Men typically wear sarongs. Sexuality is openly discussed, and in some contexts overtly practiced.

In general, there seems to be an ecstatic celebration of the body in all the cultural spaces in which I observed. For example, a few of my informants are involved with a spiritual group called 'Orgasmic Meditation'. Group practices are centered around developing and becoming more attuned to one's sexual body, and towards this end members provide physical stimulation for each other at weekly meetings, to both heighten their sexual sensitivity, and to create orgasms. This group is local offshoot of a nationwide organization known as "Turn-on," and members often travel across the country to attend national meetings and seminars. This practice is distinguished from intercourse, as group members are not considered to be partners in a sexual relationship, and even the giving of orgasms is viewed as part of a spiritual practice. Participants are known as 'OM-ers' which also emphasizes their meditative orientation to this practice (A more in-depth coverage will be given to this group in chapter eight on healing and the body).

However, within this cultural milieu the body is conceived of as not merely carnivalesque, but also as 'spiritualized'. Individuals demonstrate this through wearing such things as 'spirit hoodies', which are hats or hoods possessing animals features such as cat whiskers and ears. This should be distinguished from other subculture phenomenon, such as the Furies, whose members usually wear full animal costumes that have more of a sexual or fetishistic association than a spiritual one. Other forms of this clothing that are exhibited at neopagan festivals include wearing fairy costumes, as well as other mythological characters such as the satyr. Here individuals, usually men in this case, will wear goat horns that are symbolic of the Greek god Pan, who is associated with nature and carnal pleasure. Both forms of clothing emphasize a connection with nature, and in the case of spirit hoodies there is an overt display of a shamanistic perspective, e.g. that each individual has a 'spirit guide', usually in the form of an animal, that provides guidance and protection throughout one's life, sort of like the neopagan

version of a guardian angel. Further manifestations of the impulse to re-enchant one's lifeworld include:

- **Creating Enchanted Spaces:** Fairy Shrines or wooded spaces that are decorated with 'sacred' objects, or personal items holding spiritual significance for individuals; also Labyrinths made of candles, through which individuals walk in meditative states.
- **Practicing innocence:** releasing inhibitions, practicing nudity, being child-like, doing creative things (e.g. making art or music), participating in drum circles which are also understood as a cleansing practice, considered by some members to be a form of medicine similar to the sweat lodge or using entheogens.
- **Practicing 'non-reason':** being deliberately illogical. The goals: to practice new forms of relationships, new ways of relating interpersonally. According to one of my informants "spirituality helps us to create new norms and new symbols" (Interview with Persephone).

With the goal of returning to what they believe was a simpler past for humanity, neopagans and members of shamanistic medicine groups seek to construct timeless 'Edenic' realms for themselves, emphasizing such qualities as human innocence (i.e. communalistic egalitarianism), living in communion with nature, and participating in magic. Entering into these fantasy realms afford participants opportunities for a re-enchantment of their lifeworlds. Victor Turner describes "a liminal no-man's land, a time between past and future within which the initiands experience remarkable dramas and may be tested in all kinds of ways" (Strathern and Stewart, p. 52; Turner, 1985, p. 295). One way this is achieved is through engaging in forms of magical thinking, wherein *magic* is equated with being able to use one's *imagination*. This could involve ways of interacting relationally that reflect modes of being from one's childhood, or ways of thinking that are not governed by the rules of logical discourse. Within these spaces individuals feel free to express themselves in terms of their in-the-moment needs, which they believe elicits a more authentic account of their thoughts, desires, and emotional states.

These decompressed spaces of discourse also allow for a therapeutic sharing of thoughts and feelings, which may involve elements of emotional or psychological vulnerability, that a person might otherwise not feel safe in expressing elsewhere. It therefore contains nostalgic elements from one's past, and is a way of thinking and behaving that is viewed fondly, as part of an innocent or simpler time in one's life. For example, that we all as children had more open or unguarded ways of communicating with each other, and were more free of worry and concerns over what others might think of what we choose to say. These are ways of thinking and feeling that are moreover free of judgment according to my informants, and so imbuing one's life with magical ideas may be a chance to relive certain aspects of one's childhood, and to escape hyper-rational modes of being that characterize modern secular life. The feeling of being free to express oneself without negative repercussion, is exemplified by Gaia:

I'm not talking about being nicer. I mean you can say bad things, it's just being able to say the whole spectrum, cause I think that builds people's self-confidence when they have that rapport with other people when you're in a spiritual group, and you can say, "Oh, I just saw that in my mind," and you can say "Oh, I saw that too." Or you can have complementary evidence that things are happening, and you're getting that confidence of, "Oh, well this is how my body felt, I got goose bumps when I read that," "Oh, me too." All of that feels right now [...] you get a validation.

Feeling free to express doubts, and to seek validation for one's subjective experiences, especially spiritually oriented ones, is important to participants. Finding cultural spaces where this is possible is difficult, and so re-enchantment friendly milieus are quite understandably highly coveted by my subjects.

4.4 Re-enchantment through Play

Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood. Fred Rogers

Victor Turner contends that liminal phases of action contain within them aspects of play, and further that play itself is “a serious business.” In other words, “that it can convey serious messages about social relationships in a kind of metalanguage” (Turner, 1985, p. 160), that enables discourse about social life to take place in collective contexts where multivocal symbols are brought into relief. Play as a concept underpins the idea of imagination being a force in cultural creativity, and relates to the use of metaphor in particular as an ingredient in the genesis of symbols (Strathern and Stewart, p. 53). By this definition play is doing serious things for the individual and group. Permitting participants the room for experimentation, and loosening the limits on what is allowable socially, it gives the collective a prefigurative space in which to create new values and forms of relationships. Turner suggests that play liquifies structure: “communitas is always pre-structural, even though those who participate in it have been saturated in structure—being human—since they were infants. But flow for me seems to be one of the ways in which “structure” may be transformed or liquified into communitas again. It is one of the techniques whereby people seek the lost “kingdom” or “anti-kingdom of direct unmediated communion with one another (p. 58).

For example, one of my informants, who is part of the neopagan intentional community in Ohio called Wisteria, stated that “people play with things here: identities, expressions, bodies, relationship ideas, polyamory, social deviance” (Interview with Persephone). Within this community individuals are experimenting with unconventional, non-state sanctioned, non-mainstream ways of living and thinking. Examples include forms of social organization, such as practicing polyamory versus monogamy; using bartering versus currency as a means of exchange; communal living versus maintaining discrete nuclear families; and ways to relate interpersonally and with nature.

I feel festivals are very critical because it allows the group that's gathering to create the kind of world they want to see for a short period of time, and you get to drop all your outside roles and responsibilities, and really manifest the life that you want to be living (Interview with Moonflower).

This informant's notion of festival culture resonates with Turner's concept of the “liminoid,” or “optional categories of activities” that contrasts sharply with the mandatory rites of passage in traditional societies, or rituals and belief structures involved in organized religions. Rather this is “the threshold or phase in which actors are suspended in transitional phase and are thrown together in an unstructured *communitas* or sense of shared experience prior to the re-establishment of a structured set of roles in a new configuration” (Turner, 1982, p. 56). I have found that group memberships and communal belonging among my study participants to be largely transitory. While I have encountered veteran members who have made lifelong commitments to specific groups or communities, most of my informants seem to hold mainly temporary (and multiple) memberships within diverse sets of groups. It is as if they are experimenting with different sorts of social and religious situations, and seeking for what feels right.

When I asked another community member “well if you had to define it, what is this culture about?” She remarked, “I think experimentation” and “playful yeah, well there's a lot of that yes.” This informant amplified her statement suggesting that these are “people with very eccentric belief systems.” She explained that the individuals who attend festivals are what you might call characters, or “ideological misfits,” whom Turner refers to as “the rude and sporty segment of the community” (1982, p. 43). Within mainstream society, outside of the festival space, these individuals might be regarded as unusual to be sure. However at festival, since this is a collection of such personalities, there exists a whole society of these eccentric characters, sort of like the best of the best, or the weirdest of the weird. So a person like this does not stand

out so sharply from others within the community. Festival goers often try to outdo one another in terms of their spiritual expressions, e.g. their costumes, encampments, and behavior at group events. It often becomes a competition for who can be the most outlandish.

4.5 Spiritual Misfits and the Function of Clowns

Being in neopagan festival space brings one into contact with a variety of unusual situations, among a diverse crowd of rather strange individuals. The ritual fire events, for example, which occur in the Paw Paw patch at Wisteria (a rustic ceremonial grove set at the edge of a ravine at the heart of the spiritual community), offer observers the opportunity to witness neopagan religiosity in its most exposed forms. The ritual space consists of a large round staging area, perhaps 300 feet in diameter, and on all sides are various structures and areas, each having a specific purpose. There is an altar upon which members can lay sacred objects to be blessed by the ceremony. Across from that is a musical instrument, a sort of metal xylophone built into the wooden frame of a tree, along with chimes and a percussion section containing wooden drums of different sizes. Individuals are free to play this instrument during ceremonial rituals, which usually include drum circles that can involve hundreds of individuals all playing their drums simultaneously (it gets loud). Up against a hillside, opposite of the ravine, is a roofed pavilion that houses the drummers and some of the spectators, and at the center is a large fire area.

Many participants will come to these events dressed in elaborate costumes, with painted faces and bodies. Nudity is permitted, and so it is not unusual to see individuals dancing naked around the fire, their bodies painted with various paganistic designs and symbols, often reflecting nature deities, or perhaps imagery involving themes of death and renewal, e.g. green nature goddesses, people wearing horns (representing the goat god Pan), or fairy wings and sparkly face

paint. There are also skull faces with white and black stripes painted on the body, symbolically indicating a skeleton. Alcohol is also permitted, and as the night progresses individuals will shed their clothing and their inhibitions, as the dancing adopts ever-increasing forms of overt sexual displays.

But there are also the clowns. Towards the end of a long night of ritual fire dancing, drumming, and carousing, a strange apparition of a woman was spotted dancing topless. She was wearing a see-through gown made of light colored silks, similar to a belly dancer's costume. Her face was not too garishly painted, just some light make-up, but on her feet she was wearing what looked like large dinosaur or bird feet. These appendages had enormous claws and scales, and looked very life-like. But the contrast with her top half was rather bizarre. This mixture of styles provoked in others and myself a sense of disorientation and humor. Uproarious laughter erupted in response to this absurd spectacle. The reason the woman appeared so clownish was because the seductive manner of her dancing was being juxtaposed against these monstrous feet.

There are many ways to interpret this weird combination of extremes. For instance in Greek mythology, which serves as a basis for much of the Celtic/Pagan derived gods and goddesses, there are creatures that are half-human and half-animal. A Centaur with the torso and head of a man and the body of a horse for example, or Artemis who possesses the upper body of a woman (with antlers), and the lower body of a deer. So the unusual hybrid forms this participant displayed could simply indicate aspects of pagan belief that are centered around nature deities. It is an earth-oriented spirituality after all, and so this makes sense. There is a union of forms, and a symbolic blending that emphasizes the ecological integration of humanity with the rest of the natural world, a further reflection of the carnivalesque body. Moreover the hybrid fashion symbolically serves as an attempt to overcome the duality that exists between

nature and culture.

However, as I think back upon how I was affected by this strange aesthetic, of what the overall effect of this dual image was, I discovered a more conventional interpretation. On the one hand we have the beautiful and highly sexualized human female dancer, graceful, appearing highborn, almost like a fairytale princess. But rather than being poised upon the dainty and eloquent feet of a ballerina, the beautiful dancer had been spliced together with a monstrous bird/dinosaur. The ugliness of her feet stood out in high contrast with her beauty as crude and clumsy, perhaps even brutish. One thing was certain, the princess-bird combination was without question a visually comical character for the spectators. I was also reminded of the Grimm's fairy tale involving a princess who must kiss a frog to acquire her prince. But then, remembering the mythological function of the clown within indigenous cultural myths, I derived another meaning. This is also an interpretation that comes closer to addressing the goals of my study: to understand alternative forms of religiosity, and the functions of liminality and experimentation among contemporary Pagans. Within the stories of Native American tribal cultures, (ones generally west of the Mississippi), is the figure of the Trickster (Handelman, 1981, p. 323). The clownish coyote caricature is rude but nimble, usually animalistic in appearance (e.g. black and white striped animal features), however possesses the quick and graceful motions of a magician, whose movements are in part designed to mesmerize audiences, and put them into trance states.

Taking this interpretation of the woman's dual mode costume as a 'trickster', in the sense of a trance inducing clown-god whose role is to burlesque authority, I moved closer to divining her purpose. The meaning of the trickster's actions, the clowning around and making fun, is to poke holes through the religious system in which it is housed, and is an abrogation of the normative system (Turner, 1982, p. 42). Often the trickster will latch upon specific ritual forms

or beliefs, and will exaggerate them to the point of absurdity or indeterminacy¹. These exaggerations are designed to make fun of everything reverent or pompous, by setting the grotesque or irrational alongside the sublime, in order ‘to knock it down a few pegs’. The ritual clown also appears in medieval European folklore as the character of the Fool. Aside from their role as a ritual sacrifice, e.g. the King For a Day that has to do with renewal and fertility, the fool occupies an analogous role within a royal court, and fulfills the same purpose as the trickster. For example, the fool is permitted to poke fun at the king, or other forms of authority, in order to ‘keep it real’, i.e. to provide those in power with a critical perspective that they ordinarily might not receive from their underlings. This is because, within the context of ordinary life, to challenge nobility would be disastrous, for both critic and for the object of ridicule, and so it is done satirically in the guise of comedy.

Thus, the purpose of a religious or spiritual clown, as the personification of disorder, is to exaggerate the weaknesses of a religion so that they can be more clearly seen. This demonstrates to initiates that the religious system they are subscribing to, this grand and shining Olympian and majestic structure, is nothing more than a prop or a vehicle for enabling their spiritual ascendance. The system of referents: the beliefs, practices, and rituals, are designed to allow individuals a means for achieving personal transcendence. But to become attached to the system is a mistake, because it is not the goal or end in itself (Campbell, 1991, pp. 275-76). The religion with all of its rites and rituals, aesthetic imagery, grand spectacles, rules and deifications, are a means by which the individual advances to a higher plane, whether this is accepted as a higher state of consciousness, or an actual afterlife. So, the message is to not become attached to the

1 In the Umbanda religion, the entity known as *Exu* deity “of the Crossroads,” is a Trickster, and personifies this position of indeterminacy. The figure possesses two heads: one having the face of Christ, and the other that of Satan's. This creature of the limen signifies the balance between order and chaos, which Turner argues forms the underlying basis of all social drama. He argues that all “social reality is fluid and indeterminate,” and resists the human desire to transform it into organized and systematic forms.

system, for it is only a means to an end. The ritual clowning therefore serves as a reminder to initiates, to not lose sight of their spiritual goals.

Thus, the strategy of burlesquing what is sacred serves as a rebuke, to “not take yourself too seriously,” and reflects well the philosophy of many neopagans and New Agers/New Paradigmers whom I interviewed. It is a loosening of the bonds that ritual and belief structures have over individuals, and is part of what play involves: a loosening of the guiding structures of a religious system, creating wiggle room for the desired identity shifts. Liminoid zones, such as those that exist in neopagan festival communities like Wisteria, are experimental spaces. They are places where individuals can feel free to experiment with their identities, including forms of embodiment, which involves how bodies are clothed and performed. In other words, these are flexible spaces that facilitate identity transformation. They are made flexible or porous in part from the sense of play that inheres in their ritual practices. There is a great deal of comedy, in terms of how people interact and how they look at the world, especially in the ways they view authorities and institutions. In these ways, the seriousness with which mainstream society and religion carries itself can be safely lampooned within the sanctuary of liminoidal festival space.

4.6 A Final Word on Play

Is play somehow disingenuous, or subversive within the context of religious culture? Once while presenting my research findings I had a colleague ask, “well how do you know if they are being serious?” He was responding to a photo I had shown of individuals merrily dancing around the Maypole at a neopagan Beltane ritual that focuses on spring as a time of renewal. At the time the question seemed misguided, and I responded with something like, “well just because this involves elements of play does not mean that it is not being taken seriously.” I

then asked “when a child plays, is she being serious?” It seemed that the inquisitor was asking whether or not a given person participating in a ritual was faking it. I continued to reflect on this question, and asked myself, “well yes, how do you know if someone is faking participation in a religious ritual?”

To illuminate this point further, let us take as an example the ritual of communion performed by Catholics during a mass. When communion is being offered individuals will form a line as they move to the head of the church, and when they reach the altar will kneel down to receive the host from a priest, who places a thin wafer representing the body of Jesus Christ into the person's mouth. The recipient then returns to their seat and prays, perhaps while contemplating the sacrifice made by their god, in order to absolve their sins. So then I ask, “well how do I know they are being serious?” In other words, how do we know this person is not faking their participation in this ritual? The person could be going through the motions of the ritual, and on the outside appear to be very earnest in their participation, yet on the inside they could be saying to themselves “I do not believe in this, I am faking it, and I am tricking everyone who sees me and believes I am really doing this.” The question is initially absurd, for obviously the only way to know what is on someone's mind, or how someone might be experiencing (or embodying) a ritual practice, or how they are thinking about it, or what it means to them, is to talk with them about it.

So that is in part what my interviews are addressing. Moreover, by asking “how do you know whether someone is being 'serious', or just playing at the ritual,” is almost as if to suggest there is only one 'right' (serious) way to do it (the ritual). But is it possible for someone to do a ritual in a way that is spiritually inauthentic? Each individual will have a slightly different understanding of its meaning, and will have a different experience of a ritual practice, and there

may be no one that is objectively correct. Therefore, it could be argued that there are no rituals which are not serious, or not spiritual. All subjective experiences are equally valid or authentic it could be argued, because again each individual is at the center of their personal 'religion', and whatever meaning one possesses about a belief or practice is the 'correct' one for them.

However, I think that a more interesting question is: How does a particular ritual or discourse work for a person? What does it provide for them individually, or within a group? And how are they using it? And if someone actually is faking it, why would they do this?

Chapter 5 Ritual and Structure

Any analysis of religion and structure necessarily involves at least a passing glance at its associated rituals. The term ritual itself is the root word of 'spi-ritual', which provides a very basic way of defining spirituality, as the ritualistic enactment of a religiosity. In contrast with beliefs, that are largely thought based and immaterial, rituals are the more active part of a religion. Rituals are often based in physical structures, yet they are at the same time metaphysically informed. Questions to be addressed in this chapter include, why do rituals exist at all? What has been and continues to be their place in society? How do they change over time? What are the key differences between individual and group rituals? Also, what is the distinction between ritual acts and technical acts? Are rituals aesthetic acts marking customary identities, as anthropologist Edmund Leach suggests? For example, technical acts display an obvious means-ends relationship, whereas ritual acts can refer to hidden occult forces that are hypothesized by the performers (Strathern and Stewart, 2010, p. 3). And to assess what is this ritual doing here, in this particular context? Included in this chapter will be an analysis and interpretation of the material culture relevant to this type of religiosity, with a focus upon informant's art-making practices, and how these are incorporated into their rituals, and how they draw upon metaphysical and mythological beliefs.

5.1 Individual Practice

Most of my Peaceburgh and Wisterian informants divide rituals into two basic types: personal and group. The distinctions they make between the two are typified by statements such as: “The group stuff is more structured,” while “the work I do on my own is often more improvisational and chaotic, and often I don't understand it until after I've done it,” But “working

with a group you have to have common definitions of what you're doing, and things need to be laid out pretty specifically, so that there's group cohesion” (Interview with Persephone).

Virtually all of my subjects described their spirituality as scattered collections of religious philosophies and ritual exercises. Contrary to individuals following traditional sorts of religion, who are typically bound by specific systems of beliefs and ritual processes to the exclusion of all others, my informants feel free to draw upon many faiths and disciplines to find what compliments their current interests. They tend to choose rituals that resonate with their individual goals and personalities. The blending and mixing of diverse religious forms can be conceived of as spiritual creolization: the hybridizing, reshaping, and form-fitting of practices and beliefs to suit one's personal needs. Persephone exemplifies the phenomenon of personalizing ritual practices, stating that “I totally learned it my own way, I realized in hindsight looking back I didn't even process it the way they taught it, I processed it in a way that made sense to me.” Her statement suggests that the personalizing process was not a conscious decision on her part, but was recognized only after reflection. She defined her spirituality as something that is constantly evolving, and what she considers spiritually meaningful is often only realized in the context of a current need: “I really just take stuff and I incorporate it into a way that makes sense to me, [as] usable and meaningful to me.” Many of my informant’s comments concerning groups and rituals affirm that doing spirituality is often a reflexive and unconscious utilization of religious structures, that involves a method of taking what is needed when it is needed, and then dispensing with it when it is no longer required.

Persephone went so far as to define ritual itself as a group focused type of religiosity that is done communally, whereas spirituality is more individual and subjective:

It's interesting that I do so much of it, and I enjoy creating these ceremony and ritual experiences with community, but I don't do it myself [...] so it's very different, what I will do by myself is going to look very different from what I do in a group context. It's not

meaningful for me to do ritual alone.

For this informant practices are more individually oriented, while rituals represent more of a communal thing. These realizations about the self/group dichotomy seemed to come to her during the course of our conversations. Presumably the dialectical interaction of the interview process allowed this informant the reflective space necessary for her to understand and acknowledge what she was doing. Another division is that personal rituals are usually done spontaneously, and are more often centered around prayer, while group practices, from what I observed, seemed to be more elaborate affairs that required some choreographing. Group rituals are more formal, and require pre-planning, whereas personal rituals are more casual and spontaneous (this point, and the need for flexibility in spiritual practice, will be elaborated upon below).

5.2 Group Ritual

Ritual theorists Strathern and Stewart (2010) state that, in terms of group cohesion “rituals helped to orient individuals to one another in a group, and provides uniform structures to house their otherwise widely varying intentions. In this way rituals establish a common activity field in which to practice spirituality, that minimizes interference and clashes between separate egos. Ritual structures may help to reduce tensions that can result from competitiveness between individuals in a group context, thus “transforming enmities into amity” (Strathern and Stewart, p. 57).

Many of my informants echo these notions, arguing that “doing [group] ritual helped build like good definitions of intimacy, and kind of aligned our perceptions of what we were trying to do” (Interview with Moonflower). Groups also encourage feelings of shared goals and

camaraderie: “group ritual is important because it helped reassure me that other people are trying to accomplish similar goals,” and “doing these types of ritual helped solidify that there are other people looking to create the type of world I want to live in.” Doing rituals with a group therefore helped this person to visualize their personal goals:

I feel like I get a lot of the same things out of group ritual as I do out of personal ritual, in terms of figuring out what are my goals right now. Like what are my intentions? Just taking the time out to be with myself, and create representations of my work towards those personal goals that I have (Interview with Moonflower).

Used as guiding structures, rituals can serve as symbolic machetes of one's life, or models for where one is going. For example, the mental focus that individuals claim to receive through doing repetitive ritual acts such as reciting mantras, performing yoga positions, or doing meditations, allows them to see clearly where they stand with regard to their personal goals, and how they might better achieve them. Whether or not this is actually true might be difficult to ascertain empirically. I can say from my own experiences that often while practicing yoga or meditation, I have discovered solutions to problems that had otherwise eluded me. The simple act of slowing myself down, and spending time doing something repetitive, provided me with the space, or reflective distance from my ordinary self that I needed in order to work something out. Therefore, doing rituals enables individuals to more effectively achieve their goals, by giving them opportunities for reflection, and a dedicated space of time in which to do problem solving and reflecting.

It is often the case, however, that collective goals become aligned with personal goals, in which the former help to facilitate the latter. Moonflower feels that these two phases of her ritual life are equally important, and ideally balance one another out, with each one enhancing the other. However, for some of my informants, this was not the case at all.

5.3 I Don't Resonate With Groups

Peaceburgh member Owsley explained his dislike of ritual, and how he has never been much of a joiner, and has often avoided group situations. He also questions their provenance, “like who came up with that ritual?” He mistrusts ritual situations because he could not help but think of them as being adulterated in some way by others. Moreover, rituals are often connected with “ego and power” he argued. He stated that group rituals usually come with a leader and a hierarchy, which he regards as suspect. Ritual structures, especially ones derived from sources exterior to himself, do not suit his notion of spirituality as a more self-oriented discipline, wherein he calls the shots, and decides where, when, and how a ritual or other spiritual practice ought to be done. Because of their authoritative structure, group rituals present a barrier to Owsley’s achieving personal goals, that include having transcendental experiences in the company of others:

Ceremonies have a limiting, they have a *barrier*, they have do's and do nots [...] I try to stay away from these, but to keep them as *loose guidelines* from personal experience. So I will practice with you, but I cannot tell you how it can be done. I can only show you what I do (Interview with Owsley).

More than a few of my informants commented about the problems of being a joiner. While they generally valued group experiences, noting the benefits such as building intimacy, social cohesion, and connecting solitary questers with a like-minded community, they remain hesitant to commit themselves to any particular groups. It seems that most prefer a 'no strings attached' form of involvement.

I wouldn't say, “Ok I'm now a part of your lodge,” or “I am one of you, and I'm going to keep doing this, this is my practice.” I can't really [do that] (Interview with Niffer).

Some recurring concerns that surfaced in response to my informant’s comments include:
What does it mean that I value participating in groups, but do not wish to be bound by any

obligations to any kind of group thing? On the one hand I want to do the ritual practice with a group, but on the other I do not wish to be owned by anybody, or to be labeled as a group member. One informant used the term “free agent” to define what it means to be in effect a “participating non-member.” The desire for free association is exemplified by New Agers, who often hold multiple and temporary group memberships. Persephone reflected upon the transitory nature of her group involvement, commenting that “largely whenever I get involved in something I always inevitably end up, sooner rather than later, leaving stuff.” The common reasons given by my subjects for their shifting and temporary memberships generally involved a sense of feeling trapped, or feeling pressured by a group to do certain things. For most of my informants losing one's personal freedom, feeling pressured, or being limited to one religious system or perspective is intolerable. As observed in the previous chapter, religious membership often imposes structural constraints upon potential initiates. Since many new spirituality groups also evolve agreed upon sets of ritual practices over time, these may be similarly regarded as unpleasantly binding by some.

One of the issues surrounding the interface between a self-oriented form of religiosity, and the desire for community and group practice are the subjective explanations versus the social aspects of doing rituals. Because new spiritualities are non-traditional, and recently devised forms of religiosity, there is a question of their validity and authenticity. Within indigenous societies, because rituals are assumed to have a deep history, they are perceived as having cultural legitimacy. For example, I have observed some members of the Native American Church oriented medicine and sweat lodge groups insist that since they possess cultural validity, indigenous ritual processes should be shown added respect, and be privileged over more recently created rituals, especially western-made ones. Yet others, while respecting the native traditions

and practices, are okay with mixing the two cultural perspectives, and even invite a blending of ancient and modern ritual structures.

However, it is not so much that individuals are resisting what a group technically is or what it does, but rather the notion of its exclusivity. Further questions emerged during my interviews that addressed this concern, such as “if I belong to this group, will it interfere with my life in other groups or situations?” For example, members of a local Tarot group also attend kirtan events at the Krishna temple in Pittsburgh. A kirtan is a ritualistic group practice that involves singing the “Maha Mantra” repetitively, to the accompaniment of a harmonium, tabla drum, symbols, flutes, and other instruments, often for a few hours. The president of the Pittsburgh temple defines himself exclusively as a Krishna, and has spoken openly about attracting individuals from the Peaceburgh spiritual community to his center. He welcomes participants at the weekly kirtan potluck events. However, he has shown concern and irritation towards some members when learning of their involvement in a separate Tarot group. He questioned these individuals, and even issued warnings about the dangers of pursuing these practices, and tampering with what he termed the “occult.” He condemned the Tarot as being part of the “baser instincts,” which are either a distraction from, or threat to attaining Krishna consciousness, i.e. an enlightened and peaceful communion with a benign cosmic intelligence.

He pressured individuals to discontinue their attendance of the Tarot group, and went so far as to invite its leader to a kirtan, presumably to witness and ascertain the types of relationships that she shares with these potential Krishna devotees. As mentioned in chapter one Krishnaism is a religion, based in Hinduism, and contains a hierarchical structure and a rigid moral code. It is concerned with recruitment, and clearly the temple president is advocating to members an exclusivity of practice that most of them reject. Notwithstanding this somewhat

egregious example of religious territorialism, members did not dismiss group belonging out of hand, or even exclusive forms of membership. They more or less ignored the dilemma that the temple president was having, and continued to enjoy the benefits of both groups. When some members were confronted about this issue, i.e. the ideological animosity existing between the two religiosities, they continued to speak highly of devotion to Krishnaism. Devoting one's life to achieving Krishna consciousness is acknowledged as a legitimate spiritual goal. But also, because they routinely mix beliefs and rituals from many different religions, my informants have no inherent difficulty with participating in kirtans and using tarot cards. Indeed a common belief among informants is that all such paths will lead to the same divine ends. Discussing related issues with respect to group membership, Niffer stated that:

I think it's really great for someone to follow a particular path with persistence and in fact you could say that I'm doing that with myself by being consistently inconsistent.

Niffer finds a way to both justify her own position of uncommitted non-belonging, by framing her temporary group involvements as consistent. Yet at the same time she respects the choices of others, to have hierarchy and exclusivity if that is what they want.

5.4 Power and Authority: On the Price of Devotion

While speaking about ceremonial groups and shamans, twenty-four year old Owsley complained about the effects of unjustified authority. He has noticed that “when people enter ceremony,” possibly in response to the posture of group leaders, “it becomes a fearful experience,” so much so that “you cannot do it [the entheogenic ritual] without a shaman, you cannot do it without a ceremony, [because] it must be in that context. Why? Because the medicine is powerful, it is the place of [unquestioned obedience]. Why? I can't answer that for you, it just is. That's unacceptable!”

Many of my informants repeated this point, that group rituals are contrived things, made up by some person or group, and “why should I follow that when I can make my own?” George claimed that personalizing his rituals makes them more powerful. He argued that “there would be more energy because you created it,” and also because self-crafted rituals are better suited to one's personal needs. Niffer accords with George and Owsley, asserting that: “it's really hard for me to adapt an already made system, that's like already rigidly defined.”

Owsley, Marco, George, and others have also voiced their discontent with what they perceive to be the unjustified demand for solemnity, or obedience, with respect to a spiritual practice. Because rituals are conceived of as something sacred, there is often a tacit assumption shared by participants that they demand unconditional regard. ‘After all it is serious work we are doing here, and moreover the ceremony or ritualistic event is often at the center of a group's attention. We must of course all be very polite, and “respect the space” by paying close attention. To not do so would be to show one's unworthiness for participation.’ Group rituals demand a focused effort on the part of participants. They command our undivided attention, and within some milieu this translates as mindless compliance. Initiates are asked to submit themselves to the authority of an individual, church, or discipline, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else. But as my informant states above, “why should I sacrifice parts of myself, even if it is only my time?” Nonetheless, while participating in spiritual events, I have noticed that individuals try to be on their best behavior. They are exceedingly polite, and do not balk at the high price of admission for a festival or ceremony, because that would be in poor form spiritually. ‘We are all enlightened, and above that sort of base behavior, which displays greed or a lack of vision for the bigger picture. What are a few dollars dropped in the church tin, after all, compared with the salvation of my soul?’ one might ask.

One time prior to a sweat lodge ceremony, while waiting for it to begin, a few of us were standing around outside the lodge stretching and talking casually. The conversation turned to the issue of traveling to various events, and the high costs of airfare came up. A young man yelled “shit!” in response, and an older man who was sitting on a bench nearby erupted into a furious outburst: “Sir, sir, would you mind not using curse words, I’m trying to pray over these stones!” During the free talk I could see this person getting annoyed, his anger mounting. For him the sound of the talking, and perhaps the mundane content of the conversation, had no place around a ritual fire, which is a sacred place. The stones which create the sweat lodge's healing powers were at that time being heated in the fire, thus making it a key focal point for the ceremony. For the angered member, the space had been violated by non-spiritual, crude, and/or disrespectful behavior.

It is not so much the respect or seriousness that irks some my informants. Rather it is doing so unquestioningly. Feeling that 'it is my duty to obey the structures, rules, or authority figures of a ritual or space' is I believe a common feeling among participants, especially if they are new to a group. Most people do not openly resist the rules or customs of a space. However, they may gradually come to realize that “this is not what I signed up for,” and likely not return to future group events.

Yet Dalek argued that “structure *is* ritual,” and that “religious experience is structured ritual [designed] to produce a certain experience” similar to being in a church with your family. The program generally entails that upon entering a cathedral, one should adopt a serious and respectful attitude. Prior to a Catholic mass, for example, organ music is usually played as individuals arrive and take their seats. The congregation gets progressively quieter as the service nears its start. Even the children are expected to submit themselves to the quietness and peace of

a focused togetherness. Everyone is present and listening to the same narrative, and no one is doing their own thing. Parishioners exist on the same level, and no one is better than anyone else. When attending a sweat lodge the shaman urges participants to arrive early, so that they can decompress from their drive on the highway, and “shake off the dust of the outside world,” before entering a sacred domain.

Being in a group allows one to see him/herself in a different way. For example, group immersion can serve as a reflective counterpoint, that encourages self-awareness. It gives individuals an opportunity to consider their spirituality from another perspective, via a group-self type of positionality. However, group belonging can also create forms of peer pressure, and other unwanted side effects.

5.5 Rituals and Self-Esteem

But when asked “what does participating in rituals do for you?” many informants responded by stating they have not been participating in rituals very much lately, but that they mean to soon. They also reported that this part of their spirituality presented them with a source of anxiety, and even guilt. In the words of one individual:

I suffer from idealism and procrastination and good intentions, but not necessarily putting them into practice, so I do things when I can, but it's always been really hard for me to do something on a daily basis (Interview with Marco).

Marco suggested that the situation is analogous to “forgetting” to take his multi-vitamins, even though he knows it is good for him. Another informant admitted “I'm very bad about doing anything regularly,” and “I do not have the discipline or patience for it” (Interview with Persephone).

Because rituals are specialized activities, that are often set aside from other activities,

they have an aura of formality about them. Also, because they require concentration and focus, individuals often feel pressured about doing them. It is almost as if they are hearing a voice in their heads telling them that they should do this very important thing, because it is so very good for them, insofar as they are often recommended by others. Many informants stated that if they felt a ritual practice was something that they had to do, they were less likely to do it. They would procrastinate, forget about it, or find something else to do. This is a familiar situation to students who, when faced with a difficult school assignment such as an important project that is coming up due, they might avoid doing it until the last possible minute. In the present case individuals might simply postpone a ritual, with the intention of doing it at a more convenient time. They may have goals such as making more time in their lives for meditation. Having this as a constant source of stress hanging over their heads, however, often resulted in avoidance, which created further feelings of guilt and/or regret that led to low self-esteem, possibly mixed with perceptions of failure (evidenced by Niffer, Marco, Loki, Gaia, Persephone, etc.)

Rituals are routinized manifestations of a religion, insofar as they are composed of repetitive behaviors that are generally structured in some way that makes them meaningful or comprehensible to a group. Ritual participation necessarily requires one to follow repertoires that can include doing specific types of bodily movements, following scheduled activities, and even aligning oneself with seasonal patterns. However, these encompass some of the qualities that my subjects reject such as regularity, routines, and rigid structures. When referring to this issue concerning the regularity of ritual structure, one informant responded:

I call that a regular routine, [such as] church and the regular people, it's a regular routine. Monday we have meatloaf, Tuesday we have whatever, Sunday we go to church (Interview with George).

He continued, suggesting that this kind of format does not accord with what he considers to be spiritual. Having been raised as a Catholic George is familiar with organized forms of

religion. In the following example he expresses some of his frustration, as he reflects back on his experiences of the ritual mass:

we go there, we see the guy there do his thing, he holds up the Eucharist, and that's supposed to be god, and then he comes down, and you come down and you eat that, and you walk out the door and you go "Fuck you motherfucker!" I mean what kind of spirituality is that?

Admittedly George has some residual anger regarding his Catholic upbringing. However, he explained that submitting oneself to a moral structure, that includes observing the rules and polite decorum of a church service, but then abandoning all this once the mass ends and one exits the building, is a form of hypocrisy. Perhaps based on his own behavior, and personal observations, he believes that his church going peers did not carry their religious piety into their everyday lives. But like many of my other informants George also shows the desire to establish a clear division between traditional religion and what he calls spirituality.

5.6 Keeping it Light: The Unifying Wisdom of a Whirling Dervish

However, in addition to procrastination, there is also the sheer exhaustion that can come from pursuing something for extended periods of time. In response to feelings of despair, or the dread of monotony, some informants exhibited a desire for simplicity. When Persephone was asked to describe her ritual practices, she commented, "I like very simple things." She explained that what works best for her are "very simple, very calming" Sufi breathing exercises and Buddhist breathing meditations. For this person simplicity is also equated with calming, so it seems that the technique of "keeping it light" in her case works to alleviate the pressures, stress, and anxieties she feels in association with participating in rituals.

If a ritual becomes a mandatory thing, in other words if it seems like "a drag" to participants, it becomes a problem. One informant mentioned "feeling drained" of energy when

facing the prospect of participating in one these specialized behaviors. A few of my subjects admitted to feeling pressured, from both groups and themselves, to participate in rituals and other structured practices. They claimed to know the benefits of these pursuits, and had clear intentions of doing them, but often procrastinated, doing everything else but. Quite a few members used similar terms to express their concerns, saying that they “lacked the necessary discipline,” and that if something felt forced, they would probably avoid doing it. However, after having the opportunity to reflect upon their anxieties, over the avoidance, guilt, and feelings of failure and insecurity that many of my informants seemed to experience, some responded with a new approach towards doing rituals. The initial excitement for instance, over having acquired something new for their spiritual repertoire, coupled with a militant or gung-ho attitude of wanting to excel at this new thing, had been replaced with a subtler intention: to keep their practices light. In other words, to approach a practice such as meditation or yoga in a more casual way, adopting a “take it or leave it” attitude. This approach involves not feeling obligated to do anything in particular, at any predetermined time. Concrete intentions to perform a ritual practice are loosened from their otherwise unbendable structures, and allowed to happen more naturally. However, keeping a practice light can also include not setting unrealistic expectations for oneself in terms of ritual goals.

In accordance with notions of individual agency, a principle emphasized by new spiritualities is the need for maintaining flexibility in one's practice. This notion is reflected in most of my informant's comments. As mentioned above a few individuals stated having the desire for simplicity in their practice, of wanting to keep things light. Another suggested that, “if something feels like 'Oh, I have to carve out this time and do it', then it's an issue.”

One of the defining features of religions, according to virtually every sociologist since

Durkheim, is a separation between what is sacred and what is mundane. The American separation of church and state exemplifies this seemingly ubiquitous type of cultural division. The constitutionally erected and defended barriers placed between these disparate spheres of existence are one of the defining features of modern American life. However, these lines become blurred when we turn our attention to alternative forms of religion. This blurring of the line, between what is sacred and mundane, is also evident in the spirituality culture under study here.

More or less all of my subjects remarked upon this issue in virtually identical language, saying that for them “everything is spiritual.” From brushing one's teeth to washing a dish, everything that is done is approached with an attitude of mindfulness and intentionality. This stance is commensurate with the recalcitrance observed on the part of my study participants, against having to follow rigid ritual structures, or setting aside specific times and places for engaging in spiritual practices. It further aligns with their commonly stated goals of wanting to integrate and unify recurring dualities within religious discourses such as good and evil, male and female, and heaven and earth. Many of my informants mentioned the separations that exist in western society, and that part of their spiritual mission in life is to reconnect disparate things such as mind and body, and nature and culture. One informant mentioned that she likes doing practices that integrate the physical and the conceptual aspects of one's life. She used the image of a Sufi dancer, or 'Whirling Dervish', to symbolize the functionality or vigor of a practice. She argued that if a practice becomes too routinized, or too rigid, it becomes a dead thing. Symbolically I believe the spinning and whimsical energy present in the dancers represents for her the vitality of what a healthy spiritual practice should be, something that is animated and alive.

Noting that polarities such as sacred/mundane and good/evil are found throughout all

religious cultures (Dawson, 2011) and human societies in general, is the pursuit of non-duality unique to alternative spiritualities? Arguably the primary goal of most, if not all, religions is for an adherent to join themselves with a deity, e.g. to go to heaven or experience nirvana. The various notions of an afterlife implicitly contain the goals of unifying dualities, through uniting one's earthly existence to that of a transcendent reality, whether that is a Christian heaven or pagan Valhalla. However, my informants would be quick to point out that even in these seemingly final forms of resolution between sacred and mundane, religious after-worlds usually retain dualistic structures. And in an even more exaggerated way, for example heaven is solely good, while hell is completely evil. The two are also entirely separate realms from one another. Overcoming this duality, what my informants call the light and the shadow sides of oneself, will be addressed more fully in chapter eight of this thesis, with a focus on healing. As we will see healing, and practicing non-duality often involves rejoining conflicting and disparate parts of oneself.

5.7 Spontaneity of Practice

But one way of refreshing one's practice, so they do not become a source of stress and/or anxiety, is to avoid doing rituals ritualistically. In other words, perhaps the remedy for doing things too regularly, is to do them spontaneously. Most Peaceburgh informants advocate spontaneous practice as being more desirable than having to be bogged down by responsibilities connected with traditional religious observances, whether these are Christian, Buddhist, Native American, or ones of their own making. By loosening up the structural demands pertaining to her ritual practices, Niffer suggests:

now I'm able to not even worry about that. That's why I like spontaneous non-denominational rituals that occur at Peaceburgh, or festivals, or something where it's not predefined as the so and so tradition that's been around. So even though I feel a connection with Native American

indigenous tribes, I'm not going to be necessarily [be] committed to doing the Lakota sweat, or whatever particular.

More often than not my informants, e.g. Gaia, Marco, Owsley, Persephone, George, and Niffer expressed a desire for free form ritual practices over that of more organized, set in stone, formalized rituals such as occur in Native American peyote ceremonies. But does an emphasis on spontaneity detract from the notion of their practices being at the same time sacred? Does approaching rituals informally render them less serious, and therefore more mundane? What kind of balance can there be, between organized and disorganized, formal and informal, rigid and spontaneous? How does an individual make sense of this dichotomy? Does a ritual practice become rootless if it is altered by an individual's needs? Does it become so idiosyncratic that it simply vanishes into an individual's personality? In other words, what distinguishes a practice as a spiritualized ritual, from something such as the obsessive-compulsive behaviors that might surround other types of activities, such as eating habits or hygiene practices that are part of a person's isolated behavioral quirks? Also, are adherents in conflict over wanting to be free to choose when, where, and how they practice a ritual, to the point where it becomes so loose in structure that it disintegrates into chaos? How is this dialectic resolved conceptually? But more importantly practically, as individuals find themselves participating in group rituals with others who may not share their individual needs? What guidelines are they to follow, if everyone wants to be free to choose? If participants have their own preferences for ritual practice based on idiosyncratic needs, can there be any common ground between formal and informal, group and self, that can serve as a meaningful place to meet in the middle?

Most informants extolled the value of free choice when speaking about rituals. They liked the idea of creating their own rituals, and believe that feeling obligated by, or bound to some religious or spiritual tradition from the past is misguided, and even harmful to their personal

spiritual quests. The following example illustrates the essence of the problem of structure for practitioners of alternative spiritualities.

Among the ways in which my informants came up with to describe how to make such a compromise, a good analogy is to think about rituals as if they are musical structures. For example, free-form rituals might be analogous to a jazz composition Persephone suggested, where players make up the structure as they go along. Although a basic structure exists as a starting point, players are free to produce innovative riffs within a general structure. In a similar way Peaceburgh members take the basic shape of a ritual, e.g. a Krishna kirtan or Native American medicine ceremony, and play with it. I have observed many variations on these themes, from what songs are chosen, to the artifacts used, and ideas expressed. However, in each case it is clear to anyone who is familiar with these kinds of rituals, that they are indeed creative interpretations of kirtans or sweat lodges. The basic structure is there, it is simply modified. After one has become familiar enough with the traditional structure of a kirtan, personal flourishes can be added to reflect the individuals involved.

I have found that new members typically enter into a practice or group as a student, and for a while at least adhere to the structures provided. Once they become familiar enough with its routines, they may feel the need to adjust it to fit with their other practices. The latter may be from different, possibly ideologically incompatible spiritual traditions. It is up to each individual to negotiate these sorts of compromises, between the particular sets of practices and traditions that attracts them. Because each individual has a more or less unique set, no one else can really do this better than they can themselves. Therefore, gurus and teachers can only take one so far. They can teach a person about a particular tradition. They can demonstrate a technique, and help one to achieve mastery in it. But they cannot do the work of spiritual synthesis for that person,

because they simply do not share the person's specific life situation, of juggling their unique system of rituals, beliefs, and existential obligations.

Peaceburgh events are spaces for experimenting with ritual practices, which members believe is necessary to prevent being suffocated by structures. Analogous to sitting in with a jazz band, an individual can join a group, and practice with other members for a time, perhaps adding their individual ingenuity and creativity to the collective. When things work well, and the group attains some degree of cohesion and playability, a good sounding song will emerge. Like anything else a group's chemistry will determine its success or failure. But this is also a fleeting thing, for when individuals have the choice to exit a group when it no longer suits their current needs, they tend to be short lived. By contrast institutions such as the Catholic Church tend to rely less on the personal chemistries of its members, and more on formalized structures and obligations to bind them together. That is not to say that obligations are absent from new spiritualities. Only perhaps that these are based more on personal friendships. In either case, because their ritual structures tend to be more flexible than those of traditional religious institutions, they are by and large more temporary.

Other ways of keeping rituals light involve “letting it happen,” and not being attached to making them have to happen at a certain time. “Use the ritual rather than letting it use you.” The trick, my informants suggest, is to think about a ritual, or other practice, as a means for achieving a goal. Rather than as something you feel you must do, “this is something I want to do.”

This could explain the appeal of having a mystical experience. Marco defined this as something “that occurs spontaneously, and cannot be planned, it just happens.” One of the joys of having a mystical experience is that they are unpredictable. And given my subject's resistance to overly structured rituals, it makes sense that they are attracted to these sorts of uncanny

subjective experiences. In contrast to the routines and structural regularities that exist within traditional religions, a mystical experience is irregular, thus defining it as a structureless expression of spirituality.

5.8 Rituals Are Grounding

However, some of my informants explained that doing rituals is a way for them to achieve bodily grounding:

What I find is that since my tendency is to be cerebral and mental, and tuning into that wavelength, I find that I need to get into my body, and so doing practices that integrate my body and my mind and my emotions are what I'm after (Interview with Niffer).

For this individual doing rituals helps to concretize aspects of her life that might otherwise be overly conceptual. The physical act of performing rituals enables her to tangibly experience what might otherwise be out of range, i.e. metaphysical concerns. Rituals provide a way of capturing ideational abstractions, disconnected ideas or intentions that are important for her spiritually. She is thus able to bring these perhaps ethereal parts of herself down into her material life, so that she can interact with them in a meaningful, or “grounded” way. As she puts it, “I like doing practices that integrate the physical with the conceptual.” Engaging in practices that are repetitive also helps Niffer to establish positive behavioral routines. Participating in rituals, such as a Full Moon cleansing, puts an individual in touch with their body, insofar as this involves a ritual fast. But it also aligns personal ideals with something in the physical environment, because during a full moon (according to informants) one is at the height of their creative powers. Acknowledging the seasons, or times of day with prayers or food sacrifices, creates an association with daily and rhythmical activities, and centers them around beliefs.

Niffer states she is able to integrate herself not only temporally, but also spatially by incorporating rituals into her life:

You know [it's helpful] interacting with others in this kind of time way. Otherwise I'd just be floating out there learning things. I'm living in the abstract a lot, so ritual actually has a lot to do with rhythm, so I'm going to get into some of the earth rhythms like the moon cycles, and the seasons. I'm going to incorporate those in my spirituality more this year, paying attention to what the moon and planets, and all of those guys are doing, so I can factor that in, and feel like I'm part of a system (Interview with Niffer).

Rituals are thus embodied modes of religiosity, that act to pull one into physical contact with their surroundings. Rituals are therefore also an aspect of place, and are especially salient within the intentional spaces of Wisteria, and in Native American ceremonial gatherings. In both locations, however, nature is the overarching spatial ground, and forms a good part of the identity of ritual participants. Insofar as much of their spirituality is earth-based, it becomes attached to the surrounding space, for example in a sweat lodge, or in the Fairy Shrine. Forms of naturism are embedded in these spaces, and shape how they are used, that includes informing ritual structures. The placement of sacred objects within the Fairy Shrine reflects both a concern for aesthetic sensibilities, but also notions of for example tree mythology (See Figures 2 – 5 in Appendix D). Woodland creatures such as fairies, sprites, brownies, etc. are connected with European folklore, and appear in literature favored by neopagans which includes the works of J.R.R. Tolkien such as *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. Various mounds exist throughout the community (See Figures 6 – 8 in Appendix D) that emphasize these environmental and folklore-ish themes, and are likened to for example, “fairy rings”: the rings of mushrooms that are believed to spring up in places where fairies were dancing (Manly P. Hall, 1928, p. 315). Many of my participants are also mushroom enthusiasts. There is moreover an entire mythology surrounding the use of “magic mushrooms” that will be thoroughly explored in chapter six of this thesis, on interpretations of new spirituality texts.

One informant reflected that she gets so absorbed by life processes that are removed from the physical, that:

I may not be present in the moment enough to eat or sleep, but that's actually now become [a] ritual, like eating is a ritual. That's like making you bound into the physical plane, and considering that the ritual of being in a human body and taking care of it (Interview with Niffer).

There is an escapism implicit in religions that often contains goals based on achieving an afterlife. This is true for many new spiritualities that also have an other-worldly focus, in which the everyday mundane world is framed as something to be transcended. However, for most of my subjects, the whole of life is regarded as a manifestation of spiritual energies. This attitude of course spills over into how food is managed and dealt with. As Niffer mentions above, for her eating is approached in a spiritual way. And because it is a necessarily physical and grounding activity, it ends up falling into the category of ritual. But in what ways is it ritualistic then? Are my informants eating in ways that are different, because of their spiritual beliefs or values?

For many ritualized eating was expressed in terms of a daily rhythm. For example, when asked about her ritual practices Xaena immediately referenced her morning routine:

I wake up in the morning and I basically am very gentle with myself. I take it really easy, so I wake up and I have water, and I have kind of reset my digestion. It's a good four or five hours where I actually am [not] consuming anything other than liquids [...] And then if I'm eating, of course I'm eating fruits and mostly raw live things.

Many religions also have specific times set aside for ritual activities. Within the Catholic Church matins is the morning prayer that begins at dawn, and opens a cycle of ritual prayer that continues throughout the day. A similar pattern can be observed at dhama centers, places that allow individuals to experience an ancient form of Buddhist practice in a modern context. For example, I once participated in a ten-day Vipassana meditational retreat at such a location. Aside from the specific ritual structures contained within this practice (e.g. not eating sugar or meat for

ten days, abstaining from sex, as well as not talking for the entire duration) the standard daily routine involved waking up to a gong at 4:30 a.m. to meditate prior to having breakfast, which occurs at 6:00 am. This was followed by more meditation, with a lunch at 11:00 a.m. being the final meal of the day. After yet more meditation tea is served at 5:00 p.m., at which time having fruit is optional (<https://www.dhamma.org/en-US/about/vipassana>).

Many of my informants have adopted similar schedules, especially waking early and abstaining from late night meals. But ritualized eating also includes *how* one approaches food. Saying grace prior to enjoying a meal is considered normal for most devout Christians. In fact, thanking a deity for the food and water one has been blessed with, is a fairly across-the-board type of ritualized prayer that occurs in virtually all of the world's religions. Xaena discussed this point in terms of a Krishna concept of food offering known as prasad:

I would always offer whatever I was eating to Krishna. At first I was just giving gratitude for how this food got to my plate and just environmentally, and who all consciously was involved, but now it's very specific. Now I would say I'm spending a couple minutes where I still am doing the gratitude, but I'm doing the Maha mantra, and I'm thanking Krishna, and that's kind of all spontaneous, but when I am cooking I'm chanting, and before I'm eating I'm chanting, and as I'm eating I'm trying to be mindful.

In the medicine ceremonies of Native peoples food and water are made conspicuously absent throughout what are normally overnight affairs. Near the end of these events, and in a highly ritualized process, the “sacreds” (e.g. water, berries, corn, and buffalo meat) are brought in one by one, and are blessed in particular ways. However, Niffer argued “whereas most people might think ‘oh that's just surviving, that's not ritual,’ well you can make anything a ritual by being really aware of it, and doing it with intention, so I am trying to become more intentional about it [eating].” For Niffer and others doing something in a deliberate and focused way, and holding intentions that can include prayers or personal wishes, constitutes a ritual. Combining

goals of intentionality and community, Niffer suggests that rituals involving meals help facilitate group cohesion:

I'm already really intentional about what I eat, but how I eat it, when I eat it, and with how much consciousness, that could make it more ritualistic, and I think it's actually probably the most important human social ritual is creating food and eating it together. So I would like to do that more, in a group (Interview with Niffer).

Niffer points out that through sharing food together, a community reinforces its social bonds. And that presumably, because it is so critical for survival, explains why eating has become such a highly ritualized process, so prominent within religions, and attached to notions of community.

5.9 Ritual Sacralization

The grounding effects of rituals can also be observed in how they act to sanctify or sacralize a thing. A water blessing for example, directs participants' attention to what might otherwise be viewed as ordinary, or taken-for-granted. Focusing ritual attention upon water is a way of increasing its spiritual weight, and lends seriousness to the environmental and political issues surrounding it. Participating in the ritual also helps ingrain water's importance as an element into member's conscious awareness and behavioral routines, thus making it sacred for them. The ritual serves as a device for cementing one's values and ideals about something into a concrete form, and in the words of one informant "makes it more real" (Interview with Nettle). She added that rituals help us remember the intentions that we do have. In general rituals heighten our awareness about things we believe are sacred, that includes one's spiritual goals. However, intentions are often invisible, and will only appear between people if they are openly discussed. Yet Peaceburgh members place a high emphasis on what a person's thoughts and intentions are, because they are seen as powerful effectors in one's environment. For example, it

is believed that intentions alter the timbre or tone of a person's physical actions, which affects how they work in the world. Consider Xaena's statement concerning food preparation:

Prabhupada [founder of the Krishna movement in America] was saying that you have to be careful of the consciousness of whoever's preparing your food. He would tell people try and eat as many raw fruits and vegetables, whatever you can find, or go to an ISKON center or some place where you know the people who are cooking the food, and the consciousness they are in, and that they're actually blessing the food.

Most people might assume that the physical acts of acquiring and preparing food speak for themselves. If the end result is a meal that can be enjoyed, then buying and preparing the food are perhaps the most valuable parts of the process. But for Xaena and others the cook's intentions seem to hold greater importance. If a spiritual hierarchy exists for my informants, intentions would most likely be ranked higher than mere physical actions. But how it is that another's intentions are known is not very clear from the above statement. Most of my subjects follow external cues as to whether or not something seems spiritually 'kosher' to them. This can include how a person carries themselves: how they talk, the language they use, their style of dress; and in terms of food, what sort of food is being offered. At Peaceburgh gatherings one typically finds a lot of vegetarian and vegan options. Most of this food is organic, GMO-free, Fair Trade, and consists of raw foods such as nuts, berries, vegetables, and other plant derived sources.

Acquiring and consuming food is a mandatory, and never-ending concern of all life. Eating is a cyclical process, often follows routines, and can be repetitive, so perhaps naturally lends itself to ritualistic interpretation. But moving from what is perishable to what may be more enduring, let us examine other ways in which rituals become expressed materially.

5.10 Art, Ritual, and Meaning within Contemporary Spirituality Culture

Because these are prefigurative forms of religion, New Age and neopagan rituals are not derived from traditional authorities as unchanging structures, but are often improvised by individuals to reflect their current spiritual goals and interests. Moreover, because my informants' beliefs and group memberships change considerably over time, associated ritual structures must be recreated more frequently than in more fixed forms of religion. These practices are experienced as dynamic spiritual processes, and are often viewed as more primary than the goals or ends to which the rituals are meant to achieve.

Some of the questions I will attempt to address in this section are: how does ritual function aesthetically for my subjects within this cultural milieu? How are notions of beauty connected to spiritual themes? What is the relationship between ritual and art-making? And how are ritual processes experienced subjectively? In other words, what are the phenomenologically relevant aspects that frequently surface, within the context of new spirituality practices, and in connection with the creative process, of making ritual structures to hold informant's subjective needs? In this section, and also in chapters six and seven on texts and discourses, I will be examining the role of aesthetics in both art and beliefs, as they appear within new spirituality culture.

5.10a Creativity, Innovation, and Replication

“Rituals are a creative act,” and creating one's own artifacts for use in a ritual is for many the ultimate expression of their spirituality. Almost the reverse of what stands for authenticity among traditional religions, e.g. their ancient provenance and historical capital, is creating something entirely new. To make something yourself has the virtue of being local, and is

perceived as more authentic. Whether that involves making a sword, a piece of clothing, a magic wand, creating music, or enacting the dances that compose the rituals.

I think art is spiritual because you're creating something physical and it's manifesting itself, and it takes work, it takes practice. You can develop a picture that a thousand people have taken, the same picture from the same angle, and some people would argue that "it doesn't have any meaning because it's already been done" (Interview with Marco).

How is this significant? Personalizing common experiences such as taking photographs, or drinking water? An informant raised the question that, since drinking water is a mundane act that everyone does every day, does that make it meaningless? On the contrary, he argued that water holds the highest of meanings, both for physical survival, but also spiritually. The recurrent dichotomy of sacred and mundane appears in this example. I have a story from my childhood that emphasizes Marco's point by displaying its opposite:

When I was growing up I played baseball, and it was a customary practice to go out for pizza and/or ice cream as a post-game treat. One of the coaches happened to own an ice cream parlor. There was an agreement between the league and this man's shop that if a team won, or if a player distinguished him/herself by hitting a home run for example, s/he would get a special reward. Often we would go to the shop after a game, and if you happened to have received such a certificate of accomplishment, you could trade it in for a special ice cream sundae that was served in a miniature major league baseball cap, instead of in the typical non-descript bowl. Receiving such an honor was somewhat rare, and was therefore highly coveted among players. One day while at the shop the owner ran out of these hat-bowls, but had to give one to a player who received a game honor. He went to the back of the shop, and a short time later I saw him return from the stockroom with a box that contained stacks of these little plastic baseball caps. What had been up until that moment a special (i.e. sacred) object, suddenly became very ordinary. The spell had been broken for me when I realized that, similar to other mass-produced

trophies and symbols of achievement I once saw in a trophy store, they were nothing more than hollow material objects. What had been infused with uncommon meanings and symbolic power became, perhaps because of their sheer volume, commonplace. As a result, the value of this highly sought after and treasured item had been rendered meaningless for me. The artifact lost its magic qualities, because it came from a stack of hundreds of identical plastic hats.

Marco reiterated his point above, about how taking photos has become a meaningless activity because everyone does it:

That's like saying that a mantra doesn't have any meaning because it's been said, and tens of millions of people have uttered that mantra. But if anything that just puts it out into the world more, or you could make something individual that nobody has ever seen, and it motivates and inspires other people to do the same thing or to create in different ways.

Marco reinforces an argument he made earlier, that just because something has already been done by others, does not negate its value. People often speak of something popular having lost its appeal, because of its being played out. Everyone has already done or seen it, so it is no longer interesting or impressive. The ubiquity and availability of an artifact renders it ordinary, and no longer exceptional as it may once have been. Often in the spiritual community certain practices, such as the vision quest, are regarded highly in part because they are rarified experiences. Individuals feel that completing such rites gives one a mark of distinction, similar to a military rank insignia. They serve as measuring sticks of one's spiritual accomplishments, and thus become distinguishing parts of one's spiritual identity.

By contrast Marco argues that, despite the ordinariness and obviousness of a thing, it can still be sacred, because it is his expression, or his interpretation of it. If by speaking a mantra, or taking a photograph, he is able to personalize what is an otherwise commonplace and mundane activity, then it has value regardless of who else may be doing it, or how often it is being done. Unlike the example of the disenchanting mass-produced item given above, whether it is an article

of clothing, or a plastic baseball cap, the practice of making or doing something oneself endows it with special meaning. For Marco creating art, like uttering a mantra, beyond being a ritualistic practice that holds potential benefits for the individual, is also a way for elements of one's spirituality to be replicated.

5.10b Art and Spirituality

As mentioned above, my subjects are dedicated to individual freedom of expression in terms of what beliefs and practices they adhere to. This is inherently a creative approach to religion, wherein individuals are constructing unique spiritual systems tailored to their personal needs, for growth and well-being. And the act of crafting one's spirituality is thought of as an artistic process. However, something that surfaced in my interviews about the relationship between art and spirituality is that because art is "universal," it is connected to notions of "forever-ness." For Zoiee making art becomes aligned with notions of immortality, and the transcendent nature of the soul. Put in terms of its religious function, Zoiee stated "it's [art] a way to connect to a divine essence." The majority of my informants who had something to say about art, expressed these notions in more or less similar ways. One informant suggested that creating art is "an inevitable result of experiencing entheogens." He added further that, "if you want to condense god into an idea, it's creative" (Interview with Owsley).

According to Peaceburgh member Dalek "spirituality *is* avant-garde religion." In its simplicity his comment succinctly encapsulates much of the vital principle of this culture type. For Dalek and others new spiritualities are rarified forms of religion, similar to avant-garde art, that exist on the fringes of society. He stated that:

the true artists of the authentic experience will become the spiritualists compared with the grandmas and ordinary. They're young vibrant capable people who are driven to the depths of the truth, and not everyone is because they don't need to be. Not everybody is deeply

captivated by the spiritual question.

From what I could ascertain, the “spiritual question” for Dalek represents the mysterious presence of the universe. This is the “why are we here?” question common to virtually every religion or society. Those who are not content with conventional answers to these questions, commonly provided by either science or traditional religions, are forced to seek their own answers independent of them. However, according to Dalek this is not a condition to be envied. The quest is not always pleasant or easy. Rather “spirituality is for the sufferer who has spiritual questions.” In contrast with the frequent New Age picture of peaceful and harmonious enlightenment, Dalek's image of new spirituality is embodied by the suffering artist. He contended that “spirituality is not for the well-constituted being.”

As this informant explained his vision of modern spirituality via art, I formed a mental image of Vincent Van Gogh, as the iconic symbol of an individual who had trouble fitting himself into the molds of conventional society. Frustrated by not being permitted to follow his dreams of becoming a priest, and spiritually suffering as a result of this and other social failures, he created art as a kind of therapeutic life-balm. For example, he often painted himself in a meditative repose, in the manner of a Buddhist monk, e.g. “Self-Portrait with Shaved Head,” or healing from self-inflicted injuries such as in “Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear,” presumably after attempting to cut off his own ear due to a lover's quarrel (Barron's, 1998, p. 157).

In chapter eight I will explore in more depth notions of suffering and healing as they relate to new spiritualities. But for now, Dalek's ideal of the spiritual quester draws itself in comparison to normal or muggle type citizens: “some people are earthly, who are practical, and are not spiritually suffering, and so do not have spiritual questions, [but] maybe some are suffering, or need something extraordinary.” Again, for those who cannot find solace within the

structures and remedial prescriptions of normative society, lies a wandering existence in search of answers.

5.10c The Eye of the Artist Sees the Whole

However, because it surpasses language and other cultural barriers, art is also perceived as a universalizing phenomenon among many of my subjects. This more inclusive definition differs from Dalek's portrait of the artist as a lone spiritual seeker. As one informant mentioned, due to its barrier neutralizing capabilities, art transcends religious differences: "It's unlike religion in that everyone can relate to it, everyone can feel your art, and it doesn't matter what belief you have because it's your self-expression, and people can appreciate that no matter what you believe in" (Interview with Zoiee). Her comment seems to offer a counterbalance for religious exclusivity. She explained that since art is not necessarily bound to any particular religious, ritual, or belief structure, it is also not attached to the ideological differences that exist between religions, and thus overcomes the problems of exclusiveness. This may explain why many of my informant's spiritualities include various creative activities. Due to a capacity for uniting opposing perspectives, artistic practices perhaps offer New Agers a means for achieving a more seamless link between their eclectic, and often disparate sets of religious identifications. Zoiee states that she uses art "to express the inspiration that I get from life, and from the so many paths that exist, and I feel like art is a way for me to bring them all together."

In almost identical language, Persephone argued that "art brings together many paths," and "it unites different ways of life. Different lifestyles, different cultures, it's like the unifying function, that's what I love about it." According to this individual art is a medium that helps her to connect diverse beliefs and practices, and knit them together into a manageable whole. In

other words, incorporating art practices into her repertoire facilitates a spiritual synthesis, and by extension helps to harmonize disparate spiritual paths among individuals, due to its barrier transcending qualities.

In a similar way, participating in group rituals often acts to reduce initiates to a shared and undifferentiated state or condition. For example, if initiates are made to undergo some sort of trial, or forced to endure a hardship together such as a sweat lodge or vision quest, the experience may act to bring them together. Analogous to the way basic training works in a military setting, sharing a trial deindividuates group members. By removing aspects of individuality such as distinctive articles of clothing, hair styles, or uses of expressive language, military recruits are homogenized into cohesive group units. For ritual participants adopting the same clothing at a Druidic mass for example, in which adherents wear identical cloaks with hoods, or getting nude, or having their bodies painted, helps to strip away the superficial differences that exist between individuals. This undifferentiated condition allows a group to more easily identify with, and emphasize those things that they share in common. Similar to the transcendental art experience, ritual participation is thus a kind of group harmonizer.

By removing the distinguishing features between individuals, ritual structures may lead to group harmony. Ironically these are the same benevolent qualities that art is argued to possess, i.e. its universalizing properties, that work to create social cohesion among members. Yet art is also viewed by my subjects as a vehicle for self-expression. Moreover, the homogenizing structures that allow for group identification, are at the same time viewed by informants as intolerable forms of dogma in other religions. They largely reject ritualistic and/or ideological structures that occur within traditional forms of religion, because they are perceived as rigid, dogmatic, or antagonistic to individual spiritual goals. However, as described above art, and

similarly ritual, are valued as artifacts capable of escaping the barriers that separate cultures and alternative perspectives. So, on the one hand universalism is rejected as being dogmatic and oppressive, but on the other it is praised for its unifying qualities.

5.11 Material Culture

5.11a Materialization: Spirituality in Three Dimensions

Many of my subjects agreed that creating art is at its base a form of self-expression: “I do art to express myself,”

I create art because it's helping me to express I think some of my core ideas about myself and the world, and or even my hopes and my dreams, and it is a ritualistic meditative thing.
(Interview Marco).

According to my informants, art functions as a vehicle for self-development. It is a material set of processes, and so serves as a physical medium for tangibilizing what are otherwise intangible feelings, values, or states of mind. Making art gives an individual the opportunity for putting one's spiritual sensibilities into a concrete form, which perhaps makes them more real. Doing art also allows one to encounter aspects of their personality in a physical way, putting into three-dimensional shape one's values and ideations, so they can be more easily recognized, experienced, and worked with physically: “it could be like being in the dark room and developing and enlarging, it could be having something tactile in your hands” (Interview Marco).

So then, what does it mean to have a material experience of one's spirituality? One informant mentioned that creating art gives him access to processes that are usually hidden or latent. For some there is the notion that spirituality exists solely in the mind or soul, which perhaps keeps it in an abstract or nebulous state beyond one's sense perception. Making one's

spirituality physical therefore permits a direct and conscious engagement with aspects of one's life that are usually unavailable. Art making, insofar as it is a reifying activity, contains the means for a reflective experience, by allowing individuals to see and work with parts of themselves usually beyond their grasp.

5.11b Ritual and Objects

Rituals are visible. Because they involve the actions of individuals, and the use of artifacts, their structures are plainly obvious to anyone looking on. However, being able to make sense of what is being done requires an insider's knowledge. For example, ritual acts often contain symbolically encoded meanings. Bodily movements hold particular meanings within a particular religious tradition. Rituals are also the enactment of myths. So knowing the mythological story and referents is often critical for understanding the meanings of the ritual, just as knowing particular words is required for speaking a language. But because ritual is a physical manifestation of spirituality, it is a tangible way into understanding a religion. I will be analyzing material examples of this culture via my informant's artwork. While these hold aesthetic value in their own right, more importantly they contain the otherwise hidden keys to understanding my subject's thought processes and worldviews. The artifacts they create show us something of an inner and subjective world that is not readily available for examination.

What is material culture? How can we approach it? How do objects embody religious beliefs and/or practices? Radcliffe-Brown notes the connection between ritual attitudes and objects, and their connection "to animal and plants that are ecologically important" (Strathern and Stewart, p. 42). The anthropologist is talking about a primitive-indigenous culture. But what sorts of objects would be absorbed into modern ritual processes? Ones found in modern cultural

ecosystems that hold importance for its inhabitants of course. One would therefore expect to see things such as cell phones, laptops, etc. to find application as ritual objects. Yet these items tend to be deemphasized in New Age and neopagan rituals, and are usually kept out of sight.

Objects endowed with spiritual and religious significance for Catholics include crosses, rosary beads, cathedrals, bibles, holy shrines, and relics. Some of these have obvious meanings. For example one might ask, why are the bones of saints and martyrs venerated among traditional religions? Even a cursory examination will reveal associations to death and immortality. However, also embedded within relics are notions of continuance, that a person will continue to have importance beyond death. That life issues from death is a basic theme common to virtually all human societies, and serves as an ideological ground upon which a culture reproduces itself.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that artifacts used by earlier cultures, indigenous, ancient, and medieval peoples, such as incense, crystals, tarot cards, and drums, have also become sacralized as part of contemporary rituals. Insofar as followers of new spiritualities have constructed their beliefs and rituals using earlier religions as their building blocks, ritual objects utilized by neopagans and New Agers should be derived from the same sources. But we would also expect to see things of significance to modern individuals, contemporary attitudes and objects.

Amidst discussions of this theme, a pair of symbols surfaced repeatedly: ideas of a “door” and a “key.” One informant stated that “Each art piece I make is a doorway, or a gateway to discovering yourself, and they [the artworks] use different keys to unlock the door.” For this informant notions of a door and key are additionally connected with entheogenic spirituality, in as much as “these plant medicines are keys, that they open up this whole other realm that you can interconnect with, this spiritual realm, the whatever fabric of reality” (Interview with Niffer).

Questioning this person about how a key is spiritual, she responded “the art is my impression of a certain key, for example sacred geometry is a key.” My understanding of this concept is that the geometric designs contained within the art possess magical qualities. Geometry of course holds mathematical information, spatial relationships between Cartesian points for example. But for many individuals in the Peaceburgh community this information is more than just abstract knowledge. The power of geometric designs can, for example, magically cleanse water of its impurities. I have encountered individuals who actually place drawings of “sacred geometry” under their water containers, as a form of ritual blessing that purifies them. A similar example involves changing the frequencies of digital music files from 440Hz to 432Hz, in order to yield more “natural” and harmonious sound vibrations, that heals one rather than doing them harm. Sound frequencies are believed to contain vibrational, numerological, and other mathematical properties that can affect the bio-rhythmic balance of organisms (<http://recreatingbalance1.blogspot.com/2014/09/how-to-easily-convert-any-music-to.html>).

Other examples include chakras, the occult symbols imbedded within Tarot cards, and even the designs of the letters and runes that create words. The very structure of words, the sounds they make, and the power contained in their ideas are, according to writer and graphic novelist Alan Moore, a form of magic itself. The notion of a magic spell is historically connected to the “*spell*-ing” of the words he argues (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1qACd0wHd0>). The vibrational frequencies created by pronouncing the words themselves produce magical effects.

5.11c Landscapes of the Soul: Explorations of Inner Space

“People love sacred geometry and crystals,” my subject noted, “and [we love] looking at

these complicated symbols that we really resonate with,” indicating both their aesthetic value and emotional significance (Interview with Niffer). She went on to discuss geometry and the structure of the soul. Notions such as these are not new, as comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1991) points out in his iconic text the *Power of Myth*. He argues that human created artifacts, such as the interior spaces of cathedrals and mosques, contain a great deal of sophisticated geometry; and that moreover these geometric structures and spaces are symbolic representations of the human soul. Campbell suggests that holy places such as temples, cathedrals, and mosques are in effect landscapes of the soul. The architectural structures, the stained-glass artwork, and the interiors of the churches represent a kind of language and mythology, communicated via spiritual imagery (1991, p. 70). Moreover the domes of mosques, themselves laden with geometric forms, are Muslim depictions of “inner space.” Even the painted caves of Lascaux in southern France are believed by some to be Paleolithic equivalents to cathedrals, and are similarly depictions of the soul.

Key informant Merlin discussed this notion, referencing the purpose of his altar, as building “a space for the gods to step into.” For Merlin the reasons behind ritual aesthetics, and creating lavish temples with luxurious environments, involves setting up a space that looks, smells, sounds, and feels good. Adorning these with religious iconography and sacred artifacts such as ancient relics, crucifixes, altars, etc., is about creating divine spaces that are not only comfortable for oneself, but are even suitable for gods themselves to inhabit. However, saturating one's environment with divine properties also carries with it spiritual goals. For example, when this is done, one becomes “blessed” by the quality of the space. In other words, by surrounding oneself with rich and powerful things, one draws these attributes to themselves. Moreover “nature” notices these fine touches, and responds by bringing more of it (i.e. the

spiritual power, wealth, and energies) to the individual. This phenomenon is also widely known within spiritual circles as the “law of attraction”: that by putting out positive vibrations, one receives them in turn. By putting out harmonious energy formations, one attracts similar energy patterns.

Surrounding oneself with sacred geometry, essential oils and crystals is thus the New Age equivalent of cultivating cathedrals as holy places. It is once again an attempt to make physical what for believers is metaphysical. A religious faith is perhaps inherently insecure, because so much of it is based on intangibles. Belonging requires having faith in powers or forces that are unseen. When Niffer explained above that performing rituals are a grounding practice, partly what is being grounded are her beliefs that are largely based on immaterial phenomena.

Further examples of this principle include feng shui: the strategic arrangement of objects in a space that produces energetically favorable results. Improving the flow of energy in a space also rubs off on the activities done within it. Rituals infused by this good energy will be more successful, and in general practices will yield more of what they seek to attain. For a given input of energy, the energy output is maximized. Therefore, from the perspective of a religious economy, the most harmonious and desirable outcomes result from spiritualized, or feng shui-ed spaces. This also reflects the lock and key notion discussed above.

With “any form of creation you can open a door artistically, life is artistic” (Niffer). For my informants to be spiritual is to cultivate the art of living, by acting in deliberate ways, and being mindful of aesthetics in terms of bodily movements, food preparation, and eating. These prescriptions of course have analogues in other religions: mindfulness derives from Hindu and Buddhist forms of meditation. And to strive for an aesthetic balance in one's life provides the core of martial arts practice, and captures the essence of a Japanese tea ceremony.

5.11d The Tardis

It is an aesthetically informed approach to life, and the majority of my informants are involved with some type of art practice. Most of this art is of a conventional sort, such as painting, drawing, photography, or sculpting. Two individuals do blacksmithing, some make candles, others, especially ones who attend festivals as vendors, make mead, jewelry, and everything from pillows to incense and perfumes. All of these creative mediums are understood by participants to be extensions of their spirituality. Indeed, their artwork is often described as an outward flowing, or expression of it. The subjects of the artworks themselves are often related to New Age or neopagan themes. For example, some make magic wands. Others paint or draw images of sacred geometry.

However, let us examine a more detailed example of how one informant does this, and in a very unique way. During our interview the idea of journaling surfaced. In response to this prompt my informant pulled out a homemade journal. She called the journal her “Tardis pack,” and explained how it is a multi-dimensional device that embodies story elements from the science fiction television series “Doctor Who.” The Tardis is the vehicle the hero of the story uses to time travel. The TARDIS (i.e. Time And Relative Dimension In Space) is a fictional time-machine and spacecraft that can transport its occupants to any point in time and space. On the outside it appears to be an English police call box.

In the show, it appears as a phone booth that one enters, however the interior of the TARDIS is much larger than its exterior. This feature is significant for a few reasons. The homemade journal provides a way for this individual to personalize her connection to the ideas in the show. She asserted that her journal possesses Tardis-like qualities. For example, it is bigger on the inside, meaning that within the compact form of a notebook is contained a person’s

thoughts and feelings, things that are much larger on the inside. But the Tardis also echoes the notion of inner space referenced above: that similar to mosques and cathedrals, the Tardis is a physical embodiment of interior space as a spiritual dimension.

My informant mentioned that when she re-reads her journals, it is like visiting herself in the past, “like visiting another person” (Interview with Niffer). For her journaling itself is a form of time travel. The thoughts and ideas contained in the journal are in this way transcendent, because they allow her to visit earlier versions of herself. Her journal entries thus expand beyond the spatial confines of the book itself. Through reading the journal she is moreover using it as a resource, to develop her rituals and other practices. The space inside the journal is akin to a textual laboratory, a liminal dimension in which she experiments with aspects of her spiritual identity. By writing in the journal she is adjoining her life experiences to an external but continuing narrative, one that involves spiritual themes of growth and self-development.

The journal itself is a beautiful piece of art, filled with drawings and poetry (see Figures 9 – 11 in Appendix D). It has multiple covers and moving parts, “doors” as she explains, and other key elements from the Doctor Who series, such as the “sonic screwdriver” that is attached to the book with Velcro. The magic screwdriver is a steam punk pen that lights up and plays voice recordings from the TV show when a button is pressed. The narrative functions of the sonic screwdriver are based on its power over sound waves, electromagnetic radiation, wavelengths, and frequencies. It is able to hack, disable, activate, and otherwise control virtually any form of machinery or technology, from remotely activating computers to detonating explosives. But of particular importance for Niffer is its propensity for opening locks, and thus opening doors. These symbols are important, insofar as they allow movement from one place to another. They also represent transformation, from life to death, or evil to good, and tend to figure prominently

within religious discourses.

Yet, however she may incorporate these objects into her ritual practices, I did not get the impression that Niffer believes her sonic screwdriver to literally possess actual magical properties. She does not try to use it to accomplish worldly goals, or do things with it as depicted on the TV show. It is more likely that she constructs and uses objects such as the Tardis and sonic screwdriver, because they are representative of qualities that she associates with her spiritual beliefs. Niffer chose the Tardis as a symbol for her spirituality, and as a mode of artistic expression: a machine that transcends space-time and takes you on a magical journey around the cosmos. Artistic expression, like the Tardis, is a vehicle for self-transformation – “a tool for you to develop your potential” she stated. Beyond the show's material objects is the symbolism embodied by the Doctor himself, that has relevance for Niffer's eschatological beliefs:

And in fact he dies and regenerates, and he forgets who he is every time, and so for me this is a huge metaphor for what we do, like when we reincarnate, but his is a little more self-aware, so this is my space-time exploration vehicle.

Producing this artifact allows Niffer to interact with parts of herself that are usually invisible, by creating a material three-dimensional interpretation of her spirituality. Like any form of art it is a way for individuals to immortalize themselves. What is created has the potential to outlive its creators, which for my informants contains numerous metaphysical associations, having to do with creation myths, reincarnation, and other themes that will be further explored in chapters six and seven on spiritual discourses and psychonautics.

Chapter 6 New Paradigm Texts and Discourses

6.1 Psychonautic Explorations: Rituals, Wormholes, and Mystical Discourses

The religious beliefs and practices examined in this study that exist on the margins, insofar as alternative spiritualities are experimental and rarified forms of religiosity. Time travel, other dimensions, and weird quantum physical phenomena are frequent topics of interest among my study subjects. Narrative themes involving aliens, space travel, and theories that the universe is a holographic projection, are also widely acknowledged in popular media. However, in addition to these presumably empirical, or at least possibly occurring physical phenomena, New Agers, neopagans, and New Paradigmers are also involved with what is called psychonautics: inner explorations of consciousness, most often catalyzed via the use of psychotropic plant entheogens such as ayahuasca, peyote and LSD, that are providing among other things specially sought after forms of subjectivity. But whether it is through the use of psychedelics, or simply engaging in yoga, meditation, or other ritualistic practices, my subjects seek out transcendental experiences that they claim involve being transported to other realms via conduits or tunnels through ordinary space-time and beyond.

These types of phenomena are most commonly incorporated into the everyday life experiences of my informants by way of stories and collective discourses. I have observed how the subjective texts of individuals are being discursively woven together to produce larger, more encompassing mythologies or macro-stories. My analysis examines the ways in which micro-level bits of spirituality narrative combine via dialectical and interactional processes. Like currents flowing in a stream, individual texts coalesce into new synthetic wholes as separate notes fuse into single yet multi-voiced compositions. Ones, however, expressing cosmically

attuned or mystically oriented themes such as the mysterious origins of the universe, or notions of a collective destiny for humanity. Through various interpretative measures (e.g. semiotics, strong program, critical theory) one can observe how these larger holistic and collective entities, or macro-molecular text structures are being discussed, debated, and negotiated by my subjects. The latter may involve how they are being shared by individuals, and how they are creatively formed and reformed to serve both personal interests and group needs.

Participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock meanings and their relationships to each other. The process of telling the story creates and supports a social world. Cultural stories provide exemplars of lives, heroes, villains, and fools as they are embedded in a larger cultural and social frameworks as well as stories about home, community, society, and humankind. Morality and cautionary tales instruct the young, and control the adult” (Richardson, 1990, p. 24-25).

Peter Berger uses the terms “symbolic universe” and “plausibility structure” to explain the prevailing socio-cultural system through which an individual's experience of the world is incorporated into an “overarching universe of meaning” (Berger 1967, p. 115). These work best when they are stable, cohesive and monopolistic. Plausibility structures are highly reliable because social change is slow, and alternate worldviews are scarce, Berger argues. The mythologies and theories discussed below represent some of the ways in which my subjects create meaning out of their psychonautic experiences. Interpretation of the symbols and bits of narrative contained within these spiritual discourses will provide insight into my informants thought processes, and how this type of religiosity is lived with. Including them here, as part of a discussion about beliefs, provides for the reader a contextual background that will facilitate a better understanding of how individuals are thinking about these ideas, and how they are using them in their lives. An analysis of spiritual texts requires not only the individual life stories of specific individuals, but also collective discourses which form the religious and conceptual ground that helps us to get a sense of where they are coming from ideologically. Not all of my

informants subscribe to every one of the discourses that I explore in the following sections. However, these are the kinds of texts that they make use of as part of their belief systems and world views.

Discourse analysis treats ethnographic data as expressions of culturally standardized discourses associated with particular settings, in which we look for “related assumptions, categories, logics, and claims – the constitutive elements of discourses” (Silverman, p. 34). Examining texts can show us how individuals within a specialized textual universe attempt to validate their beliefs and ways of organizing the world. Laurel Richardson (1990) agrees, suggesting that meanings are grasped temporally via story structure:

Narrative is the primary way through which people organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes. In other words the meaning of an event is produced by its temporal position and role in a comprehensible whole. The question “what does something mean?” requires showing how the something contributed to the conclusion of the episode. The connections between the events is the meaning (p. 21).

Meanings are thus contextually embedded, and deciphering them requires analyzing the specific connections that exist between artifacts of belief, and notions of self. Texts provide individuals with ideological frames, or conceptual spaces for understanding and connecting phenomena that are subjectively experienced, but at the same time disposed towards communal participation. The spiritual texts presented below are collective, and are therefore socially immersive. They are also plastic. They are additive and transformative, and serve as a medium that encourages intersubjective and creative sharing between individuals. Shared texts are often socio-historically rooted, and so are relatable temporally.

I moreover view my subject's discourses through an analytical assumption: that the stories they communicate are a kind of mythology. Approaching my informant's texts as myth is useful, insofar as the content of their stories actually involves mythic themes: magic, quests,

good and evil forces, etc. Robert Elwood recognizes myth as a legitimate form of truth, making it a relevant measure of analysis within modern discourses. He helps us define and deconstruct how we use the term in contemporary culture:

Myth is a funny word in American culture. We tend to think of myth as a lie or as an outdated explanation for a mystery long since cleared up by science. But as Campbell and a host of other mythologists, writers and storytellers have observed, myth is actually a framework of meaning, a set of collective fantasies that story our relationship to each other, the world and the cosmos. To tell a myth is to tell a culture's dream about its inner workings and truths. Myth does not convey these truths literally, however. Like a night dream, a myth tells its tale through symbol, image and metaphor. That is why a literalistic approach cannot grasp myths. They are too slippery, too rich, too multidimensional for that. They don't explain so much as offer an enchanting, elevating or disturbing experience, sometimes giving off bright future visions and sometimes warning us about where we should not go (Elwood, 2010, p. 37).

Analysis of my subject's myths and stories will thus involve emically embedded frameworks of meaning. My strategy for this chapter will be to provide the discourses up front, with some commentary, and afterwards get into more in-depth interpretations.

6.2 The Starseed Transmission

A prominent New Paradigm discourse is one that involves extraterrestrials and magic mushrooms (*psilocybe cubensis*). The connection between these seemingly unrelated phenomena was first proposed by Terrence McKenna, an ethnobotanist and New Age philosopher. In his book “Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge – A Radical History of Plants, Drugs, and Human Evolution” (1992), McKenna asserts that alien intelligences transmit consciousness across the galaxy by way of space-faring mushroom spores, also known as starseeds. The story goes something like this: McKenna argues that there are no analogues on earth for the molecular structure of the psychedelically active chemical in the mushrooms, psilocybin. Based on its anomalous chemical signature this life form seems to not

be indigenous to earth, and is therefore assumed to have come from a source beyond the planet. Moreover, it has been found that the mushroom spores can survive in the vacuum and temperatures of interstellar space, and so could conceivably have travelled here from another star system.

What we do know is that when ingested, the mushrooms create an altered state of consciousness similar to the psychedelic effects produced by LSD. Both these and other entheogens, such as Ayahuasca and Peyote, are classified as hallucinogens, which tend to evoke very similar experiences among users (Grob; Hoffman; Walsh; & Weil, 2002). It has been argued by McKenna that the effects of magic mushrooms on human consciousness are profound, producing thoughts and mental imagery that are other-worldly, transcendental, and trans-dimensional. Individuals can have out-of-body experiences, in combination with what Freud called the oceanic experience, or feelings of interconnectedness with the rest of nature/universe (*Civilization and its Discontents*). He describes it as a primitive ego feeling left over from infancy, but also as a state of “limitlessness.”

The psychotropic effects are moreover uniform among those exposed to the entheogens. My informants argue these are not merely random or chaotic forms of euphoria, but rather a very deliberate type of experience which seems to be *purposefully* spiritual. And since the spores of these organisms seem to him to have an extraterrestrial origin, McKenna argues that in fact they *are* extraterrestrials. In other words, if extraterrestrials exist, rather than going to the trouble of making space voyages over millions of light years, that require long time periods and large amounts of resources, the way they have chosen to communicate with other forms of life according to McKenna, is to send out emissaries of the 'intelligent' mushrooms. Eventually the spores, or “shroom-ships,” will make contact with a planet conducive for life. When they

germinate they are inevitably eaten by the sentient inhabitants of these distant worlds, who will necessarily experience their mind-altering effects. The altered states of consciousness that occur via the joining of the chemistry of the creatures eating them, and the psychedelics, is what Aldous Huxley has called mind-at-large. The implication is that there occurs an expansion of the mind's possibilities, which he argues opens up avenues of experience hitherto unexplored (*Doors of Perception*, 1958).

The mushrooms therefore act doorways into new, and higher-level states from the ordinary conscious state. A growth or expansion of consciousness is believed to occur, into rarified realms and orders of experience. Thus proto-humans are able to conceive of greater possibilities for acting in their environment, not to mention they become sexually aroused, and so according to McKenna mate prodigiously (1992). These entheogenically enhanced individuals therefore reproduce themselves more effectively, and presumably confer their mind-expanding practices onto their offspring, who thus outcompete their non-mushroom experienced contemporaries. The expanded thought potential of these beings allows them a further selective advantage: the ability to problem solve on an enhanced level. This leap ahead intellectually alters the course of their biological evolution, which eventually results in the appearance of super-intelligent apes, i.e. modern *homo sapiens*.

According to my informants the meeting of the mushroom magic with the protohuman nervous system occurs subjectively in the form of a conversation with an intelligence inherent in the mushrooms, placed there by extraterrestrials, and brought about due to their ingestion. The thoughts, feelings, insights, and revelations that are produced via this chemical joining are therefore built into the mushrooms and evoked by them. The mind-altering mushrooms are in effect a communication device, operating between the aliens who engineered them, and the

humans who have eaten them. And so the mushrooms serve as a cosmic radio that permits a telepathic link, connecting intelligent life across the vast stretches of interstellar space.

6.3 The Serpent and the Mushroom

The discourse presented above is basically a creation myth, insofar as it purports to account for human origins. But let us now place this into a more familiar religious context by considering another popular New Paradigm discourse, one involving the serpent in the garden of Eden. In the standard telling of the biblical story, in defiance of God's will an apple is offered to Eve by an evil serpent (a mythological trickster), who in turn gives it to Adam to eat. According to Judeo-Christian myth this event creates an alliance between humanity and evil forces. In the New Paradigm version however, the serpent has been reinterpreted, or rather retrieved from its more ancient matriarchal cultural matrix, as an archetype of life renewal (Campbell, 1962, p. 40; 276; 302). When eaten the serpent's apple symbolizes the beginnings of a new life for humanity, outside of God's domain within Eden, and represents liberation from religious and economic tyranny. In the alternate Eden God is therefore equated with the evil force, and furthermore holds an alliance with the reptilians: monstrous illuminati extraterrestrials that are obsessed with power, control, and planetary domination ². In this discourse God is more or less an extraterrestrial prefect, who designed organized religion to enslave humanity. God is therefore in league with the reptilians and their modern day capitalist overlords.

2 It should be noted that “reptilians” are a separate and distinct character from the serpent. Reptilians derive their name by association with the R-complex, or “reptile” portion of the human brain, the basal ganglia, that is responsible for motor functions and primitive emotions such as anger, fear, and lust (Robert Bly in the *The New Naked Poetry*, 1980, p. 15). Within this discourse reptilians are often conceived of as greedy, materialistic, violent, and ruthless creatures that are obsessed with wealth and power. The label is similarly applied to humans who exemplify these qualities, such as corrupt politicians and corporate oligarchs.

Let us observe how these two discourses (i.e. the Starseed-Mushroom and Serpent-Eden-Apple) combine. New Paradigmers have it that the apple of knowledge is actually a magic mushroom. For them the entheogen's mind-expanding properties are represented within the story symbolically as knowledge, and when eaten by humans the Apple-Mushroom liberates them from the oppressive yoke of organized religion and external social controls. Remembering that the individual's social agency is increased among new spiritualities, e.g. believing without needing to belong, self-authority is generally the rule. It can be classified as a more decentralized form of religiosity when compared with the hierarchical forms of monotheism. This thematic structure is emphasized within the New Paradigm interpretation of the mythology of the garden. Here the serpent is viewed as liberator, who shares with humanity knowledge in much the same way that Prometheus shared fire with humans, to equalize the disparities between humanity and the gods. In the Greek story fire symbolizes knowledge, something exclusively controlled by the gods, that is until Prometheus took it.

However, in the standard telling of the tale, upon eating the apple humanity is expelled from Eden, wherein a "Fall" had taken place. This is commonly understood as a falling out of favor with God, but might also be interpreted as a fall out of harmony with the natural world, and into civilization. It is the result of a false step, or sin for which we are still paying the penalty, in the form of expulsion from paradise. And this fits with the New Paradigm interpretation, that the fall entails a movement for humanity, from non-polarity (a unity with God and nature) into a socio-temporal condition of polarity, a duality of good and evil, nature and culture, id and ego, etc. Duality is seen as divisive and disharmonious. It entails a shift in perspective from an ecocentric to egocentric mode of existence, i.e. movement from a state of innocent, socially

cohesive communalism into a jaded civilization that is destructive towards nature, and plagued by all manner of social ills.

But if the God of organized religion is being defined by my informants as a subjugator, the actual evil force in the story, the serpent or Satan must then be the good helper. What can the overall meaning of the allegory be? Because humans were with God in Eden, which is usually equated to a paradise, does paradise become maligned by this new view? Rather the condition of non-polarity (i.e. the union of humanity with God and nature) should be one of the goals of spiritual practice, according to New Paradigmers. While the Fall into polarity (of good & evil, mind & body, sacred & mundane, male & female, up & down, etc.) equates to being out of harmony with nature. How can these apparent contradictions in the overall *Eden* narrative be reconciled? Does a religious myth's integrity, or plausibility, depend on how its gods are defined?

6.4 My God is Nicer Than Your God

Of course myths are used to reconcile opposites, to mediate the contradictions that confront us in life. And it seems that there are at least two conceptions of “God” active in New Paradigm narratives. The version most familiar to westerners is the Judeo-Christian-Islamic patriarchal God, who is associated with organized religion and all of its binding institutional structures, viewed by my subjects mostly as barriers to their spiritual development. This is the God of the prison of religion. The second notion is a less personal, and more androgynous kind of God, that is equated more or less with the universe as a whole³.

3 For my subjects God is usually a non-gendered and diffuse supernatural force. However, depending upon the particular context in which the term surfaces, s/he can be referred to as either male or female. Or by the term “Source,” which means the source of all energy and events in the universe. However, since this definition of God is generally synonymous with the universe and/or nature as a

Yet in both traditional and New Paradigm religious perspectives, God is acknowledged as the creator of the universe. Within the former 'he' is anthropomorphised as a father figure and founder of monotheism, equally believed by the adherents of alternate forms of monotheism to have an exclusive relationship with only themselves. Whereas within New Paradigm beliefs this conventional definition of God is considered to be merely a projection of monotheistic ideology. Because the latter supports patriarchal values that include among other things dominion over both women and nature, and manifests itself often as repressive and violent, it is dismissed as illegitimate, and sometimes as evil.

But, I asked my informants (George, Marco, and Jack) why have the aliens done this? To what end have they devised such a remotely activated and elaborate plan (i.e. “The Starseed Transmission”), one requiring millions of years to bring to fruition, not to mention chance alignments of hospitable worlds that could intercept its message? One idea is that, in a manner similar to the theme of Carl Sagan's *Contact*, the message is for the benefit of humanity. Francis Drake created a mathematical formula to estimate the number of sentient and technologically sophisticated species present in our galaxy. According to the Drake equation, a species which reaches the point of an advanced civilization has come far in terms of their biological and cultural evolution (Carl Sagan *The Cosmos*, Ballantine Books, 2013).

However, there is a universally insurmountable hurdle that occurs for them, a pitfall according to Sagan which few sentient species manage to avoid, but all must face: self-annihilation. During the cold war, when the threat of nuclear holocaust hung in the air like the scent of death itself, it is understandable that a discourse would emerge to alleviate this ominous possibility. One meaning then, or reason for the starseed transmission (entheogenic mushroom

whole, God is more often than not referred to as a feminine power, i.e. mother earth or the goddess creatrix.

knowledge) to have been sent here, is to allow for a counterbalance against the inherent self-destructive impulses that all intelligent species inevitably succumb to. Insofar as psychedelics, such as LSD and psilocybin mushrooms, produce among other things a pacifistic disposition, McKenna and others believe that this quality has been deliberately built into the entheogen, to give humans a way out of their self-annihilatory tendencies (Lee & Shlain, 1992, p. xx of the prologue). To reiterate, the tranquility of the meditative state evoked by the psychedelic experience is designed to offset the violent impulses sure to surface at the critical juncture where a species' technological capabilities advance farther than their moral development. The ET sent peace probe/drug offers them a fighting chance to avoid the inherent flaw in their evolutionary composition. In other words, humans have been equipped, via the psychedelics, to neutralize and transcend the dangers of their own reptilian consciousness.

Enlightened pacifism is thus one of the benefits of the mushrooms, foreseen by the wise ETs who have presumably already circumnavigated this difficulty in their own civilizations. In other words, there is intentionality behind the seeding of the galaxy with the mushroom spores by the ETs. It is done to enable intelligent species the opportunity to evolve beyond the cataclysmic stage predicted by the Drake equation, so they can advance into higher and more interesting levels of awareness. In conjunction with this New Age myth is another in which a galactic war is occurring, between the forces of good and evil, and that the mushrooms are emissaries of the good side, i.e. the pacifistic side that is seeking potential allies among other sentient beings. The mushrooms are, in this capacity, a way of recruiting allies, by insuring the mushroom's recipients positive evolution into a benign and benevolent species. The evil ETs are the “reptilians,” who have even now infiltrated earth by either seducing some humans to join their program, or actually through engineering our civilization down certain paths. The latter

includes, among other things, generating all the conditions needed for a war-ready species: attitudes of violence, greed, intolerance, divisiveness, and narcissism, ideal values and traits suited to their evil agenda of galactic conquest and control. Therefore God, traditional monotheism, and industrial capitalism are all agents on earth of this evil initiative, viewed by my informants as parasitic and destructive towards humans and nature.

However, this is all to suggest that the Fall, or separation into the antagonistic dualities mentioned above, is a negative and regrettable occurrence. What happens if it is viewed as a necessary event? Setting aside for the moment notions of God, let us back up a little and look at the meaning of the serpent from another point of view.

6.5 Ego and the Meaning of the Serpent

Because the ego is such a pivotal concept for members of new spiritualities, it makes sense to have a discussion about it, and to interpret it from within the ideological framework of this social milieu. The term is widely used within therapeutic psychological theory to refer to an individual's unique personality structure. This conception is derived from Freud's theory of mind in which "ego" is defined as one's conscious identity, or "I of awareness" (Freud, 1949, p. 14). Within western mythologies the serpent becomes a dragon, and is often symbolic of the ego. In this context the dragon represents all the things we tell ourselves about who we are, what we can do, and who we should be (Campbell, 1991). In this capacity, the dragon/ego represents the limits of one's identity, and is a barrier to self-realization. For example, the way in which we talk ourselves out of pursuing our dreams, "Oh I could never do that," or that it is easier to not do something, that it is not worth doing, or doing it is too dangerous, or too expensive. The dragon in this sense represents our fears and doubts.

In mythological terms having an ego identity, because it is largely shaped by external societal forces, is too small a container for a developing person's needs. To fulfill one's goals or "destiny," identity (i.e. the ego) must therefore be transcended. The Dragon, as depicted in myths such as *Beowulf*, *Tales of King Arthur*, and more recently J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, also represents a selfish creature that greedily hangs onto things like treasure or virgins. These are things it does not need and cannot use, but hoards nonetheless. Put in terms of an individual's ego, the hoarded treasure represents aspects of one's existence that are no longer necessary. These can be truths or ways of thinking and behaving that once held meaning and purpose in one's life, but no longer work in the ways they once did to aid a person's social or ethical development. What was previously invaluable is no longer required, yet is held onto dysfunctionally. And so each individual is cast in the role of the hero, in the present case as a dragon slayer, who must do battle with their own personality structures and routinized ways of thinking and acting. We must each of us slay our own internal psychological, moral, and socially constructed dragons in order to liberate ourselves from these limiting structures, to allow for further growth. Dragons can thus be interpreted as walls, boundaries, or guardians of one's ego, where again 'ego' is being equated with one's overall sense of identity. An individual's identity includes their race, gender, and socio-economic classifications, as well as the particular events and personal experiences that have shaped their given life course.

By contrast, from the perspective of matriarchal mythologies and religions, the serpent is an archetypal symbol typically associated with notions of rebirth. Certain qualities inherent in snakes, such as having the ability to shed its skin, translates as an ability to renew oneself. Moreover, its coil-like shape and manner of movement is symbolic of time, and the cycle of life, death, and new life. Connecting the image of the serpent with the ego reveals how these

mythological symbols function within New Paradigm discourses. The ego is viewed as an aspect of oneself, a personality complex which must die and be reborn in order to continue. It is symbolic of a person's movements through phases of life, e.g. from childhood to adulthood. One's early identity, through growing and maturing, inevitably faces a death, or liminal transformation, where one is reborn as a new person, an adult, with a whole new set of roles and responsibilities. And of course this developmental process occurs in innumerable ways throughout one's life-course as a continuing series of life changes.

Moreover, within the garden of eden the serpent represents humanities *collective ego*, a thing which must inevitably give way to the next phase of its organic development. From out of an innocent state (i.e. egalitarian communalism), humanities shared ego-state eventually, after a period of growth and decay, encounters a boundary which it must cross. This boundary is represented mythologically as the Fall discussed above. As a result, the collective ego then dies to its childhood condition, and by doing so moves itself into a new societal paradigm, civilization, which contains a whole new set of challenges, trials, and self-actualizing possibilities.

6.6 ETs Are Super Advanced Beings

An assumption by New Paradigmers about the benevolent extraterrestrials (ETs), is that they are unequivocally wise and compassionate beings. Their very existence is proof that they have advanced beyond primitive stages of development, ones characterized by fear and violence, that still in fact plague humanity. Implicit within this description of ETs as super-intelligent beings is a humanistic notion of progress, insofar as these beings have presumably transcended inhumane conditions such as warfare, poverty, hunger, and disease. The good-natured extraterrestrials are also imagined to have pacifistic dispositions, not unlike those of an

enlightened Buddhist sage. The benign ETs are often portrayed as quiet, thoughtfully meditating monks. This description thus connects these other-worldly creatures to what are regarded as earthly human spiritual ideals.

However, beyond ETs representing our “Buddha-natures,” the advanced qualities of the extraterrestrial also correspond to the extraordinary powers of super heroes. An obvious example is Superman. Derived in part from Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, which translates as “overman,” he is defined literally as a superhuman person. His source of superhuman abilities derive from the fact that he is an ET. Because he was born near a different kind of sun, Superman has a superior physical constitution, that gives him almost godlike strength and the ability to fly. In a recent interpretation he appears as an almost messianic, and even Christ-like figure (DC Comics *Superman Man of Steel*, 2013). He stands, or floats above humanity as a transcendental being. For example, in one scene he is shown floating above the earth in a crucifixion pose, and within the film he is often backlit to emphasize his deity-like status, where he exists in a plane of existence beyond their capacity. Superman, and perhaps all superheroes are, in terms of myth, more or less modern analogues for various gods of the Greek pantheon.

George has explicitly stated that for him, spirituality is a means by which he might achieve his life-long mission of wanting to be a superhero. Through using entheogens, coupled with forms of yoga and meditation, he believes he is developing enhanced intuitive powers, and other paranormal abilities, such as telepathy, and the ability to transport himself to other dimensions. He also stated that he wants to “get the bad guy,” which indicates his alignment with the good ETs. Recall the other side of this mythology which speaks of the bad or malicious entities, the reptilians, who are identified with evil forces. According to new spirituality discourses these creatures are responsible for brutal and nefarious agendas involving the

enslavement of humanity, both in the past as slaves who were genetically engineered to be used as workers to construct the pyramids⁴; and currently as in league with corporate powers and corrupted human authorities, such as 1st world politicians, European royalty, in other words the “Illuminati” who seek world domination.

Also on the dystopian side of these allegorical narratives there exist plots to wipe out most of the earth's population of people via biological plagues, toxic chemicals in food and water supplies, chem-trails, and world wars. It is important to note that discourses involving extraterrestrials and reptilians are not specifically religious. Conspiracy theories have appeared within secular culture, within sci-fi novels, films, and TV shows that also display these ideas. However, like anything else, they are prone to being appropriated by my subjects, and interpreted through the lens of spirituality concepts, values, and ideals. As mentioned above these include notions of reincarnation, or evolution into higher forms of being, and battles between good and evil forces.

Returning to my informant's desire to be a superhero, which at first glance seems impossibly strange, by placing it within the proper context, his mysterious belief becomes more intelligible. Its meaning need only be translated into terms that are more lucidly transparent.

4 These conceptions of extraterrestrials have become intertwined with unconventional origin myths, for example that humans have been genetically engineered into existence by “ancient aliens” who mixed their own DNA with that of proto-humans, resulting in a hybrid human-ET, i.e. a modern homo sapiens. There are also connections made to ancient mystical religions, such as Sumerian and Egyptian, that seek to explain the mysteries of the pyramids, attributing their enigmatic construction also to extraterrestrials. And of course, the notion of alien-human hybrids is a contemporary example of a classic mythic device the demigod. Modern superheroes, often created as the result of an accident with atomic age technologies, are a scientifically informed re-telling of the half god-half human hero. Ancient versions include Hercules, and Gilgamesh who is described as being $\frac{2}{3}$ god and $\frac{1}{3}$ human, (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 1972, p. 61, Penguin). In the discourses discussed above, the ETs inhabit mythically the role of a god. Possessing super advanced qualities, similar to the super powers of the superhero, equates them with a higher and more enlightened kind of being. Superman is of extraterrestrial origin for example. The Marvel comic book characters exist in this twilight world, being half human-half godlike. The genetically enhanced X-men are also conceived as more evolved humans.

Becoming a god-like figure is plausible when considered in the light of certain religious beliefs, which actually contend that an individual's soul is subject to evolutionary forces. The heightened states of consciousness reported by my informants, achieved via entheogen usage or other forms of spiritual practice such as yoga or meditation, go hand in hand with the mythological potentials of gods and ETs. Religiously decoded these rarified and highly sought after forms of subjectivity can be understood as a type of re-enchantment. Within the context of psychonautics, which my informants understand as a kind of mystical dialogue that occurs between self and world, enchantment corresponds with enhancing one's life-world. In other words, to re-enchant is to openly participate in magical processes.

6.7 Mystical Positionality and Quantum Physics

Chapter seven will provide a more in-depth examination of “psychonautics,” and themes pertaining to wormholes as transcendental gateways into higher levels of consciousness. But a further way of defining and understanding notions of super or meta-human abilities within new spiritual discourses, involves cultivating the mythological gaze. This is a type of enchanted perspective that entails seeing one’s life as a mythological story unfolding, and casting oneself as the central character or hero of the story. Through approaching one's life as a mythological quest, the individual begins to see and participate in what seems to be an epic narrative. It is as if a magic light has been cast upon one's previously drab or muggle type existence. Where before there may have been only a random and meaningless series of events strung together by chance alone, having no rhyme or relevance, story elements, plot turns, and characters suddenly emerge. Gradually the individual, who is at the center of this meaningfully unfolding story, will come to realize their life's purpose it is believed. As connections between the events of one's life and

external world become increasingly apparent, the individual gradually awakens to the meaning and direction of their spiritual quest.

In a popular narrative, highly resonant with New Age sensibilities, comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell argues that previously unseen paths open up to those who take a mythological view of their own lives. By “following one's bliss,” as opposed to accepting standardized formulas for how to manage one's life, desirable possibilities become manifest, and make available opportunities that facilitate the individual's quest or life project. These doors moreover appear where none existed before, and are specific to each individual. The notion of mystic doorways opening themselves in response to a questing individual's authentic and self-generated expressions, are also interpreted by my informants as alternate probabilities that reveal themselves to the psychonautic adventurer. For example, my informant Star mentioned that doing entheogenic ceremonies such as Ayahuasca, “can actually help you see those paths, probable paths they're called” (Interview with Star). Eager to integrate her psychedelic experiences into a discourse emphasizing personal empowerment, and to validate them scientifically, this informant utilized theories involving probability physics to explain the connections she sees between the events in her life. According to her reasoning quantum filaments (which make up the fabric of all existence) become realigned in response to an individual's actions and intentions. This creates alternate openings in space-time, i.e. wormholes that lead to one's possible future(s). By following one's authentic impulses, and not conforming to the programmatic demands of cultural authorities, one is able to change their quantum course as it were, because as “you change your path, you're changing your destination ultimately.”

This mythological outlook provides us with a new quantum-spiritual definition of positionality: the questing individual, through acting from out of their own centers, creates a

quantum gravitational field that effects the nature of the space surrounding them. These acts alter the space-time continuum, yielding new timelines for the individual. The questing psychonautic knights, as a result of their authentic and self-determined actions, fortuitously position themselves energetically with respect to the rest of the universe. By aligning themselves favorably with nature in this way, nature in turn aids the individual by furthering their quest, helping them to achieve their spiritual goals via a sort of quantum-harmonic destiny.

One implication of this kind of quantum, or mystical positionality, is that “maybe you see more of where to go, “that's a question right, where do you go? Should I go somewhere? Do you get clues or signs of where you should go sometimes?” My informants consciously seek signs, or meaningful connections between life events (i.e. synchronicities) to manifest a direction. These quasi-scientifically explained magical cues serve as an existential compass, a way for individuals to determine their next move.

Star explained that “I get information of what I should do or shouldn't do.” We discussed how sometimes it is hard to see things in the long view, the “entire structure of it where I might want to end up” like an overall life trajectory, in the way that we might see with hindsight. But the way that clues work, as in a myth, is to see one's life as an unfolding story. So she can do it, she can act on them in the moment, “Yes and those are the little synchronicities.” We may not know what the end is like, yet in the mean time, through receiving signs and cues, individuals may be guided along their spiritual paths towards favorable outcomes.

As mentioned above, quantum physics is a modern way of explaining the unseen forces that permeate all things. It provides a scientifically meaningful discourse, and is a contemporary analog for medieval occult beliefs. Using scientific theories to explain seemingly metaphysical phenomena is a way for my informants to validate the plausibility of their magic beliefs. After all

who can dispute the fact that everything in the universe is, on some level, fundamentally connected? We now have scientific proof for it, as anyone can tell you! It is a way to access larger meta-processes that operate to connect people to each other and with the rest of nature. Similar to the idea of “the force” in Star Wars, there is an energy field, or proto-plasmic substrate that surrounds us, and binds us together (*Star Wars IV: A New Hope*, Lucas Films Ltd., 1977).

Mysticism, as defined by Rosicrucians, an occult mystery school that dates back to the renaissance era (<https://www.rosicrucian.org>), is the direct connection individuals share with divine, or supernatural meta-processes. It usually takes the form of a personal conversation with a deity, and is a state of total identification, understanding, or engagement, without the need of intermediaries such as priests, kings, or other sorts of spiritual authorities, who are traditionally in charge of such matters. Having a mystical experience is necessarily a subjective part of one’s religiosity, as is the connection with nature achieved via the entheogenic experience. From Star’s statements above it is also a kind of faith in a “source,” that will provide help in the form of profitable developments for one’s life, so long as they follow their self-truths. Psychonautics is thus a fusion of magic and science, and provides New Paradigmers with a scientifically plausible way for them to think about their metaphysical beliefs.

6.8 Peeking Behind the Veil: Interpretations of New Spiritual Discourses

What is the effect of these paranormal theories on the individuals who maintain them? How does it affect the way they conduct themselves in the world? What kind of world does it allow for? Do holding these sorts of beliefs remake the world into something more than ordinary? Many of my informants have expressed feelings of discontent about living in the muggle world, where everything is normal and happens for a logical reason.

Thus, to re-enchant their life-worlds is to make the very causes and meaning of one's existence strange and magical. Is this a way of injecting notions of a purposeful design into the everyday turning of events? By the reasoning of the Starseed Transmission theory (of the ET-magic mushroomed apes) humans did not simply evolve out of other animals via random selection processes that lack conscious intent. Rather we are the result of intelligent causal forces, operating behind the curtain of the world as it were. However, the Starseed discourse distinguishes itself from other kinds of origin myths, which generally postulate divine entities as creative forces. Perhaps to differentiate modern creation narratives from traditional religious ones, New Paradigmers have put in the place of omnipotent gods as the mover of all things, a biological organism as the intelligent designer. Making extraterrestrials responsible for sending to earth the psychedelic mushroom spores by extension makes them the progenitors of human evolution. For scientifically oriented individuals this is perhaps a more plausible explanation to account for human origins. But importantly, at the same time it is not simply the result of random chemical processes. Although they are imagined to be more advanced intellectually, morally, and spiritually than humans, extraterrestrials nonetheless share the same basic plane of existence with humanity. Because they are physical and biological creatures, they have undergone similar evolutionary processes to get where they are now. This moreover implies that humans are on a par with these aliens in ways in which they cannot be with a god, who is of a different order of being. Though my subjects have created a fairy tale myth of beginnings with discourses like the ones mentioned above, the characters are more down to earth and believable, which fits with a more this-worldly approach to religion.

6.9 Journey of the Psychonaut

6.9a Reincarnation via Entheogenic Wormholes

Setting aside for the moment whether these transcendental experiences actually take place, even if only subjectively, the meanings of these discourses can nevertheless be discussed and interpreted. What is important to keep in mind is that, while these theories and plots may seem strange, eccentric, or simply too outrageous to be taken seriously, they are nonetheless meaningful and important to my subjects. That we must also believe them is not necessary for us to examine them. But only through examining them can we hope to shed light on the perspective and life-worlds from which they have sprung.

The very notion of wormholes being mysterious doorways is perhaps only a physical representation of metaphysical human capacities. They are symbolic of gateways to far away realms. But they are also special shortcuts, insofar as they permit travelers to reach locations they never could using conventional means of transportation. To illustrate this point in terms of psychonautics, goals associated with the use of psychedelics can also be achieved via various other holistic practices, or so it is argued. It is the view of many of my participants that yoga and sweat lodges are similarly a means for advancing one's spiritual evolution, so they can move beyond their personal issues and attachments, which might involve daily struggles over poor health, money, or relationships. This perspective is rooted in Eastern religious and philosophical beliefs, and is embodied by the notion of the bodhisattva or illuminated person. This is a figure who, having already ascended the ladder of karma via yoga or other means, serves as a role model and guide for those seeking elevated states of being. However, within new spiritualities, anything that enables such leaps into a higher condition is viewed favorably, including the use of entheogens, which are described as magical doorways. This is all the more so because they

happen very quickly. In accordance with Hindu, Buddhist, and even Scientological myths, the types of evolutionary and karmic developments mentioned above are believed to occur gradually, over the course of many lifetimes, requiring perhaps billions of years to achieve. It is a slow process, and so one resigns oneself to doing their small part during this lifetime, for the larger entity, i.e. their successively incarnating soul or self.

However, through the use of magic mushrooms, Ayahuasca, or other psychedelics individuals believe they can bypass these slower routes, and instantaneously make fantastic journeys to the outer reaches of spiritual experience. This really is the appeal for many of my subjects, insofar as they are offered the possibilities for making extraordinary leaps in personal development. Analogous to acquiring a special key that enables one to jump into a higher level, as occurs for example in a video game, a player takes the entheogen and travels further and faster than they could have on their own. This is also the meaning of the magical cakes in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. The hero of that story is a young girl who, when confronted with a tiny door, realizes that to go any further in her quest she must move through this impossible barrier. Suddenly she sees a cake with the words "Eat Me" written on it, and upon eating the magical treat, shrinks herself down to a size small enough to enable passage through the doorway. This is the symbolic-spiritual meaning of the wormhole as a doorway, and mushrooms are a key to entering these doorways, which in this instance equates to crossing evolutionary barriers into transcendental and mystical experiences. Also traveling through wormholes implies moving to these places at warped speeds.

6.9b Magic Mushrooms: The Spiritual Catalyst

Speaking about the character of the psychotropic mushroom as a form of religious sacrament, one individual informed me that, “It’s not a life form, it’s a death form, [insofar as] it prepares people for death, and makes people not afraid to die” (Interview with Jack). Implicit in this statement is a basic existential realization, common to perhaps all religions, that the experience of death is as meaningful as that of life. Jack's statement highlights another ubiquitous polarity, 'life and death', in which the psychedelic mushroom experience produces a sort of spiritual rebirth. A transcendental experience of this kind equates to a condition of non-polarity, and results in the unification of the life-death duality, or a going beyond opposites into a condition of eternity, that is both timeless and without category. It is the state of enlightened illumination and aesthetic arrest, argued by James Joyce to be transcendent to morality, critique, or judgment whether good or bad, and rather signifies absorption in the pure illuminating experience of the dimension of mystery, e.g. as god or nirvana.

Another spiritually oriented understanding of the mushroom experience is that it hovers between a sort of sleep and waking state. While discussing this idea with an informant, he remarked that “I kept yawning” (Interview with Michael), which he interpreted as a sort of rebirth process. In other words, under the influence of the mushroom induced mystical habitus, one is immersed in a continuous cycle of awakening and yawning at the dawn of a new day. But also in accord with Buddhist belief, the awakening is spiritual, i.e. having a heightened awareness of one's existential situation, and of becoming enlightened, or more awake, as a result of this self-knowledge. For the psychonaut throughout the duration of the mushroom trip one is dying and being reborn. Thus, one is reincarnating as they are caught in a cycle of awakenings in the middle of which implies a continuous spiritual growth is occurring. The concept of

reincarnation, understood religiously, is that as one moves through successive existences, as one lives and dies, they are evolving and ascending a moral, intellectual, and spiritual ladder. Because this growth process occurs more rapidly during an entheogenic experience suggests that, through their use, one is advancing spiritually, accomplishing the equivalent of multiple reincarnations in a relatively short span of time. So to reiterate, the entheogen is a concentrated karmic dose, equivalent to many lifetimes worth of spiritual work and progress. It moreover produces an instant spiritual growth in the user, again represented mythologically by the magic cake in the *Wonderland* story.

6.10 Mythological Interpretations

6.10a The Hero's Quest

But another way to interpret the exotic spiritual journeys my informants describe is through the mythological adventure of the hero. The general narrative structure is as follows:

- 1. The hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder (regions under enchantment);
- 2. fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won (enchantments are dispelled);
- 3. the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell, 1968, p. 480).

In this story form, however, the *enchantment* is a trial that the hero undergoes, and must surpass to achieve spiritual victory. It is more the nature of a pitfall or snare, and so is not to be lingered in. Yet for New Paradigmers enchantment is often the goal. As opposed to its being a danger, or hurdle to be overcome, making the transcendental voyage to a far away and fantastic realm *is* the sought-after experience. Max Weber argued that due to the disenchanting character

of modernity, some individuals seek to re-enchant their life worlds by adding creative flourishes to an otherwise drab existence. Among my informants there exists furthermore a desire to find a place of supernatural wonder, to rediscover a lost Eden, and dwell there indefinitely (see also section 7.5a in chapter seven below).

6.10b Land of the Machine Elves

Making the psychedelic journey propels the traveler into unfamiliar places. And as was the case for Alice in Wonderland, one is potentially out of their depth. It may be that, by taking the entheogenic shortcut, one has outsmarted a barrier that was put in place for their own protection. In such cases the precocious quester may be ill equipped to handle the challenges awaiting them on the other side. So, what happens when the psychonautic traveler finds herself in a place for which she is not yet evolved enough? New Age icon Terrence McKenna's story of the "Machine Elves" illustrates this point. According to him taking the journey into a higher dimension (via DMT, the active psychedelic in ayahuasca) can be perilous, or at the very least unrewarding. McKenna suggests that in the world of the Machine Elves, even the most advanced humans are no more than infants in the cosmic spiritual hierarchy. Due to their underdeveloped powers, the traveler is unable to meaningfully participate in the Elves higher level games. In the Machine world the psychonautic quester is a sort of newbie, and by appearing there has risen above their cosmic station or dimension, having in effect crashed the Machine Elves' party.

This also translates as the 'bad trip', in which one has gone too far too fast, and is ill prepared for the challenges they encounter. In the *Wonderland* story this idea is shown as Alice tumbles down a rabbit hole, only to find herself in a strange and hostile environment. One finds themselves in over their heads, and if they are unable to cope with the trials they are dealt, they

are psychically annihilated, as Beowulf was physically. In that tale, after neutralizing Grendel, Beowulf faces an even greater threat: a sea creature symbolizing chaos and mass destruction. By defeating the sea-dragon he manages to save his people, but in the act he is dragged to his death, to melt back into the timeless abyss of non-being.

The annihilation my informants experience, through losing their own egos, is a little less permanent. After the psychonautic experience has run its course the ego-state returns they report, and there is a return to normalcy. But this comes as a sort of let down. It is as if one experiences a “fall” of their own, banished once again from the Edenic state of ego-lessness and union with god/nature (in the condition of non-polarity), in much the same way as Adam and Eve were. Afterwards, according to informants, the ego-conscious state may reassert itself in an even stronger way than before, where the world and its problems come crashing back into one's awareness. There is thus a sadness and bitterness upon returning from the enchanted realm. In other words, humanities time in Eden represents an egoless state of innocence and magical bliss, and being cast out of Eden is symbolic of coming down from the trip. For psychonauts returning to the ordinariness of everyday consciousness is a return to egoic modes of being.

6.10c The Wasteland: Beyond the Rim of the Ordinary

But what makes one a hero partly rests in their readiness for the quest. And what makes a story interesting, or even possible, is that the main character is offered the challenges for which they are adequately suited, even though they may face hardships that are seemingly insurmountable. This notion of the individual venturing into unknown circumstances, or becoming lost and terrorized by monstrous forces, is a theme common to most mythological structures.

Examining the myths of Gothic Europe, such as the adventures of *Parzival* and *Tristan*, comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell argues that these stories are symbolic manifestations of a spiritual crisis that was occurring at this time. In the late medieval period westerners were waking up from the enchantments of organized religion, and preparing the way for a new paradigm, one marked by science and secularism. As a result, the culture heroes in this period were those making forays into this new territory. These individuals embody collective goals, such as freeing (western) humanity from the (monotheistic) religious spell under which it had been languishing since late antiquity. Campbell states that:

In Wolfram's *Parzival* the boon is to be the inauguration of a new age of the human spirit: of secular spirituality, sustained by self-responsible individuals acting not in terms of general laws supposed to represent the will or way of some personal god or impersonal eternity, but each in terms of his [or her] own developing realization of worth. Such an idea is distinctly—and uniquely—European (Campbell, 1968, p. 480).

And here we are in the modern age, with scientific explanations to account for our origins and positions in the universe. Many Enlightenment thinkers presumed that culturally sophisticated people no longer required the services of a religion that, among other things, purported to explain our otherwise uncanny and mysterious existence. If we have a perfectly good empirical explanation of something, a reasonable person hardly needs a magical one. But where scientific understandings end, magical ones can enter into meaning. This occurs at the limits of the known world, for example in the sea for ancient peoples. For the current era, perhaps it is the ocean of space, with its unimaginably vast stretches of unexplored territory that invites human adventure. A good deal of contemporary mythology is to be found in science fiction tales about space exploration, e.g. *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Alien*, *Interstellar*, etc. However for some, rather than being drawn physically outward into the expanses of outer space, one is drawn inward into the depths of the mind. That

is where they seek adventure. Psychonautics is thus a subjectively oriented inner journey. At the edge of knowledge mythology begins, so is it any wonder that a modern religious experience should involve exploring subjectively the depths of one's own consciousness, perhaps the final and ultimate undiscovered country?

But beyond the edges of ordinary experience, in addition to the wonder and thrill of exploring new worlds, one also finds in myth the wasteland theme. This is typically the point in a story where the prescribed path that a hero follows ends. As an agent of the social and moral good, the hero is an exemplar of his/her society's values and sense of honor and decency. For the most part they follow the prescribed route for fulfilling the needs of their community, which ordinarily involves struggling against evil forces. But at a certain point, when one has gone so far from where any of their kind have ventured, they are forced to either turn back, or enter the unknown. At such a place, all familiar paths come to an end. Mythologically this is often represented by a dark wood. If the quest is to continue, the hero must push on. And having no predetermined course, they enter the forest "where it is the thickest," to carve out a new path of their own making (Campbell, 1968, p. 37 & 88).

6.10d The Making of a New Religion

Practitioners of new spiritualities are in an analogous position: standing at the edge of the world they are confronted by all religions, but as already worked out systems complete with prescribed movements. Most of the important decisions are already made for them. One has but to follow the rules and commandments, complete the required rites, follow dutifully the outlined procedures, and humbly accept it all in obeisance. However the hero, unwilling to defer to any of them, must create their own.

As an individual ventures into uncharted territory there is necessarily a departure from the security of the known, to the uncertainty and vulnerability of the not known. It is a solitary place, insofar as few travel into its strange depths. Being unfamiliar there is the possibility of encountering unfriendly forces, but certainly it is filled with hidden dangers, as opposed to the familiar ones of the ordinary daylight world. This experience understandably produces anxiety, but at the same time exhilaration, as one is forced to meet its challenges by becoming more of what they are. By moving out of one's comfort zone there is an expansion of one's perspective and powers, as they must draw upon their every resource to make it through.

The Waste Land is thus “any world in which force and not love, indoctrination, not education, authority, not experience, prevail in the ordering of lives, and where myths and rites enforced and received are consequently unrelated to the actual inward realizations, needs, and potentialities of those upon whom they are impressed” (Campbell, 1968, p. 388). Defined mythologically the Waste Land might well be equated with Weber’s notion of disenchantment, as a state of spiritual desolation or mythic dissociation. Partly the result of secularization, it signifies the loss of collective religion, and along with it its social institutions and networks of power. However, “it would be ridiculous to argue that such reigns of power never should have been. In the first place they have been the givers of everything good and great beyond the range of thought, vision, art, and civilization of Shakespeare's apeman Caliban” (Campbell, 1968, p. 388). It can involve the loss of participation in divinity, and is where a type of social identification is also dissolved (Campbell, 1968, p. 394).

6.11 The Don Quixote Syndrome

6.11a The Shift From Communal Religiosity to Individual Spirituality, Collective to Individual Heroes

The shift from collectively oriented mythologies, e.g. classical Greek and Judeo-Christian, ones that illustrated and enforced social, political, and religious values, into the mythology of modern Western humanity begins in Wolfram's *Perceval*. In this tale the questing knights enter the forest “there where they saw it to be thickest” (Campbell, 1968, p. 540). The ideals being expressed via this literary device is that the path to Paradise, i.e. some form of enlightenment or healing, which leads to the fulfillment of a knight's quest, comes from within. Represented symbolically as a search for the holy grail, its direction is:

for each unique; and I see in this the first completely intentional statement of the fundamental mythology of modern Western man, the first sheerly individualistic mythology in the history of the human race: a mythology of quest inwardly motivated—directed from within—where there is no authorized way or guru to be followed or obeyed, but where for each, all ways already found, known and proven, are wrong ways since they are not his own (Campbell, 1968, p. 553).

New spiritualities are very much in accord with the mythological themes of *Perceval*. Goals that emphasize breaking free of preformed guidelines, abandoning gurus, and embarking upon self-directed programs for finding one's own religious meanings, embody the spirit of the age. My informants often describe their spiritual paths as solitary quests, forged outside of those that have been imprinted on them by their parents and/or society. Where adventure become impossible, what is possible becomes potentially antagonistic. When the structures of ordinary society grow stale, those who seek the unusual fight against them, even when their cause may be hopeless or futile:

In the earlier world of the epic of Parzival and Gawain, knights in the forest met with adventures in accord with the movements and readiness of their hearts, dreamlike; Quixote, on the other hand, encountered windmills in a hard, resistant world, unresponsive to his will (Campbell, 1968 p. 604-5).

The break between the inner (subjective) creative center of a person, and the outer (objective) unrelenting world encapsulates the schizophrenic condition of modernity. This conflict describes the situation of my informants, how they find themselves at odds with the mainstream world, and explains why they seek to repair or heal it. I once described to a colleague how individuals practicing new spiritualities have become disenchanted with the world, and how they seek to escape from it. Initially I noticed in this person an expression of disinterest, and eventually even disgust with the notion of people wanting to flee into sanctuaries, away from mainstream society. This individual stated, “well maybe the world isn't sick, or toxic, or violent, and in fact is simply ok just as it is, because after all it works just fine for many people.”

To be at odds with one's surroundings is not a comfortable burden to bear. Being forced to constantly clash with the structures of one's world, whether they are physical or ideological, is not an enviable position. Individuals raised within homogenous societies were perhaps more seamlessly integrated into their collective worlds. This is true for most traditional societies in which social structures did not change appreciably from one generation to the next. People were connected with local concerns, and shared virtually identical worldviews. But in a world as multiplicitous and variegated as the modern, a world in which social structures are not only highly diverse, but also change significantly from one decade to the next, individuals are not as seamlessly meshed together. This is especially true in terms of beliefs. The sheer volume of information available to a person today, couched within a staggering plurality of beliefs, mores, and political philosophies, is simply overwhelming. Even when comparing the ancient world with the renaissance, one notices that:

the men of Homer belong to the same world as their desires. In Don Quixote we have, on the other hand, a man who wishes to reform reality. But is he not a piece of that reality? Does he not live off of it, is he not a consequence of it? How is it possible for that which does not

exist—a projected adventure—to govern and alter harsh reality? Perhaps it is not possible, but it is a fact that there are men who decide not to be satisfied with reality. Such men aim at altering the course of things; they refuse to repeat the gestures that custom, tradition, or biological instincts force them to make. These men we call heroes, because to be a hero means to be one out of many, to be oneself. If we refuse to have our actions determined by heredity or environment, it is because we seek to base the origin of our actions on ourselves and only ourselves. The hero's will is not that of his ancestors nor of his society, but his own (Ortega y Gasset, Meditations on Don Quixote, pp. 148-49).

The solitary quest knight stands in stark contrast with the collective nature of the shared hero of previous eras. Stories such as *Don Quixote* mark the Gothic to Renaissance shift, from a collective communal religiosity to a more individually practiced one, such as had occurred with the evolution of Protestantism in England. This movement into a new modern age heralds the cause of the individual. Exemplified in portraits done by such artists as Rembrandt and Vermeer, there is a focus on individual traits and characteristics. Such a modern style is generally different from gothic art that contains, aside from images of Jesus and other saints, multitudes of anonymous figures. And more recently in the modern novel, the new perspective centers upon the individual, as a detailed character study or self-sufficient person. Having to support oneself in a capitalistic economic paradigm, a person becomes a measure of their own worth.

6.11b Individualism and the Protestant Ethic

Within early Protestantism, due to the uncertainty of a heavenly afterlife, an individual's imperative was to distinguish themselves from their peers. By their own hard work and frugality, and outwardly displaying material signs of economic and worldly success, a person demonstrates him/herself as being particularly worthy of salvation. As Weber (2009) remarks, this early modern socio-psychological orientation to the world was religiously inspired, and underlay the development of capitalist economics, and the pursuit of profit via hard work. By the 20th century, due to a gradual process of secularization, unfolding in the west since the dawn of the

enlightenment, the religious trappings of capitalism were largely dispensed with. The work ethic, however, remained and the drive for profit continued. Even though displays of material wealth are no longer the means to such things as religious salvation, it has become an end in itself. And the impulses to stand apart from one's peer group as exceptional have also been retained, i.e. to stand out from the Joneses. To distinguish oneself materially is to do so spirituality.

Looking out for number one, individuals embody values based on personal sensibilities. This stands in contrast with collective and religiously determined values that are rather imposed on individuals from without. Internal systems of truth are emphasized over external ones. With the rise of scientific thought, truth is acquired via logical and rational means, and is no longer derived religiously, through faith in a god for example. Atheism dawns as a non-religious belief system, as does agnosticism, and offers doubt as a middle position between faith and disbelief. New spiritualities emerge, some as atheistic forms of religiosity, a paradox in-itself. They accentuate practice over belief, and are affectively oriented. A belief in a god is superfluous, and supernatural explanations for existence are traded for natural ones.

However, even though beliefs are de-emphasized among my subjects, spiritual practices are pursued for varieties of reasons, and are gauged in terms of personal needs and criteria. They can be followed without having to accept the accompanying beliefs or values that have been traditionally associated with them. When the questing spiritual knight is "willing to challenge even God if the mask that he shows—or is said to have shown—rings hollow when struck" (Campbell, p. 554), we have arrived at a place of spiritual autonomy and sovereignty. For what else is one to do when encountering traditional forms of religious authority, and finding them to be ill-suited to their spiritual needs? If following a religion brings one to a spiritual dead end, they can accept the limitations of the current system with which they are presented. But if the

outward prescriptions prove to be inadequate or intolerable, they must forge their own paths, whose direction is determined from within.

6.11c Secularization: The Loss of Religion in the West, and the Making of New Ones

Speaking of the disenchanted westerner who is searching for a meaningful religious experience, Carl Jung (1959) explains how in modernity religion is like an ill-fitting suit: “The protestant [for example] is cast out into a state of defenselessness that might make the natural man shudder. His enlightened consciousness, of course refuses to take cognizance of this fact, and is quietly looking elsewhere for what has been lost to Europe. We seek the effective images, the thought-forms that satisfy the restlessness of heart and mind, and we find the treasures of the East [...] Shall we be able to put on, like a new suit of clothes, ready-made symbols grown on a foreign soil, saturated with foreign blood, spoken in foreign tongue, nourished by foreign culture, interwoven with foreign history, and so resemble a beggar who wraps himself in a kingly raiment, a king who disguises himself as a beggar? No doubt this is possible. Or is there something in ourselves that commands us to go in for no mummeries, but perhaps even to sew our garment ourselves?” (Jung, p. 14).

Jung is speaking about the New Ageds of his day. He acknowledges the situation, as he was in fact witnessing the birth of much of what is today called new spirituality. Individuals moving away from their inherited religious systems, and turning towards more exotic eastern forms. He states clearly that out of this vast cultural cache of raw materials, individuals would create new religious systems oriented around self-interests and contemporary concerns.

The westerner turns from the familiar trappings of Christianity in order to embrace what for them is an exotic alternative. But no sooner does one escape from the bonds of one Bronze

Age mythology, that they turn to another. A disillusioned monotheist may start out following something like Hinduism because of its novelty. As one informant noted, speaking about their yoga practice, “for lack of a better system, I followed this one” (Interview with Merlin). The notion here is also that initially ‘because I do not have an alternative system, I adhered to Hinduism or Buddhism, to have some structure to guide my meditation practice. Eventually I may come to realize that this system is inadequate to address my spiritual needs, but it will do in the mean time’. But also the trappings may be attractive, because they are new and filled with ancient wisdom. Ironically it is partly the rich cultural history, in eastern religiosities, that my informants find so appealing. But it is just this quality, from the perspective of their own culture, that has become so exhausting. Western religion is for them “played out.” But eventually my informants reach a point where they realize that Hinduism, or Native Americanism, are systems like any other, just as dogmatically handicapped as the religions they are familiar with, just as much full of “do's and don'ts.”

Seeking answers in alien cultures such as Hinduism or Buddhism is appealing, for no other reason than that they are novel. Accepting Krishnaism because it is alien, and rejecting Christianity because it is old and tired, is perhaps understandable. Of course, early Christians were just as much at odds with the status quo as my informants are with the Christianity of their parents. Originally Christians were heretical. They were as subversive to Roman Paganism as hippies were to the establishment powers during the 1960s culture wars. Robert Crumb’s cartoon “American Jesus” satirically depicts this historical irony, in which Jesus provokes uncharacteristic reactions from modern Americans.

Jung suggests that to supplant one theocratic order with another may be just as inauthentic as to quietly submit oneself to one that is disagreeable due to being ideologically at

odds with one's interests, values, or spiritual growth. For example, most of my informants are quick to condemn forms of dogmatism, oppression, or power imbalances within monotheism. But then strangely they accept as much in Krishnaism. Similar to many Christians, Krishnas disavow the body as corrupt. They focus all their devotional energies on perfecting the "subtle body," and on transcending the earthly plane for higher ones. The animal body is depicted as a baser level of existence. It is an other-worldly type of religion, and it is technically a kind of monotheism, because adherents worship Krishna as the sole deity of their faith. It seems odd to exchange one form of monotheism for another, and hypocritical to condemn one while praising the other.

However, Jung sees in this estrangement the conditions for a new beginning. What for some is a wasteland, for others serves as a fertile ground for the next growth cycle. With the transition from medieval to renaissance sensibilities, comes a shift from religion into a scientific perspective. As the ancient regime wound itself down, and Christianity in Europe began to wane, there was a lessening of collective religious experience. However, banishment from a communal Eden was at the same time for some a liberation, an unshackling of what had been occulted. Don Quixote's world was wiped away to make room for a new age. It is a necessary clearing away of old growth. One person's loss is another's gain. From the death of the old are the conditions for new life. And so, the decline of monotheistic religion entails the opening of the way for new epistemologies.

6.12 Post-religion and Trans-rationalism

In his seminal text *Decline of the West* (1926) on the life cycle and stages of development of a culture, Oswald Spengler argues that when the critical-intellectual faculty has gained

ascendancy over the lyric-instinctual, a brief period of enlightened creativity bursts forth that always ends, however, in exhaustion, sterility, and mechanical repetition. In connection with the current discussion, he cites Goethe's "Epoch's of the Spirit," which outlines in diagrammatic form a cycle of four stages common to all cultures:

| | | | | |
|-----|------------|----------------------------|--------|-----------------------------------|
| I | Poetry | Folk Belief | Hearty | Imagination |
| II | Theology | Idealizing Exultation | Holy | Reason (<i>Vernunft</i>) |
| III | Philosophy | Clarifying Devaluation | Wise | Understanding (<i>Verstand</i>) |
| IV | Prose | Dissolution in Banality | Vulgar | Sensuality |

In terms of its epistemological orientation to life, for example whether a culture's perspective is inclined more towards superstition (e.g. medieval Europe), or logical empiricism (classical Greece and Enlightenment Europe), both Spengler and Goethe argue that when a culture moves from stage II to III (from a theological to a philosophical perspective) a reductive criticism begins to devaluate and even eradicate the instinctual impulses to life.

Speaking of the final stage (IV) which we are in now, Goethe states:

This epoch cannot last long. Human need, aggravated by the course of history, leaps backward over intelligent leadership, confuses priestly, folk, and primitive beliefs, grabs now here, now there at traditions, submerges itself in mysteries, sets fairy-tales in the place of poetry, and elevates these to articles of belief. Instead of intelligently instructing and quietly influencing, people now strew seeds and weeds together indiscriminately on all sides; no central point is offered any more on which to concentrate, but every-odd individual steps forward as leader and teacher, and gives forth his perfect folly as a perfected whole. And so the force of every mystery is undone.

Goethe seems to accurately anticipate the character of New Age type self-motivated and synthetic spirituality. He also provides a good description and prediction of the climate of

spiritual gurus, life-coaches, shamans, and advisers that currently proliferate within contemporary spirituality circles.

Cyclical models such as these are of course generalizations, and suffer the same sorts of limitations as anthropological-evolutionist timelines that purport to explain religious development as a movement from animism to polytheism to monotheism (Bailey; Peoples, 2015, p. 93-94). These sorts of schemes, being over-simplified and generalized, are linear abstractions that hardly capture the organic nature and qualities of growth that actually occur in religious movements. They deny for example the historical uniqueness of a given cultural system. The developmental progress of any society is far more complex and idiosyncratic, and may not follow such generalized patterns of change. However, notwithstanding the dubious and generic nature of Goethe's model, if it can meaningfully interpret the ways individuals place themselves historically in terms of their religious beliefs and motivations, it can be useful for analytical purposes. For instance, perhaps it anticipates the movement from enlightened rationalism to mythopoetic romanticism, or from collective heroes to individual questers. In what ways can this pattern inform our discussion? Can we explain the movement from a hyper-rationalistic disenchanted perspective to an emotional meta-rational one?

New Agers and neopagans believe themselves to be at odds with conventional forms of religion. They present themselves as new and hip, but then does that hipness become coopted after a few centuries, to yield a new kind of totalism? Leninists sought to authenticate themselves by connecting and rooting their new society in the past, remaking established cultural images into icons of Soviet prestige. Similarly, new religious forms make connections with the status quo through absorbing their symbols. Just as the Catholic Church absorbed the Judaic Old Testament into its canon, New Agers have assimilated Eastern philosophies into their beliefs.

This cultural cooptation is justified, because of course everything is now fair game. Ancient wisdom and eternal truths are not owned by anyone, nor are they capable of being own. Religious texts are not copyrighted by any single country, race, or group, and are available as open source material. Most of my informants agree that if a practice or belief is useful, it should be used by anyone who is equipped to make use of it. But so far as the rules or dogmatic prescriptions for how to use these go, they are simply discarded along with any other types of cultural baggage. A common refrain among my informants is to “take the philosophy, and reject the hierarchy.” If something is useful use it, but feel free to drop the moral and other types of obligations.

Carl Jung describes precisely this process of cultural co-optation: “I am convinced that the growing impoverishment of symbols has a meaning. It is a development that has an inner consistency [...] If we now try to cover ourselves with the gorgeous trappings of the East as the Theosophists do, we would be playing our own history false. A man does not sink down to beggary only to pose afterwards as an Indian potentate. It seems to me that it would be far better stoutly to avow our spiritual poverty, our symbol-less-ness, instead of feigning a legacy to which we are not the legitimate heirs at all [...] anyone who has lost the historical symbols and cannot be satisfied with substitutes is certainly in a very difficult position today: before him there yawns the void, and he turns away from it in horror. What is worse, it gets filled with absurd political and social ideas, which one and all are distinguished by their spiritual bleakness. But if he cannot get along with those pedantic dogmatism...” (1959, p. 14).

Friedrich Nietzsche provides a striking example of just this sort of disenchantment, in his case within German university culture. His experience with the academia of his day places the wasteland theme in a familiar context: “what an atmosphere prevails among scholars, what a

spiritual desert, how lukewarm and complacent! It would be a profound misunderstanding to bring up German science against me on this point. For I have been calling attention for the past seventeen years untiringly, to the *despiritualizing* influence of our present-day science industry. The hard helotism to which the prodigious range of the contemporary sciences condemns every individual scholar is the main reason why the fuller, richer, more profoundly endowed of our students can no longer find a congenial education, or congenial educators. There is nothing from which this culture suffers more than from superabundance of pretentious corner-watchers and fragments of humanity; our universities are, against their will, the real hothouses for this kind of withering of the instincts of the spirit” (from Twilight of the Idols, in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 508).

Jung speaks of inherited religious symbols, such as the virgin birth, the divinity of Christ, and the Trinity, having lost their original meaning: “It almost seems as if these images had just lived, and as if their living existence had simply been accepted without question and without reflection, much as everyone decorates a Christmas tree or hides Easter eggs without ever knowing what these customs mean” (1959, p. 13). Because modernity is marked by a transition from collective to personally oriented religious systems, people may no longer recognize the signs and symbols from the previous religious cycle. The artifacts and ideals which guided individuals in the past no longer hold the same meanings or importance for those of the contemporary period. Ancient and medieval religious symbols do not work on some moderns. They do not seem to produce the same kinds of ecstatic religious states or mystical experiences, perhaps even for the most devout of contemporary adherents. Nor can they evoke the kinds of insights and profound feelings as they once did in earlier times. Individuals who subscribe to self-created religious systems will therefore need to create for themselves symbols that are

personally meaningful, and that represent things of importance to themselves. Individuals will need to establish new kinds of relationships with reference to their environments, and form connections to others and their world that fit with their values and needs. But what new symbols will be chosen to represent them as a whole? What common mythological themes, or macro-structures, can possibly house the multitude of individual worldviews?

Chapter 7 The Sociology of Psychonautics: How *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Matrix* Serve as Models for Understanding New Age Seekership and Identity Formation

7.1 Alice and The Matrix: An Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze spiritual phenomena using contemporary mythological and pop-cultural referents, such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), and *The Matrix*. Using these texts as interpretive mediums, I hope to deepen reader's insights into various aspects and meanings of these phenomena. Using narrative structures as analytical aides is useful, insofar as it permits in situ examinations of New Ager beliefs, and reveals how they work discursively. In other words, the stories provide a dynamic narrative context, analogous to the kinds of terrain in which spirituality beliefs are formed and operate. This analysis is phenomenological in nature, to the degree that it necessitates an examination of narrative structures which animate and disclose types of subjectivity and meaning structures among my study participants. At basis it involves deconstructing themes taken from their texts, ones related to my study participant's beliefs, practices, and experiences. It involves moreover identifying points of contact that exist between these sets of discourses, and noting where they overlap and disagree.

Because they appeared spontaneously during the course of my interviews, I chose to utilize the *Alice in Wonderland* stories by Lewis Carroll as a medium for understanding the phenomenological and subjective nature of new spirituality seekership and questing. The *Alice* texts therefore serve as devices for examining and interpreting the popular discourses that permeate these subcultures. This study includes an analysis of spirituality concepts and beliefs, as well as bona fide mythological forms that, while having some relation to religious myths, exist

in a class by themselves. Meaning-making among my study participants is explored, which involves how beliefs are created and maintained, and how plausibility structures operate. Having particular significance to the *Alice* stories is something my informants refer to as 'psychonautics', a term that derives from 'astronaut'. However, instead of exploring outer space, the psychonaut journeys into the recesses of their own psyche, via entheogenic substances such as peyote, ayahuasca, or lsd. These are specially sought-after forms of subjectivity that individuals seek out, usually within the context of shamanistic ceremonial rituals, that are based on hallucinogenic experiences.

Contemporary studies of Lewis Carroll's *Alices* involve everything from mathematical treatises on logic and game theory, to specialized analyses of its poetry, folklore, and relations to quest literature. The works have been reviewed so thoroughly that H  l  ne Cixous (1982) claims we have reached the point where, "to be honest, the territory [Carroll's texts] is so well studied, its stratifications uncovered in every direction, that it seems bold or even impossible "to add" anything" (1982, p. 231). Perhaps it is true that Carroll's critics have run the full gamut of interpretive possibilities. However, aside from being the theme of a psychedelic song "White Rabbit" written by Jefferson Airplane in the mid-1960s, I am unaware of any reference that seeks to connect the *Alice* narratives specifically with those of modern experimental religions.

Books such as *Alice in Acidland* (1970) have attempted to relate psychedelic culture to its story elements. But they do not explore either religious or spiritual themes in connection with them, and so remain superficial analyses of altered psychological states. The present study also references some of the common subjective states individuals experience while using psychedelics. But let it be clear from the outset that my analysis will not include a comprehensive history, or review of hallucinogens and their effects. Those books have already

been written (e.g. Gordon Wasson's The Road to Eleusis; Terrance McKenna's Food of the Gods; Koral's White Rabbit; and Schlain & Lee's Acid Dreams). However, I will during the course of the analysis provide readers with some background information on the subject, in addition to participant's personal accounts where needed.

Often described as “A timeless adventure of fantasy and nonsense,” Lewis Carroll’s *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* continually violates the rules of conventional literary narratives. Carroll's “disruption of the continuity and causality on which many fictional representations and philosophical conceptions of identity and reality have tended to rely,” distinguishes his text from others in its literary category (Beckman, 2014, p. 1). Carroll's books represent a marked departure from other children's stories of the time, that were intended to educate and impart a moral message: “moral tales for Christian propaganda and social control” (Beckman, p. 9). The latter were almost uniformly pedagogical devices, concerned with teaching a causality system, i.e. that misbehavior would result in immediate and severe punishments. Carroll's texts, far from supporting, actively sought to ridicule such moral narratives. Similar to other types of underground movements and publications, Carroll's use of illogic is a partly disguised subversion of the above-ground world's sense of meaning and order. It is also an attack on the logical, orderly, and coherent approach to life stressed by post-Enlightenment Europeans. Through an examination of their themes, and how they resonate with spiritual ideals, the following analysis will account for why these stories hold such a fascination for my study participants.

7.2 Going Down The Rabbit Hole

Sitting on the grass with her sister who is reading a book, Alice is bored because it has no interesting pictures or dialogue. But upon seeing the white rabbit she is “transformed, and burning with curiosity she races after it,” commencing her adventures in Wonderland. In an act that has since entered the language as a synonym for plunging into another world, Alice goes “down the rabbit hole” (Miller; Jurecic, 2016, p. 3).

When Alice falls down the rabbit hole, she begins her adventures in non-ordinary reality. This opening between worlds represents a conduit through which one is able to exit the land of the everyday. One travels via a sort of wormhole, or phenomenal bridge that connects disparate realms. Alice's journey is in itself strange, as the walls of the well are filled with cupboards and shelves that contain oddly placed items. This part of the story accords with psychonautic accounts, of individuals moving from the daylight world into strange or fantastic ones. Here normal things appear unusual or out of context, much as they might in dreams.

Entering such umbilical passageways also symbolizes the separation event that delivers an initiate into a condition of liminality, such as when a child is taken from his or her family in order to undergo a rite of passage within a traditional society (Bailey & Peoples, 2015; Turner, 1982). The break from normality creates a space of identity confusion and uncertainty separating the phases of one's life, childhood from adulthood, which in the *Alice* stories equates to disparate points within the narratives. Liminal partitions permit encounters with unorthodox reality, and can involve bizarre and experimental behavior, which in turn could affect shifts in identity. In such a state a person is socially and/or psychologically malleable, wherein identities can become stretched in much the same ways as Alice's body does, as she shrinks and grows while experimenting with ways for entering the magic garden. An individual sees a place they would

like to be, perhaps a new role, social position, or career opportunity along their life course, and by playing with their sense of self, try to fit into one of these newly perceived alternate destinies. Or possibly they do not know where they are going, only that they must go somewhere else. But through being transported to an unfamiliar place one undergoes a change, that is perhaps the result of one's being forced to navigate through possibly frightening, or at least unusual territory.

A bottle marked “Drink Me” makes Alice shrink in size, while eating a cake labelled “Eat Me” causes her to grow. This story device involves the warping of physical dimensions, an aspect of the hallucinogenic experience, which symbolizes a change in the individual's perspective, e.g. seeing distortions in ordinary space-time due to having one's position altered. It also suggests an extension of one's powers of perception, such as being able to see more facets of a given situation. It represents an expansion, of moving beyond one's usual ways of seeing and understanding the world. By going on journeys of this sort, initiates (my study participants) understand that they have embarked upon a process of personal growth. Whether this psychonautic interpretation has its roots in the psychedelic music of Jefferson Airplane, or some other earlier source, makes little difference for my informants. For them the connection is clear. We cannot know if Carroll himself intended the reality warping effects depicted in his books to represent hallucinogen usage, or even altered states of consciousness. But we do know that the books were intended as children's stories. In that sense elements of nonsense, magic, and illogic are connected with a child's perspective, and thus resonate with my subject's goals involving enchantment, that for some includes a return to child-like ways of thinking and acting.

7.3 Entering the Matrix

The notion of venturing down a rabbit hole, to discover previously unseen realities,

appears in other media, however. For example, in the film *The Matrix* (Directors Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1999) the main character is Neo (sun child quester archetype), a computer hacker who discovers strange anomalies concerning his world. As he continues to uncover clues, a series of bizarre developments ensue that include encounters with shadowy forces, the agents (evil archetypes), and culminates when he sees a woman with a white rabbit tattoo. This person eventually leads him to a mysterious figure who holds the answers to the riddles that he seeks. Morpheus is the teacher-sage archetype of the story who exposes Neo to the mysteries and hidden meaning of the matrix, by offering him a choice between two pills. Taking the blue pill would make him forget about the disturbing information he has up to that point learned of the matrix, allowing him to return to a comfortable, yet illusory life. Taking the red pill, however, would take him on a journey beyond the fringes of the known world, and would reveal to him the full scope of his predicament. He of course chooses the second pill, and upon swallowing the magical drug (entheogen) he falls down a wormhole, which in this case is a computer-generated virus-doorway that permits him to exit the matrix, i.e. the holographic virtual reality program which he formerly took for reality. This event begins Neo's transcendental journey, as he is propelled beyond the confines of his previously pale and fabricated existence, into a nightmarish actual world in which humans are being farmed as energy sources for a civilization of intelligent machines. In this wasteland Neo comes to realize his full powers, as he explores and develops his unrealized potentials. He experiences a process of expansion and growth, for which the film uses religious imagery. Neo is cast as a sort of superhuman messiah sent to liberate his fellow humans from the oppressive forces of malevolent machines, that appear in the matrix program narratively as agents of the state.

Symbolically, the idea of going beyond the edge of the ordinary world to encounter other

levels of reality is a recurring theme in religion and mythology. For example, Hindu mystical texts promise, via practices such as yoga and meditation, glimpses of the actual world which exists behind the facade of our commonly experienced reality (e.g. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali). Ordinary reality is dismissed by this tradition as a delusory “veil of maya,” a sensory illusion which hides the true ground of our existence (Campbell, 1968, p. 79), similar to Plato's parable of the Cave in his *Republic* (1992, Book VII, p. 186). The primary function of spirituality, according to Campbell, is to assist a person in making such a transcendental leap (*Power of Myth* PBS television series, 1988). In other words, it provides a means for breaking with conventional values that ordinarily serve as the structuring pillars of one's lifeworld.

Going on a spiritual journey is equated to entering a strange landscape, a liminal zone within which a person can experiment with their 'powers', i.e. their agency, identity, or life's purpose. Moving oneself outside of an ordinary, and possibly disenchanting experience of life, even one that is materially or psychologically soothing, is what is being presented with this theme. And even if only temporarily, to move oneself beyond the comforts and stability of a conventional existence would, by Carroll's definition, force a person to draw upon strengths they did not know they had. These experiences allow one to develop and increase their range of possible actions, which prepares them for the challenges of the wasteland, a motif widely represented in mythologies (see Chapter 6 above, sec. 10a-d). For example, in the *Star Wars* saga (Lucas Films Ltd., 1977) Luke Skywalker, due to a disruption of his safe yet constrained life, travels beyond the limits of the familiar world, in order to begin his training as a Jedi knight. Under the direction of a wise mentor Skywalker furthers his understanding of the force, that allows him to both face and defeat his powerful enemies.

It is usually an accident, or traumatic break with one's former lifeworld that compels the

sun child to undertake their adventures. In Luke's case, he encounters a strange wizard-knight in the desert who knows of the father he never knew. Soon after this encounter his only remaining family members are killed, leaving him with no ties to the ordinary world, and so he is propelled into a new and extraordinary phase of life. Similarly, Alice follows the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole, “never once considering how *in the world* she was to get out again,” and where she is promptly presented with a series of “*out of the world*” experiences, where “so many out-of-the-way things” happen (Carroll, 1994, p. 2).

Random events that set a hero's journey in motion can also be interpreted as an unforeseen glitch. Technically a glitch is a failure of protocol, i.e. a malfunction. For video game users, this is defined literally as a mistake in the computer code that allows for an unintended, but interesting event to occur. For example, the glitch Neo detects in the matrix's code provides him with a way to see through the intended structures which define the boundaries of the normal world. It is an awakening to a problem, that may signal a traumatic break with reality. But it also allows for a passageway out of what might be an undesirable paradigm. In other words the glitch, or anomaly, provides an opportunity for an escape via transcendental actions. Taking a hallucinogen has much the same effect according to my informants. The mind-altering effects of a psychedelic experience produces a break with ordinary reality, one that cannot be reversed or undone, but must be seen through. Because the person has phenomenologically stepped outside of their ordinary world of references, and having seen the “other side,” they are necessarily changed. Users thus return with an altered perspective, and because these experiences are connected with notions of personal growth, presumably an expanded understanding of their world.

As in quest type video games there are keys that allow players to move to the next level.

Keys are specifically designed to unlock doors (doors of the mind presumably). Psychedelics are conceived to be chemical keys, structurally configured to fit specific locks (see also section 5.12b in Chapter 5 above). This type of key, it is believed, unlocks a chemical possibility in the brain which yields an altered state, taking the user to a higher, or different level of consciousness. Hallucinogens do not, by most definitions, contain supernatural properties, however. This differentiates them from the artifacts or rites of a satanic ritual for example. In that case there *is* magic involved, e.g. speaking a sequence of words (wherein the linguistic formula contains magical properties) releases a physical force that opens up doorways. From a usual scientific perspective there is nothing supernatural about the entheogen, only its chemical properties that allow it to have particular physiological effects. But for my subjects these can be magical, insofar as nature, which includes the plant derived hallucinogens, as well as video games, are all part of a divine paradigm. For lack of a better term it is 'magic', or 'spiritual' that cosmically connects hallucinogens with human consciousness and occurrences in the world, all of which have metaphysical, as well as physical properties.

7.4 Out of the Way Places: Where am I?

But by placing Alice in a series of nonsensical situations, Carroll highlights the contrast between a rational and reserved posture, embodied by a tight-laced English schoolmaster on the one hand, and the manic unreasonableness of a “Mad Hatter” on the other. This play of opposites is exhibited in other popular media. For example, in the science fiction series *Star Trek* (created by Gene Roddenberry, Paramount Pictures, 1966-69), the rational and unemotional extraterrestrial Mr. Spock, is contrasted with the emotional and compassionate humanitarian Dr. McCoy, and the spontaneously intuitive commander Captain Kirk. In the *Star Trek* Universe

Vulcans are highly logical, and have learned to suppress their emotions. They also possess superior intelligence, as well as superhuman strength. Aliens such as these are often depicted in fictional narratives as being more advanced than humans, presumably due to the aforementioned qualities. This is precisely what Carroll rebels against: Enlightenment notions of progress that have encoded within them Darwinian ideals that equate 'logical' with 'superior'. This western scientific trope projects onto the world a uni-lineal pattern of development, in which cruder forms of life evolve into more sophisticated ones.

For example, indigenous cultures were viewed, in Carroll's time, as less developed than European ones. Primitive peoples were also seen as less intelligent and more emotional, even child-like in comparison with Europeans (Bailey & Peoples, 2015, p. 93-94), and these ideals found their way into 20th century science fiction. Being more advanced roughly equates to being more logical, having a higher intelligence, and being less emotional. In other words, rationalist atheism is valued over adherence to either religion or superstition. James Frazier's cognitive theory of religion suggests that they evolve from simpler forms to more complex ones, with the implication that atheism is “after” and “beyond” religion, and is thus a superior belief system. This logocentric bias is partly what Carroll seeks to romantically undo, in part by praising emotive pre-logical thought, and child-like forms of consciousness, while parodying overly logical or rational temperaments. Robert Ellwood (2005) interprets mythological meanings from such a romantic perspective. He suggests that, “myths relate truth not just in a literary or proto-scientific way, but go behind all that to embody the primal, almost pre-verbal consciousness of the human race – or of a particular race– in its sunset years when our ancestors were trailing clouds of glory, and the shadows of the prison house had not yet closed around. Myth comes first; abstract language is only faded mythology” (Ellwood, p. 37).

7.5 Wonderland: Nightmare or Sanctuary?

7.5a Advice from a Caterpillar

The Caterpillar asks Alice “who are you?” to which she responds, “I don't know quite who I am, or how I am supposed to be,” a condition that highlights identity confusion. She continues “Am I the same as I was yesterday? How queer everything is today, I wonder if I've been changed in the night. Let me think, was I the same as when I got up this morning? If I'm not the same, the next question is, who in the world am I?” (Carroll, 1994, p. 14).

A pivotal moment occurs in the narrative when Alice exclaims, in response to the Caterpillar's disturbing provocations, “I can't explain myself I'm afraid, Sir, because I'm not myself you see” (Carroll, 1994, p. 44). Being in a strange place, where her old self ceases to work, Alice is unsure about who she is. Finding herself in an alternate reality, with different rules and expectations, she becomes estranged from her former self, which was part of the above-ground world. At this point she begins to acknowledge, with an increasing awareness, that her identity is contingent upon the discursive world in which she finds herself (Rackin, 1991, p. 46). Individuals in my study sample often see this moment as revelatory, the point in their journey which marks the separation between their home culture, and their desired one. In a perhaps yet to be determined place, individuals seek to establish a new sense of self. This is a self apart from the one shaped by the discourses and identities inherited from one's family group or society, such as daughter, son, American, Christian, consumer, etc.

Part of the motivation for using entheogens is to get to this place of identity independence. The alternative spaces in which this type of identity work occurs, such as the cosplay festivals described in chapters four and five, are analogous to the underground worlds of Wonderland, which likely accounts for its psychonautic appeal. Psychedelics open up alternative

worlds, and the resulting visions, according to my informants, often become the inspiration for intentional communities themselves, which are places designed to be socially and psychologically transformational. In a way, these spaces can be conceived of as cultural cocoons, in which individuals undergo personal metamorphoses.

Alice then tries to assess whether or not she has changed by attempting to recite her multiplication tables. However, as she tries to do this, everything comes out all wrong, “Four times five is twelve, four times six is thirteen” and “London is the capital of Paris” (Carroll, 1994, p. 15) Things that were previously relied upon to provide corporeal stability no longer work, “and with so many familiar, comforting concepts already lost, Alice naturally begins to sense her frightening isolation, and alienation from the self-defining constructs of above-ground culture” (Rackin, p. 41).

Perhaps, more than anything else in the story, individuals in my study sample most identify with Alice as she cries aloud, “I am so very tired of being all alone here!” (Carroll, 1994, p. 16). Being on an individual spiritual journey has its advantages: not being bound by prepackaged systems that are ill-fitting, being free to map out one's own direction and goals based on personal interests and inspirations, not to mention the solitude this brings one. But from talking with my informants, I get the sense that many of them feel as alone as Alice does, although probably for different reasons. Both are trapped in a strange and hostile environment, bewildered and unsure about who they are or what they should do. However, for Alice it is the above-ground world that provides solace and stability, and an eventual escape from an unpleasant and maddening underworld. For my study participants, it is the ordinariness of the muggle world in which they feel the most alienated, and so attempt to create alternative worlds to flee into. Rather than seeing Alice's adventure as a cautionary tale, as something to be

anxiously avoided, individuals are envious of her ability to peek behind the veil as it were, to see what exists on the other side. This notion is emphasized more so in *Through the Looking Glass* (see also section 6.10a in chapter 6 above).

7.5b Who am I? Identity Confusion, Transformation, and Incorporation

The Caterpillar asks her again, “Who are you?” Alice answers, “I’m afraid I don’t know at the moment, I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I’ve changed several times since then” (Carroll, 1994, p. 44). This dialogue is a favorite among psychonauts, and so I include from it the following excerpt, as it probes more deeply into identity change and its relation to narrative structures. Especially pertinent themes include the disorienting effects of change, and the warping of reality:

Caterpillar: 'So you're thinking of changing again are you?'
Alice: 'I'm afraid I am, you see I can't remember the things I used to?'
Caterpillar: 'What size do you want to be?'
Alice: 'I'm not particular to size, it's just that one doesn't like changing so often you know.'
Caterpillar: 'No I don't know, are you happy now?'
Alice: 'Well I'd like to be a little larger.'
Caterpillar: 'Hmm seems a very nice size to me.'
Alice: “I'm not used to it.'
Caterpillar: 'You'll get used to it.'
Alice: 'And being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.'
'It isn't,' said the Caterpillar.
'Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet,' said Alice; 'but when you have to turn into a chrysalis — you will some day, you know — and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?'
'Not a bit,' said the Caterpillar.
'Well, perhaps your feelings may be different,' said Alice; 'all I know is, it would feel very queer to me.'

The Caterpillar is, of course, familiar with change. His ability to metamorphose represents both transformation and maturation. Also, because a butterfly is a radically different

form of life compared to a caterpillar, a total alteration of one's self. Alice worries about changing however, and wonders how much does one have to change before having a new identity? In *Through the Looking Glass* for example, when Alice is about to enter the forest of no names, she is worried about losing her name. Moreover, due to Carroll's linguistic topsy-turvydom, Alice experiences a type of ontological insecurity. She is plunged into a semiotic chaos where “things slip away from words” (Beckman, p. 9, p. 141). Words become separated from their referents, and effects are severed from their causes. For example, because her name and identity have always been connected and interdependent, she considers them inseparable. Therefore the loss of one signifies losing the other, which justifies her fears. However, when Alice encounters Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the loss of her name becomes less about losing her identity, and more a concern about receiving an ugly name: “I shouldn't like to lose it at all—because they'd have to give me another, and it would almost certain to be an ugly one” (*Through the Looking Glass*, Carroll, p. 209).

What does it mean for me to lose my identity? And if I am going to lose my identity, who will I become? Beckman argues that the lack of character continuity is linked to the lack of narrative continuity. By disrupting continuity, the text forces Alice “to let go of the continuity of her own and the world's identity” (Beckman p. 2). Eventually Alice stops trying to predict or explain events using her above-ground knowledge and logic, and learns rather to act upon them in the moment. In the same way individuals may seek to disrupt the narrative structures, i.e. the cultural texts, in which they find themselves. Do these stories somehow inspire individuals to liberate themselves from their own discursive oppression? Beckman asks, “how is our freedom and capacity to act curtailed or encouraged through narrative structures?” (2010, p. 8).

7.5c Non-Linearity and Metamorphosis

Something unusual in the *Alice* stories, and no doubt an attractive feature for many of my informants, is that they jump from scene to scene without a logical progression of events. There are disconcerting breaks in causality, wherein characters appear and disappear suddenly and mysteriously. This contrasts with typical narratives, in which “acting becomes a matter of creating a linear and causal chain through which identity is secured” (Beckman 2014, p. 16). Carroll deliberately upsets standard forms of narrative structure by introducing elements of “nonsense,” such as abrupt jumps or breaks in the storyline. Things often seem to run backwards, as when the Hatter accuses Alice of not being the same as she was before, with statements such as “you were much muchier,” and “you've lost your muchness” (*Through the Looking Glass*, 1982, Carroll). It is as if Alice, having returned to Wonderland as a teen, must prove herself by living up to her former self, demonstrating again her unique qualities of character. As the story proceeds, Alice becomes “muchier” as she overcomes the successive challenges posed by Wonderland. In this case identity is the vehicle that connects past states with future ones.

The idea of an expanding and contracting self is implicit in the New Age notion of the “capital S self,” i.e. the future, larger, more evolved, and more complete self which is contained, in a nascent form, within the current and less developed self. It is believed that the individual, via their spiritual practices, will gradually ascend a karmic ladder into higher states of selfhood. An important aspect of my subject's brand of religiosity is in fact defined by this developmental process, concerned as it is with acquiring what they consider to be higher levels of spiritual status. It is connected with Hindu notions of reincarnation also. On the one hand a person becomes more than what they were, due to having transcended their previous set of cultural, moral, or behavioral limitations. But also they become what they already are: through actualizing

inner potentials an individual achieves their (until this moment) unrealized totality, i.e. their god-self.

In one sense Alice is not herself *anymore*, but in another she is not herself *yet*. She continually defines who she is by the ways in which she responds to the trials that have been set for her. Having been stretched and shrunk multiple times, and having her moral and causal universe turned upside down and inside out, she is no longer her once naïve self. The changes in size are symbolic of her liminal transformations, from which she emerges primed for the discovery of just who she is. Through immersing themselves in ritual practices such as entheogen use, and liminoid space activities such as New Age and neopagan ritual events, my study participants similarly affect a dissolution of their previous selves, or ego identities, which allows for the working out of a new sense of who they are.

The final stage, which completes identity transformation within a traditional culture, is called incorporation. This occurs when a person reaches full adult status. Having survived the numerous trials and challenges put to them, and with the successful completion of their rites of passage, an initiate moves from liminality to incorporation. They receive a new name and rank within their societies, along with new responsibilities. (Bailey & Peoples, 2015). Among my subjects achieving a new identity is often equated with undergoing a kind of rebirth. Ironically it is their old identity, the one given to them by their parent culture, which they seek to transcend. Because one's old identity is perceived as being produced by mainstream societal norms, it is as if the person, through developing their new self, sheds the skin of an earlier stage of life, one associated with the muggle world, to become more fully realized as their magical self. By taking the psychonautic journey, the individual experiences a shift in perspective, a shift in how they perceive and understand the world, and how they see themselves in relation to it.

7.6 Creating a Psychonautic Space

7.6a A Hero's Journey To Find Themselves

In some versions of the story the Alice character enters Wonderland in order to escape from her real world problems. In the Tim Burton filmed version (2010) Alice is a teen, and during her betrothal party she runs off after the White Rabbit, down into the rabbit hole. Firmer notions of identity emerge as the protagonist must face down successive challenges, which reveals and refines different aspects of her character. For example, how does she answer the questions and riddles posed by the Cheshire Cat? How does she handle the frequent metamorphoses she undergoes, growing and shrinking to fit herself into the unusual situations she encounters? And how will she eventually stand up to the Queen? How she responds tells us who she is. As she navigates through the perils and pitfalls of a strange and disconcerting world, she learns about herself, and comes to realize ultimately who she is.

Journeys of self-discovery are commonplace within narrative myths. Heroines must continually prove their quality, and through doing so create and renew a growing sense of self. Individuals experimenting with psychedelics often have this as a goal from the outset. They deliberately seek self-understanding through exploring unconventional subjective states. There is a desire to play with one's identity, and the logic-bending states of mind induced by entheogens help participants do this, for example by making their egos more malleable and easier to reshape. They fit themselves into new cultural forms by adopting new roles and new pathways of thought and action. This process is analogous to putting on a costume in order to play a part in a film or theater production. The person is given a role and handed a script, and if the character one plays is different enough from their ordinary self, the shift in identity may be extreme enough to induce an altered state of being. One learns new lines, and adapts to new circumstances, through

pursuing a non-ordinary situation. This is part of what a psychonaut is after: the chance to become someone else, or possibly to be a different version of their old self.

In chapter three I discussed the sorts of physical spaces that New Agers and neopagans create in order to escape from the rules and restrictions of the mainstream world. For these ritual cosplay type practices, individuals literally put on costumes, and behave in ways that are perhaps ill-suited for conventional society, because for example they contain forms of social and/or sexual deviance. Forms of play, and ways of relating socially are experimented with freely within these places. In the same way, some individuals in this culture create a subjective, or psychonautic “space” through using entheogens. In contrast with the liminoid community, in which members interact with each other in socially experimental ways, the psychonaut's created space is more personal, and more along the lines of a lucid dream.

7.6b It Was Only a Dream

The idea of reaching another layer of reality via hallucinogens is often associated with the dream experience. Dreaming is believed by many New Agers and New Paradigmers to be a therapeutic phenomenon. But it also constitutes a parallel world, in which personal growth and spirit work are cultivated. At the end of Carroll's story Alice wakes up in the arms of her sister, who is gently caressing her hair. The reader is thus left with a somewhat unambiguous explanation: Alice's adventures in Wonderland were all part of an elaborate dream fantasy. This same concept is evident in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (L. Frank Baum, 1900), where at the end of that narrative Dorothy wakes from out of a trauma induced sleep, lovingly surrounded by her friends and family. The land of Oz, and all of its characters, were merely dreamt up by Dorothy during her period of feverish unconsciousness. Many modern stories seem to share this format, in

which the extraordinary or magical elements of a narrative are accounted for rationally in the end, by giving them logical explanations. The dream is thus accepted as an illogical space where the impossible is permitted to exist. Anything strange or supernatural is quarantined within the confines of the dream. However, ancient and medieval stories allowed magical phenomena to exist in the real world as well. For example, in Grimm's fairy tales cannibal witches, evil spells, and super-intelligent wolves live in the same daylight world, side by side with mundane and everyday events. In Greek stories the gods play prominent roles, and all manner of divine phenomena are allowed to occur alongside the ordinary and materially explainable processes such as work, love, and warfare.

For New Paradigmers dreaming and psychonautics are explicitly related. Users of *Salvia Divinorum* for example, explain their trips as “waking dreams.” After ingesting or smoking a *Salvia D.* extract individuals describe entering into dream-like scenarios or situations. Suddenly one finds oneself in another location, where they may encounter characters with whom they may become embroiled in a narrative quest. Individuals argue that these experiences are very similar to dreaming because during the brief period of the trip, which for *Salvia D.* is approximately twenty minutes, they are no longer awake in the usual sense. That is, they are no longer sitting in the room where they ingested the psychedelic, but are fully immersed in a dream state from which they emerge gradually, as they re-enter a conscious state of awareness.

Another common experience is one of regression. In these examples individuals report returning to an earlier phase of their lives, usually a particular event that they relive or watch as a participant observer. In both cases, however, the person is no longer within the normal waking world, but occupies a position outside of the space-time continuum, they argue. In other words, one has entered an altered state of consciousness, as in a dream.

Dreams of course have a lore of their own outside of spirituality culture. I will not be reviewing this material comprehensively here, but because they are an important part of indigenous and animistic belief systems, many in the New Age and neopagan communities have incorporated dreaming into their spiritual practice. In what are arguably the most influential pieces of twentieth century New Age literature, the *Teachings of Don Juan* (1965) and *A Separate Reality* (1970) by Carlos Castaneda, dreaming is described as a type of martial art. According to the characters in these stories, by acquiring mastery over one's dreams, one achieves mastery over their lives. In these depictions dream-time is a sphere of reality as important as waking reality. In fact, it is even more real than what we typically call real, because it is argued to be more flexible. This is because while dreaming we are able to bend reality, allowing us to do things that we cannot ordinarily do. In dreams we seem to experience less restrictions or limitations in terms of how we actualize our intentions. We can do fantastic things, and literally make our dreams come true no matter how other-worldly, or unrealistic they seem to us in normal reality. So for example, the Mazatec Indian shamans Castaneda claims to have studied train their disciples to master the techniques of lucid dreaming. By gaining control over the events and elements of their dreams, individuals are able to consciously shape and direct them. By doing this, individuals learn to control their dream reality, which they then transfer over to “real” reality. In other words, the skills acquired through dreaming are retained and brought over into the space of waking life.

In the *Matrix* story, for example, Neo learns to bend the rules of normal reality while inside the computer-generated world. This virtual training endows him with almost god-like powers that he uses to defeat the equally powerful shadow agents. In myths dream abilities are often associated with supernatural powers, e.g. Dorothy and the magic slippers. But the

entheogens also do this, my psychonaut informants contend. For them magical or supernatural powers are really only latent abilities that we all possess, but are unable to access due to the limiting restrictions of our logical and rational cognitive paradigm, i.e. our egos. Early on children learn the rules of reality, in the form of laws of nature, which cannot be violated. Therefore, my subjects explain that people become conditioned to think and act according to these rules, which cuts them off from their own potentials. So entheogen usage for them is partly about unlocking hidden potentials, and living in an expanded reality that includes magical possibilities. Carroll seems to intuit this modern way of thinking about dreams as a practice space for real life. Notably he connects identity change with the warping of spatial and temporal dimensions.

7.7 It's Always Tea-Time: Leisure and the Subversion of the Protestant Ethic

“He's murdering time! Off with his head! 'and ever since that' the Hatter went on in a mournful tone, 'he won't do a thing I ask! It's always six o'clock now [...] it's always tea-time, and we've no time to wash the things in between'” (Carroll, 1994, p. 75). A Victorian response to time-space compression, Carroll's texts attempt to slow down or stop time by stretching it out. He loosens temporal concerns, which has a relaxing effect on members of the tea party. This contrasts dramatically with the White Rabbit, who exclaims repeatedly throughout the story that he is late. With this character Carroll presents the very image of a modern person who anxiously rushes around, inextricably bound up in clock-time, yet is perpetually late. In Carroll's time people were already experiencing the accelerated pace of culture change. Life since the dawn of the industrial age had become increasingly oriented around clocks, and keeping oneself on time, and in step with the latest technological curiosities and fashions, was a cultural imperative.

This process has only intensified in the 20th and 21st centuries, as individuals try to cope with the practical affairs of modern existence: adults work long hours by the clock to manage finances, then hustle to make up for the lack of time spent with children for example, by chauffeuring them around to their highly scheduled play activities. However, in the *Wonderland* narrative time is frozen at 6 p.m., quitting time for many factory workers. But it is also British tea-time. It signifies a break from the hectic business of life that allows for quiet and deliberate moments spent doing leisure activities, such as chatting with loved ones over a calming tea ritual.

The Tea Party consists of the Mad Hatter, a symbol of whimsy and illogic, the March Hare a rather rude and unreasonable fellow, and the napping door mouse. Together the three represent the precise opposite of the fastidious punctuality, seriousness, and responsibility embodied by the Bourgeoisie capitalist work ethic. Lazily nodding over cups of tea, and having no time to wash the dishes in between (due to time's being frozen), members of the tea party simply move one space over to have clean place settings. Because time has stopped, and there is no 'after', the present brims over with nonsensical actions and riddles that have no need of goals or answers (Beckman, p. 11). Thus it is a “mad” tea party, because it goes on forever.

Alice demands “you might do something better with your time than waste it on riddle's with no answers” to which the Hatter responds, “If you knew time as well as I do you wouldn't talk about it, it's a him [...] I dare say you've never even spoken to time.” Alice responds “Perhaps, but I know how to beat time when I learned music.” Hatter replies, “On the contrary he can't stand beating, but if you keep on good terms with him, he'll do anything with a clock you want” (Carroll, 1994, p. 73). The Hatter concludes, however, that since he had a falling out with time, “he won't do a thing I ask” (Carroll, 1994, p. 75).

Carroll's personification of time is disorderly, recalcitrant, and malleable. His view of time as finite and personal seems a comical subversion of the above ground's depiction of time's infinite, orderly, impersonal, and autonomous nature. Of course the *Alice* texts predate Einstein's relativity theory which involves time dilation, or the slowing down and stopping of time that occurs when relativistic speeds or masses are experienced. My subjects report that time for them is often a meaningless concept, insofar as when they can they forget about it. Rather than using time as a reference frame to orient their experiences for example, they desire a timeless condition. A predictable response to time-space compression-acceleration, this wish is hardly confined to New Agers. But it is a pressure that motivates some to seek refuge in festival spaces such as Wisteria, where monitoring time, and time related technologies, is of less importance.

However, recurring spatial and temporal distortions that deny “the solidity of what had been taken to be real” result in “a tear or wound, laid open in the side of the real” (Beckman p. 11). In Wonderland things are upside down, backwards and inverted. This appeals to people who view the mainstream world as uninviting. For example, many of my informants feel that contemporary society is already upside down, backwards, and inverted, in terms of its moral and ecological positions. Reversing and upending the status quo therefore appears highly liberating from their point of view. Carroll's texts also provide indeterminacy and immunity from the usual demands of a logical and predictable world. In contrast with the need for rationality and closure, both in literature and in everyday life, Carroll's work questions rationality, intentionality, choice and consequence, and opens up spaces in which potentiality can be explored (Beckman, p. 10). Whereas most children's literature of the time was aimed at teaching moral and social attitudes, and not to entertain or inspire flights of imagination (Schatz, p. 109). Carroll therefore deliberately provokes and ridicules the agenda of moral and social indoctrination of his time.

Later in the story the Mad Hatter asks Alice, “why is a raven like a writing desk?” to which she responds, “you might do something better with your time than waste it on riddle's with no answers” (Carroll, 1994, p. 73). What is the point of asking absurd questions? Are these merely linguistic puzzles, designed to encourage children to engage in a dynamic problem-solving activity, as some researchers maintain? (Schatz, 2015 p. 110). Or is it to work out the meaning and functions of metaphors and similes? Laden with answerless riddles and incoherent speech, Carroll's text often unravels, and otherwise meaningful signs give way to a poetic gibberish that is frightening for some, while for others offers a sublime music. The resulting loss of meaning, however, isolates Alice, not only from the backwards world, but also from herself. The textual chaos can lead to disconnection, terror, and states of social anomie. Or do states of madness, caused by temporal, spatial, and linguistic discontinuity, yield narrative freedom?

Hare: “You should say what you mean” Alice: “I do, at least I mean what I say, it's the same thing you know.” Hare: “It's isn't the same thing quite a bit, why you may as well say I like what I get is the same thing as I get what I like...”

Adult readers, in the face of such absurd situations, might invariably respond with the only defenses left them: they laugh (Rackin, p. 37). Alice, however, reacts to the frightful disruptions of orderly time and space with a tenacious sobriety: she childishly refuses to accept the chaos. Even after everything that has happened, all the changes that she has thus far undergone, Alice retains one thing: her faith in the orderliness of the universe. Perhaps sensing how her above-ground identity is founded upon arbitrary and constructed systems such as geometry, she attempts to recall geographical facts, and recite her multiplication tables. Carroll provides a caricature of this naïve phase of life, in which a child has “reached that characteristic developmental stage in which the world and its words appear completely explainable, where all questions have answers, where mysteries and paradoxes are simply puzzles awaiting inevitable

solutions” (Rackin, p. 38). Carroll's Alice thus exhibits an “ignorant assuredness or blind faith” in the reasonableness of the world. Confronted by a maddening anarchy “the devotees of order continually apply artificial constructs and systems to tidy up and temporarily regularize what their unconscious minds recognize as permanent chaos—the endless, incomplete, absurd, “dreadful confusion” (Carroll, 1982, p. 204) that underlies our rationalized, futilely constructed, so-called waking world” (Rackin p. 90).

7.8 The Blank Canvas of Narrative Madness

It may be that odd scenarios, such as the encounters between Alice and the Caterpillar, and the mad tea party, offer open-ended questions whose purpose is to inspire curiosity, imagination, and reflection, in both the reader and psychonautic adventurer. The point is not for Alice to know the answers, but to reflect on the questions. Perhaps asking questions without answers makes room in a narrative for the unexpected, or actions that preclude a predictable course of events. If no logical responses to a situation exist, one is free to improvise. If there is no prescribed set of movements one must follow, individuals are not bounded in the ways they may act. In other words, they can be anything they wish to be. In such cases the story becomes an empty canvas, primed for identity recreation.

By contrast there is a class of “infantile prisoners of the Looking Glass World whose very existence, the permanence and integrity of his [Humpty Dumpty's] self, is mastered by the words of an unchanging text, the nursery rhyme that comprises his only identity, his sole claim on existence” (Rackin, p. 83). When selfhood is reduced to no more than a cultural construct, contingent upon various discourses external and prior to the existence of an individual, it becomes inauthentic. Passively accepting one's role in a predetermined narrative, and accepting

that events, or one's role in them, can be predicted, is to give up one's freedom. Modern individuals surrender themselves to the logical framework of a rational world, and accept its conclusions about who they are supposed to be within it: a child, a parent, a consumer, a worker in a bureaucratic hierarchy, a wage slave of a corrupted oligarchy. Like Humpty Dumpty they must follow the script, even if it necessitates their destruction.

The *Alice* stories are Carroll's answer to what romantics like himself considered to be the limitations of deterministic Victorian rationalism: he responds with forms of unreason. They offer a relief, and a chance to laugh in the face of Bourgeoisie rigidity and seriousness. Its playful elements appear, however, next to those that are cruel and terrifying. Perhaps this contrast reveals a humanity divided against itself, implicit in the confrontations between the naïve and childish demand for order, and the irreverent flouting of societal conventions evidenced by the Wonderland inhabitants. But there also seems to be a coming to terms with the dehumanizing effects of 19th century Darwinism, which entails facing the prospect of living in a godless and morally ambiguous universe, in which the only rules seem to be the monstrous game of “Now I'll eat you; now you eat me!” (1968, Campbell, p. 4). The texts are thus a response to the anxieties and moral chaos induced by the random and morally meaningless processes of nature, that wipe away pre-logical sentimentalism, “a chilling panorama of the pointless, mindless, inescapable mechanisms in which science has now placed them firmly and forever” (Rackin, p. 90).

Whimsy is perhaps the only possible move, if one wishes to get outside of the self-reinforcing logic embedded within positivistic definitions of reality, that include rigid and prefabricated social scripts. Along this path the way to achieving personal change is to shatter the “structuring structures” of western positivism. In other words, the individual gains agency

largely through causing a rupture, or alteration in the parameters of the dominant sociopolitical-cognitive schema. And to free oneself from the constraints of a normative social matrix, deviance is not optional, it is required. Carroll's nonsense thus provides the necessary break from normal reality, that opens up a liminal space within the narrative. This allows Alice to expand beyond her education and cultural indoctrination, and offers her the chance to act in new ways. To reshape oneself is an experimental process that requires sociocultural freedom, which in the present case constitutes a textual laboratory suitable for identity experimentation, i.e. a reflexive space.

Towards the end of Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*, for example, Alice's growth is marked by her celebration of madness when she says to the Hatter "you're quite mad, but you know the best people are," (*Alice in Wonderland*, 2010). This piece of text shows a mature, yet playful demeanor. We are encouraged to view Alice in a more expanded light. Through traversing a strange landscape, and having survived numerous identity-dissolving situations, the budding heroine is forced to grow beyond her conditioning, and notions of personal comfort. Having transcended her childish limitations, she blossoms into a well-rounded young adult. At the end of her existential journey Alice emerges as culturally more sophisticated, signaled by her ability to recognize the value of unorthodox perspectives, which reinforces Carroll's agenda for the normalization of madness and/or eccentricity.

7.9 The Journey Through Wonderland: A Modern Rite of Passage?

By now readers may be asking themselves, of what significance are the *Wonderland* and *Matrix* myths to my participant's conceptions of spirituality? In other words, how are my informants using these narratives? How are they affected by these discourses? In what ways are

they inspired by these stories? Is it to interpret their own experiences, by discovering colorful analogues within the *Alice* stories, and then applying these to events or situations in their own lives? Do these texts serve as guides for how to live?

Individuals involved with psychonautic practices have subjective experiences that are of course unique. These are similar enough, however, that they can be discussed meaningfully, and by comparing them separate individuals may attain intersubjective, and to some degree mutual, understandings of each other's visions and realizations. Members within this culture have their own stories that contain idiosyncratic meanings, and personally significant references, which can nevertheless be woven together into collectively held discourses. Some of these have been examined in Chapter 6. The *Alice* and *Matrix* texts similarly represent common grounds of meaning, and serve as intersubjective meeting places.

But do these subjective processes reflect a universal human condition? In this chapter I have made analyses, and have drawn conclusions derived from my study subject's experiences. However, it should be emphasized that identity making processes, that involve using reflexive texts to inspire alternative ways of thinking about one's life, are not limited to New Agers and neopagans. Rather people from all walks of life no doubt navigate through the complexities of modern existence in many of the same ways. To some extent we all share the common experiences of worrying over personal relationships, questioning our life's decisions, and coping with fears provoked by political and economic forces beyond our control.

It may be that the concerns and issues involving order and meaning which appear in the *Alice* texts are culturally specific, and pertain largely to people of western European descent. In other words lessons concerning the life course, the ones illustrated in these stories, may be peculiar to westerners. All of my subjects of course share this cultural identity in common with

the texts. If that can be accepted, I would ask the following questions: does every person who comes of age in contemporary forms of western society necessarily participate in their rites of passage? Rites that, because they are shaped in accordance with the political and economic structures endemic within state capitalism, that due to economic expediency, are socially distorted, malformed, (i.e. underfunded, unsupported, or eliminated), or even nonexistent when compared with traditional communalist ones? And if so, are they as a result developmentally undermined? In other words, given the strongly individualistic, boot-strap economic paradigm, which during the latter half of the 20th century in America has been paired with socialization processes that are, for lack of a better term infantilizing, are most people necessarily “fuck-ups” in this society until reaching their mid-thirties?

Getting one's life together has become increasingly difficult for Generation X-ers and Millennials. Attaining financial independence in over-saturated job markets for example, while harboring overwhelming levels of student loan debt, is becoming increasingly difficult. Neoliberal economic policies, combined with recent and increasing disparities in wealth and power among Americans, have resulted in whole generations that appear culturally disaffected, and possibly ill-equipped to support themselves materially. These conditions have social and psychological consequences that I will not explore in any great depth here, but most of my subjects belong to these cultural categories, i.e. people born in the late 20th century. The disenchanting forces that come with living under modern regimes is part of what provokes interest in pursuing new spiritualities, and the discourses and themes being discussed here.

For example, the *Alice* stories provide dreamy excursions into an amusing child-like world, one that escapes the central concerns of adult life, which includes being serious and responsible. *Wonderland* type fantasies serve as temporary forms of relief from the temporal and

material demands placed upon individuals by the rational materialism of capitalist existence. Moreover Alice is a female heroine, and so she appeals to many members in my study population insofar as they revere “the goddess,” and the rise of feminine power in the contemporary era. Alice fits this narrative well. Interestingly she also exhibits qualities which undermine conventional Victorian views of women. Casting males in the story as the irrational characters yields a brilliant reversal of the standard patriarchal trope, i.e. that women are the more emotional and illogical of the species. In the text Alice routinely dismisses the unreasonableness of the Hatter and Caterpillar with a ruthless logic, and when the Queen threatens to chop off her head, she brushes her aside by saying “nonsense,” which immediately neutralizes the threat by placing the Queen into a narrative cul de sac.

One young woman I interviewed told me that, in fact, “I am Alice,” insofar as she had been for some time journaling about her adventures in a parallel reality, which involves her dreaming practice. She identifies as feminist, though she values conventional gender ideals, for example she embraces feminine and masculine archetypes. Images of femininity and masculinity adorn much of the world's mythologies, and form the basis for religious thought. And so even though in the present era of gender neutrality, these symbols being historically relevant, hold spiritual currency. But like many others in my study sample she also worships the goddess, and is ideologically aligned with Carroll's mythological gender role reversal.

Perhaps with nebulous goals of turning the existing social order on its head, my informants often see themselves in the role of such characters, mystical wanderers in a wonderland. They sometimes hold disparate views of the world which must be reconciled. On the one hand they see normative society as non-magical and lacking in imagination, whose everyday life processes are largely characterized by the dull and superficial routines of work and

consumerism. But more than that, operating within the polite “have a nice day” society are violent and dystopian forms of power. In the *Alice* stories this is symbolized by the Red Queen and her court, a chaotic and monstrous arena, filled with corrupt legal proceedings and frequent beheadings.

However, my informants also view the world as a magical landscape, rich with possibilities for actualizing oneself, at least potentially. So, there is the impulse to retreat from the world, and to abandon it as a lost cause. But there also exists a desire to reshape the world, and make of it a wonderland. The world becomes both a test of one's readiness for action, and an opportunity to mold it via prefigurative practices, which includes practicing nonsense, or engaging in the unreasonableness of play.

7.10 Re-enchantment: Rediscovering the Fountain

The subjective nature of the sun child's quest is evident within these stories, as it is in most mythologies. As mentioned earlier the hero's life trajectory is often based on a solitary and rarified path that involves self-improvement. This general formula is also present within the *Alice* and *Matrix* stories, but it is paired with transcendental themes involving distortions of perception, and traveling through passageways to outlying areas, or difficult to reach places that lie behind or underneath our ordinary experience of reality. This in part defines the meaning of re-enchantment: to venture into realms beyond the ordinary, in order to return with special knowledge.

For informants this can mean new ways of conceiving oneself, which translates into how to practice relationships more successfully, and how to live in harmonious conjunction with the natural world. In other words, to re-enchant one's lifeworld necessitates an expanded awareness

of life's possibilities, beyond those outlined by capitalist economics, or the routinized programs of state institutions for example. To re-enchant one's life is thus to gain a larger perspective that empowers one to modify their relationships, so that they can continue to discover and enjoy the sorts of experiences, feelings, states of consciousness, and material possibilities they have thus far acquired via their spiritual questing. Many of my subjects have defined their spirituality as being journeys of this sort. The means through which they accomplish these life expansions are most commonly yoga, meditation, traveling (e.g. attending spiritual festivals, or living for extended stays within alternative communal situations), and participating in entheogenic ceremonies. In this way spirituality is a means to an end, a vehicle for widening the limits for how one thinks about and approaches their life's situations.

However, in terms of creating opportunities for acquiring self-knowledge, spirituality practices are also believed to intensify the depth of one's personal insights. Informants mention the need to actively seek knowledge about what it is that constructs their daily existence. Issues pertaining to personal health and well-being surfaced frequently. Members expressed the interest in acquiring knowledge of what lurks behind their life problems. In other words, they wish to know what makes them sick, what causes them to feel bad, and what people, jobs, or situations drain their energies. All of this work and attention, pursuing mystical quests and spiritual practices, seems to have for them this central organizing purpose. What I found to be most important, in terms of participant's long term goals, is the hope to discover and identify their problems, and then to figure out just what to do about them. It is a conscious search for ways of fixing themselves. Therefore one's spirituality project, at long last, is an unceasing quest for bits of knowledge and experience, to carry out repairs on the self. This theme is to be continued in chapter eight on healing and commodification.

7.11 Conclusion: Therapeutic Effects

Encoded within the *Alice* narratives are the “discontinuities, ruptures, and transformations” that “direct historical analysis away from the search for silent beginnings, and the never-ending tracing back to the original precursors, toward the search for a new type of rationality and its various effects” (Foucault, 1982, p. 4-5). In this section, we considered the *Alice* stories as narrative depictions of what this new type of rationality is, and some of its effects. Doing this has demonstrated why these texts are so important for my subjects. We were also able to show how individuals have used story elements to interpret their experiences, and how these texts serve as models for how to tell their own stories.

Texts such as Lewis Carroll's *Alices*, and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, tend to focus on the troubling aspects of modern life. Through examining the hierarchical societal structures and paradigmatic thought processes that inform western culture, such narrative depictions enable individuals to see how their lives are affected by, for instance, the hegemonic forces which shape their worlds. Textual exercises of this sort furnish discourse analysts new ways of seeing the familiar, and offer new possibilities for how to cope with the unfamiliar. Through the use of exaggeration and parody, these texts act as therapeutic mediums that allow for reflexive distance. Using them individuals are able to separate themselves, and laugh at the otherwise frightening and monstrous aspects of their existence, such as the ruthless and dehumanizing forms of power that modern states wield over their citizens. Many features in the *Alice* texts hold appeal for my subjects on these bases, but they also reflect their spiritual interests. Indeed, among the most remarkable of Carroll's achievements is that his books create the means through which individuals can experience Alice's dreams as if they were their own. Dramatizations such as *Waiting for Godot*, and *On the Importance of Being Earnest* also do this, by giving modern

readers places for encountering many of their deep-seated desires and anxieties, in ways moreover that are comical, which makes them therapeutic rather than destructive experiences (Rackin, 1991, p. 116). It is no wonder that a lively psychedelic fantasy emerged in a period of stultifying rigidity, and to counter the morbidity of a decaying culture. As Donald Rackin (1991) argues, the “religious and metaphysical assumptions that once answered the basic human need for orderly, complete, and permanent explanations and reasons beyond the reach of reason had thinned out and vanished for a great number of Victorian intellectuals during their lifetimes, destroyed by natural innocent childlike curiosity like Darwin's—and Alice's. The resulting God-less void was terrifying” (Rackin, p. 91). The texts thus serve as a therapeutic medium for some, to work out their culture based fears, traumas, and depression.

Common mythological themes, such as the quest for knowledge or immortality, are materially symbolized by the fountain of youth and the holy grail. The reasons such themes resonate with so many people historically and cross-culturally, is that they are at the center of human concerns. The modern scientific goals to map the human genome for example, and to search for cures to the diseases which plague us and cause so much misery and suffering, are some of the most highly funded scientific pursuits in the world today. Similarly, the therapeutic aims of practicing psychonautic spirituality are likewise to heal oneself, to become whole again, and to seek knowledge about how to live a fulfilled life. Rackin argues, however, that “Alice's literal quest serves vicariously as her readers' metaphorical search for meaning in the lawless, haphazard universe of their own deepest consciousness” (Rackin, p. 36).

Chapter 8: Healing and Commodification

8.1 What is Healing, and Why is it Spiritual?

From an emic perspective, spiritual healing is often conceived as a blend of Eastern mysticism and Western rationalism. Traditions once separate and alienated from each other have become unified to better understand psychological health and spiritual well-being. The New Age movement, according to Gordon Melton,

predicted that a New Age of heightened spiritual consciousness and international peace would arrive and bring an end to racism, poverty, sickness, hunger, and war. This social transformation would result from the massive spiritual awakening of the general population during the next generation. Second, individuals could obtain a foretaste of the New Age through their own spiritual transformation. Initial changes would put the believer on the sadhana, a new path of continual growth and transformation” (in *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2016).

Utopian beliefs of this sort are not, however, limited to New Agers. Putting an end to racism, poverty, sickness, hunger, and war are similarly the goals for many New Left organizations, especially during their peaks in the late 1960s and 70s. It is an understatement to suggest that the ideals expressed in the above comment are optimistic. Many social movement activists, some of whom were participants of the New Age, have since become disillusioned with the kind of naïve optimism expressed here. But at the time perhaps it all seemed possible, and members of the holistic community have largely held onto these beliefs. For example, among new spirituality adherents a belief in the healing powers of the mind, crystals, and entheogenic rituals is widespread. Coupled with this is the belief that a new age of peace and prosperity is currently dawning. Although still asleep humanity is “waking up,” that human consciousness is evolving, and will soon collectively experience a spontaneous enlightenment.

8.2 Cuddle Puddles and Goddess Spirituality

Demographically new spiritualities are weighted more heavily towards women, both in terms of numbers of adherents, and in frequencies of teachers and gurus (Neff and Germer, 2013). But in form and substance the beliefs and practices are also largely feminized. Breaking with more traditional forms of religion, especially monotheistic faiths that are more patriarchally oriented, new spiritualities tend to emphasize the goddess, which represents feminine traits and powers. For example, many Peaceburgh courses accentuate self-love, in which participants are encouraged to become more in touch with their feelings and emotional states. Moreover, intuitive ways of knowing and understanding oneself are emphasized over rational and logical ones, all of which is culturally associated, at least in the west, with women.

Mookshi's is a local holistic spa that is owned and operated predominantly by female health and wellness practitioners, and frequented by Peaceburghers. The site also hosts kirtans, yoga classes, and spiritually focused meditation sessions organized by Peaceburgh members. Besides offering various sorts of massage therapies, one can also purchase essential oils, jewelry, and new age style clothing. These are all feminine oriented sorts of products, yet many men visit the spa, and are learning about things such as how to blend fragrance oils to facilitate their own well-being via aromatherapy. Similarly, the OM group focuses on the female orgasm as a way towards healing damaged sexual practices, and encourages enlightened bodily sensitivity and awareness. In the words of informants, orgasmic meditation emphasizes sacred sexuality versus selfish, reptilian, or violent expressions of sex. It is also a form of healing, insofar as it is conceived as an antidote to the perceived “rape culture” endemic to America, and other patriarchally oriented societies.

Another manifestation of opening to the feminine is observed in the “cuddle puddle.”

Cuddle puddles are an informal ritual practice, or social structure, that can be found in virtually any space dedicated to new spirituality, from large-scale festivals such as Burning Man, to the much smaller potluck type gatherings of Peaceburghers. Literally it is a kind of group embrace, wherein participants will enter a cuddle space to lay with and gently caress other members. Individuals will hug their neighbors, stroke their hair, whisper soft intonations of love and support, while sharing their innermost feelings. It involves opening up to receive emotional healing, and to achieve higher levels of interpersonal intimacy. Spiritual festivals are typically populated with vendor booths, but also include some that function as spaces to hold various sorts of activities and workshops. A variation of the cuddle puddle can usually be found among them. They serve as communal places for individuals to relieve stress, and find emotional support. But before delving any further into definitions of healing, it may be useful to discuss notions of sickness first.

8.3 The Spirituality of Sickness

8.3a The Amfortas Wound

Karl Jaspers states “Sickness points the way to many and opposing sorts of thinking. It becomes the teacher of the great suspicion” (Jaspers, 1965, p. 114). Friedrich Nietzsche seems to have anticipated New Age notions of healing: “a philosopher who has made his way through many states of health has made his way through just as many philosophies; he simply cannot help constantly transmuting his condition into the most spiritual form and distance. Philosophy is just this art of transfiguration” (2001, p. 6).

In terms of health, eastern religions and spiritualities are predisposed to acknowledge and explore connections existing between mind and body. States of unrest or 'dis-ease' in one,

generally affects the other. This basic premise underlies the rationales of most forms of yoga and meditation, and in the West it can be found in varieties of monastic asceticism. In mythological stories, illness is often depicted as a wound the hero receives during their quest. In western myths, such as *Perceval* and *Tristan and Isolde*, it is known as the Amfortas wound which refers to a king who, having failed in his quest for immortality, awaits healing in the castle of the grail by another hero, in this case Perceval (Campbell, 1968, p. 391). Amfortas can be interpreted as the individual who gets in over their head. This is the “Alice in Wonderland” syndrome, of going too far too fast, and encountering in the higher plane existential challenges for which the initiate is not adequately prepared. There they may face nightmarish enemies, such as the violent queen who seeks to chop off Alice's head. Injuries received during such transcendental journeys are not purely physical, but are of a deeper sort, and more elusive. In Arthurian legend, this manifests as a mystical quest by knights who must enter a wasteland in search of the holy grail. The secrets of its magic lie hidden in a mysterious castle, guarded by a custodian, the Fisher King, who suffers from a wound that will not heal. These are psychological and spiritual wounds, that usually require greater than ordinary remedies.

Throughout this study the word “healing” has been often used in the context of spiritual rituals, beliefs, and types of relationships. However, it is time now to enter into a more deliberate discussion about what it entails. Questions to be addressed in this chapter include: from the perspective of new spirituality culture, what is meant by healing? Of what does it consist? What are the healing modalities common among holistic communities? And how do they relate or differ from more mainstream medical definitions and procedures? And healing from what? How is illness defined?

8.3b Verticality, Sickness, and Confinement

Anthropologist Byron Good (2004) argues that modern medical practices are not simply a rational empirical system that exist as an extension of the physical world, but rather are embedded in culture: “the language of medicine is hardly a simple mirror of the empirical world. It is a rich cultural language, linked to a highly specialized version of reality and systems of social relations, and when employed in medical care, it joins deep moral concerns with its more obvious technical functions” (Good, p. 5). In other words, there exist within medical systems formative practices that shape illness, and illness experience, that are inherently social. These include standardized and reductive processes for creating illness classifications, and fitting patients into them via diagnostic norms. Modern medicine thus invokes the emergence of a diseased body as a site of medical knowledge due to an organized set of perceptions and emotional responses (Good, p. 72).

Good contends that the meaning of illness is constructed through narrative practices in which sufferers, their families and other associates, and healers all participate (Good, p. 162). Philosopher Michele Foucault (1984) similarly locates the production of disease in its modern form within the modern hospital. With the scientific advancement of Pasteurism, Foucault explains that state informed reason, working through the hospital, accomplishes an amazing feat of simplification: the reduction of disease from a welter of human phenomena, including social and family relations, one’s habits, prejudices, and illusions, down to a single organism as its sole cause. According to Foucault this entails the production of a certain kind of medical knowledge and discursive practice, and isolating this medical structure from the other aspects of the disease: “So the hospital’s role, by clearing away that parasitic vegetation, those aberrant forms, not only to bring to light the disease as it was but to produce it finally in its heretofore-enclosed and

blocked truth” (Foucault, p. 40). Like Foucault, Good contends that within the epistemological framework of modern medicine, “persons are formulated as medical problems” (Good, p. 79), and are designated “as the site of disease rather than as a narrative agent” (Good, p. 80).

Disease thus becomes detached and depersonalized, insofar as it is largely due to chance encounters with pathogens. Therefore, both the cause of an illness, and its cure, are limited entirely to physical phenomena. What this means is that the role of the individual within the disease process becomes reduced to that of hapless recipient of a disease-causing organism. The agency of the infected person is thus decreased to zero. By contrast individuals who turn to non-western or holistic medicine often cite the patient as an essential player. The mental state of a person can increase or decrease the likelihood of their becoming sick, it is believed. Especially in terms of prognosis, the quality of an individual's thoughts and intentions can have a significant impact upon the course of a disease, and its removal.

Good points out that from an empiricist paradigm, disease is framed as an external category of universal reference (Good, p. 66). This perspective, while situating illness within the individual, at the same time locates the person within a cosmological scheme in which they are subject to laws of nature beyond their control or competency to act upon. Individuals must therefore submit their bodies to the hands of modern medicine, that rests its healing practices on an understanding of physical properties to which all bodies are subject. In contrast Good argues that biology is not simply external or material, but very much a cultural phenomenon.

But amidst the materialist perspective which informs modern medicine, the agency of the sick person is almost completely undermined. If a person becomes sick or injured, they have little other recourse than to submit themselves to a medical system which, upon forming a diagnosis, treats the person by either operating on them, or administering medications. By

contrast within Ayurvedic or shamanistic medicine it is often the reverse situation, in which the individual is considered to be the expert, or primary source of insight into the nature of an illness.

8.4 Types of Embodiment

8.4a The Sexual Body

But before entering into an analysis and discussion of orgasmic meditation, a brief consideration of sexuality and the body is necessary, insofar as it figures prominently in the OM group's practices. There is similarly a need to place sex within the context of religion and spirituality, i.e. to relate it to themes involving death, rebirth, good/evil, suffering, and healing. Interpreted from a Freudian perspective, sex is connected with death insofar as both are considered life sustaining drives: the death instinct (Thanatos) which involves eating and represents the individual's survival; and the life instinct (Eros) or libido, the survival of the species via reproduction (Freud, 1949 p. 17-22). The two are considered natural physical drives, and are typically defined by traditional religions as being aligned with carnal desires, or evil impulses. Love, however, is also connected to sexual relationships. Love is often conceived of as a higher, and more evolved expression than lust, e.g. as agape or "love of god." What is spiritual is often framed as immaterial, on the level of the intellect or mind, while love is traditionally conceived as more emotional. Therefore love, it can be argued, bridges the gap between the material and the spiritual. Indeed, rather than relying on spiritual or religious codes as a basis for one's moral actions in the world, many secular individuals base their values upon social and emotional attachments.

From a Buddhist perspective love, death, and sex are equated to fear and desire. The

associated drives and emotions are understood as unfortunate attachments that bind a person to their material earthly condition, and are the sources of all suffering. Thus, meditation is geared towards overcoming one's fears and desires. A good deal of Buddhist spirituality involves detaching oneself from these conditions to alleviate suffering, a quality that marks the human condition. Dis-ease is a symptom of unrest, of one who is not in a state of equanimity, both with respect to their own mortality, and life circumstances. In any case, the Buddhist response to suffering is compassion (Cuevas, 2003; Albahari, 2002, p. 17). We will soon see how all of this figures into the OM group's philosophy and ritual practices.

8.4b The Medical Body

Good (1994) argues that medical practices create the objects of which they speak. Healing activities are more than just beliefs and behavior, but are “interpretive activities through which fundamental dimensions of reality are confronted, experienced, and elaborated” (Good, p. 69). One way in which medical facts are empirically produced is through an objectifying practice, that results in the cultural construction of persons, patients, bodies, and diseases. An example of how the body is constructed by such a perspective can be observed by the manner in which human sexuality is reduced to human physiology. As part of the standard program in sex education for children in the US public school system, which begins roughly in the 5th grade at around age ten, a very divided picture of sexuality is presented. For example, from my personal experiences in this milieu I can recall that on the first day of this educational program, the teacher appeared in the classroom with a large laminated poster of the human body. It was of course bifurcated by sex, one side depicting the male, and on the other the female. The head of the person was rendered with an attention to surface detail, as it would be in any standardized

artistic portrait. But the rest of the body was shown from varying perspectives: some areas revealed the underlying biological structures, such as internal organs; and in others different tissue layers were emphasized, or the skeletal structure was visible. This is not extraordinary of course, just a typical image of human physiology given from a western scientific perspective. What is extraordinary is that the human phenomena of sexuality was being presented in this highly skewed manner, to pre-pubescents, as part of a “general” sex education.

Yet even as a child I already had certain ideas about sexuality, which included feelings that I had for specific people in my life. There were also doubts and questions, such as what sort of possibilities might exist between myself and others, for enjoyment and exploration? Even if only unrealizable fantasies, these thoughts and dreams were about people who I knew. They involved fun, excitement, and taboo experiences, however, no doubt also motivated by hormonal influences and instinctual drives. These fantasies and feelings were real to me, and held meanings that were consistent with the experiences I was having as a real person in a multi-dimensional lifeworld. But in the public institutional setting, sexuality was being discussed in such a way as to be almost completely abstracted and detached from anything that I knew about my own body, or those of other living persons with whom I interacted. Seeing the human body depicted as essentially an imaginary corpse, and associating this with sex, I think probably traumatized and shocked all of my sensibilities as a person on the verge of a sexual awakening. This was a theoretical view of human sexuality that was being presented to me in a dead, and even disembodied sort of way (Good, p. 71). Reflecting back on this experience I remember thinking that I had sexual interests, but these were disconnected from what I was seeing. My body was not the body contained in the anatomical poster I was being shown. And to think that my sexuality was in some way intimately connected to these postmortem images was frankly

terrifying.

8.4c The Spiritual Body

“Oh love the body, love, and death, these three are together one. For the body is delight and disease: it is what delivers death. Yes, they are carnal both, love and death; therein their terror, their grand magic” (Thomas Mann, *Magic Mountain*, pp. 432-33).

As mentioned in chapter five, the carnivalesque body is traditionally aligned with pagan religions. Often conceived as an extension of nature, it is moreover feminine, as is the earth's body. In his novel *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann writes “the body is the devilish, evil principle, for the body is Nature,” and is antagonistic to the spirit, and to reason (Knopf-Doubleday, 1992, p. 317). For western monotheistic religions the body, because it is derived from nature, and associated with pleasure, especially sexual, is evil. Additionally, sins such as lust, greed, sloth and gluttony are also rooted in the body. They represent its natural condition. Within Judeo-Christian mythology the body is largely construed as a corrupting influence upon the soul. Of course, this begins with Eve. She is responsible for forming humanity's alliance with the evil. It was the original sin, eating of the apple of knowledge in the garden, that exiled humanity from paradise. It was the devil who tempted Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit, and she sealed humanity's fate by sharing this experience with Adam. This angered God, who leveled a curse upon humanity in response to this sensual act. Innocence and immortality were exchanged for suffering, pain, and death. With this event, the body was made subject to disease and other forms of corruption which, lest it can be cleansed, threatens to contaminate the spirit. Healing is thus a mystical act, insofar as it cleanses and purifies the body of its diseases. Healing the body neutralizes it as a problem for the spirit, and so it equates to a spiritualization of the body. In religious terms, healing is the embodiment of spiritual purification.

This combination of identities probably stems from the perceived duality that exists between material and spiritual realities. Among western cultures, the separation of spirituality from nature has resulted in what Campbell refers to as “mythic dissociation” (1968, p. 637). As civilization progressed the once familiar animistic bond between humans and the natural world was replaced, Campbell argues, with the relationship of individuals to a social body. It is an abstract social identification that binds individuals to a society, church, or state, and often acts as the primary form of association, even to the exclusion of the biological family. It is the very thing that neopagans seek to undo by entering into mythic identification with nature. Individuals in Peaceburgh, and in the Native American Church groups refer to fellow members as their spiritual family. However, embodied understandings of spirituality generally contain forms of embedded knowledge, that includes subjective experiences of illness and how to cope with it.

8.5 Orgasmic Meditation

8.5a OM Structure

An example of embodied spirituality being practiced by Peaceburgh members, includes a local Pittsburgh chapter of Turn On: Orgasmic Meditation, known as “OM.” In terms of its origins, the founder and CEO of One Taste is Nicole Daedone, “she was told by doctors that she couldn't have an orgasm” (from Interview with Howard). The New York Post calls OM a “cult” (<http://nypost.com/video/is-this-meditation-or-just-masturbation/>). Further info on this and related practices of therapeutic sexuality, including tantric peak, can be found here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/15/fashion/15commune.html>. Howard found the group through Meetup.com and went to a meeting to check it out. There is a one time fee of seventy five dollars to become a member.

When I tell people that I am studying spirituality, I often get responses such as “oh that's interesting,” and in some cases I am told why. My point is that this field of religious studies is not so unusual as to confuse lay people. Mostly people understand what it is I am doing after a few carefully chosen words are proffered. It is not weird or shocking, but is generally received as a kind of study of religions. However, when I mention the OM group, I get a lot of smiles, chuckles, and a variety of “are you serious?!” kinds of questions. After I give a (confidentially sensitive) report about the noteworthy features of OM, e.g. that it is a meditation group that centers their practice on the female orgasm, the initial shock, thrill, or interest seems to wear off. If I have the chance to continue, I may attempt to discuss some of what I believe to be the interesting aspects of the group. In other words, I give a sociological interpretation of it, which usually has the effect of boring my audience. My descriptions and analysis of what the group actually is does not live up to its promising name. I do sometimes feel a little guilty about deflating my inquisitor's curiosities.

But when it comes down to it the OM group, which at first sounds bizarre, and elicits all sorts of wild thoughts and images, is only a group of people who are doing things that are, in many respects, similar to what other groups are doing. For example, the OM meetings and games are often held in a depersonalized room, filled with inexpensive plastic or wooden chairs, not unlike where AA meetings might take place. Many participants come to the events wearing clothing similar to what 'mainstream' people wear. They talk, laugh, break up into smaller conversational groups, and generally carry on as ordinary people. Most of the groups I attended are like this, their meetings being held in churches, or places like the Carnegie Library or Friends Meeting House. Other kinds of groups meet in these spaces, so structurally, at least on the surface of things, they appear to be quite similar. The content of what they discuss varies of

course, but the norms, of taking turns to speak, asking questions, forms of politeness, and other sorts of signs and cues, are what one would expect to see in virtually any average sized American city's group milieu.

By contrast the environments I encountered at Wisteria, discussed in chapters three and four, were a little more picturesque, and structurally unusual. Due to the frequent nudity and expressive body language, norms of decorum and politeness were a little more colorful there. But the OM group, aside from involving some unorthodox types of bodily practice, is not exceptionally strange *looking*. In fact, compared with other kinds of spaces, such as a night club or a museum, it is visually quite dull. Again, I mention this because, after hearing the name of the group, its physical descriptions may be anti-climactic. So, allow me to apologize for inadvertently creating the conditions of an inevitable let down, or for getting my readers hopes up too high, for a climax that may never come. But hopefully the analysis and interpretation of orgasmic meditation will excite the reader's interests in other ways, through providing some insights into its unique kinds of embodiment and group dynamics.

8.5b Welcome to the OM Games

Nymeria stated that “orgasmic meditation is a structured practice.” This helps members to feel safe and trust each other, and “because you know that no one is going to violate your space,” and “because your consenting to this [...] that can calm down, so then you're more able to be present for the sensations and what arises.” Having consent is a structure that, from this informant’s perspective, helps add stability to the group insofar as it provides security. Under such conditions one feels comfortable revealing personal information, sharing intimate feelings, and becoming open with their bodies, due to its being a safe milieu.

The OM group has multiple levels of belonging. There are private sessions that involve the orgasmic meditation practice, which are reserved for inner or core members. There are also public events, like the ones that I attended. These are meant more as introductions to the group's overall philosophy and purpose for being, and explore some of the activities, or “games” as they are called. I will begin by describing a typical event of the latter sort.

The context is much like a group therapy setting, though participants do not sit in a circle. Rather the group facilitators sit at the front of the room, and other members sit in rows arranged in a semicircle facing them, and not each other. The games that are played resemble exercises that one might encounter in a therapeutic group session, e.g. the facilitator states a prompt and each member gives a response to a question or prompt, such as “I'm here tonight because...” and then the member responds with “because I was curious about this group,” or because “I'm looking for a more fulfilling sex life.” Another part of the game structure involves the “hot seat,” in which a participant is asked to come to the front of the room and sit in a special seat. Now having the focus of the entire room, the audience gets to ask them any question they wish, and the person occupying the hot seat has to answer truthfully. When the questioner reckons they have received an acceptable answer to their question, they say “thank you,” at which time the respondent has to stop talking. The third game played was one that everyone participated in. One by one each member was asked to say something to another member, something about that person that they had felt reluctant to say in the past, or in other situations. So honesty and authenticity is expected, in both the questioner and respondent.

The themes explored were one's thoughts and feelings about others in the group, about their relationships, and their sexual perspective. For example, in the first question/response game the facilitator asked “when I have an orgasm, it sounds like this...” to which each member gave

theirs. Many responses revolved around a member's image, how they saw themselves, and how others in the group saw them. At times the responses veered off into wild imagination as some members described their "true" selves as fairytale type characters, going into great detail about what they looked like, e.g. "I have wings and several mouths," and when asked by another member what the extra mouths are for, the person said "to take energy from people, who are freely offering it." Spiritual themes did emerge during the one hour session, in these descriptions of members alter egos.

But in some cases, members broke down and cried while delivering their "fear inventory," having revealed traumatic events such as "I was violently assaulted when I was three years old." Although at the outset the facilitators talked about the place being a safe haven (they made a point of locking the doors so no one could wander in off the street), and that it was going to be fun, the group experience was very similar to a group therapy session. Members were thus encouraged to reveal troubling things about their past and present. Initially I felt uncomfortable at the prospect of having to share my thoughts and feelings, but as the night unfolded I became more comfortable with the structure and activities. It was disconcerting to hear such serious stories being told, assuming that they are true, and at times it was laughable to see members indulge in themselves egoistically.

Narcissistic displays seemed to be evident in some members, and is perhaps the reason for the group mechanism of saying "thank you" when you heard enough out of someone! The healing element is obvious in all this, because this was for all intents and purposes very much like a therapeutic milieu. However, the facilitators, while somewhat experienced, having led this particular group many times over the course of a couple years, nevertheless are not trained therapists. Moreover, within the professional psychological community there is a standard of

ethics in place to prevent damage from occurring. For example, it is considered unethical for a therapist to have sex with a client. This poses a conflict of interests, for the therapist may have an agenda beyond the healing of their client that may involve gratifying their own sexual and emotional needs. Also, they can use their position of authority and knowledge, about the other person's issues, to gain power over them to fulfill their personal agendas.

This critique also applies to veteran members who are more experienced with this format, and seemed to use the situation to show off their skill at it, sometimes being facetious, and prodding less experienced members with embarrassing questions of a sexual nature. At other times, if a member did become emotionally troubled, they offered their sympathies, saying comforting things, and in one case holding a member's hand who had just come from the hot seat where they made a disturbing emotional revelation. They were also the ones who gave the most outlandish descriptions of themselves, and flamboyant indulged in their orgasms, showing their prowess with handling these topics which are usually considered inappropriate in mainstream social contexts, or deviance practices. However, in their defense, the facilitators also made personal revelations, and so placed themselves on the same level as other members. But they decided when games were over or not, what the themes to be explored were, and chose individuals from the audience when questions were posed to the "hot seat" participants.

When judgmental behavior surfaces during a session, because it is done in the context of a meditational safe-space, it is generally not frowned upon. If it is done mindfully, offering judgments is respected and accepted as part of the growth process. Applying the word "mindful" to one's judgments, criticisms, or other sorts of "ego behavior," implies that there are good intentions behind them. But members are also confronted with the goal of transforming them into a positive outcome. Nymeria stated, "we need to expose the vulnerabilities and accept that."

8.6 OM-ing to Restore Gender Balance

The second and more private OM-ing practice involves greater levels of intimacy between participants, including sexual acts. It begins when one person (the stroker) approaches another and asks “would you like to turn on?” If the respondent agrees, the OM session commences. OM-ing is a choice, but if one agrees to participate, they accept responsibility for following the structure and focus of the practice, that emphasizes the female orgasm:

it's a partner practice, where there's two partners, and they set up a nest, and the stroker's usually a man, but it can be a woman, [who] strokes with his left index finger the upper left hand quadrant of the woman's clitoris for fifteen minutes with no goal other than to just feel (Interview with Nymeria).

Because OM-ing involves what appear to be group sexual acts, outsiders often compare it with other unconventional social groups, such as swingers. It was obvious Nymeria had become accustomed to receiving questions about this part of the practice. However, she was quick to stress that “it’s not sex, but it’s a sexuality practice,” and that “orgasm and climax are two distinctly different things.” She explained the differences between ordinary sex and the OM practice: “In OM we don’t have a goal, we just feel.” In this respect OM-ing is similar to a Buddhist meditation form known as vipassana, in which the goal is to become aware of one's bodily sensations, but not to act on them, or *do anything* with them. The goal is to simply allow thoughts and feelings to surface freely, to observe what occurs, and then let them go without becoming attached to any outcomes. (<https://www.dhamma.org/en-US/about/vipassana>). Whereas the typical goal for sex is to have a climax, the end purpose of orgasmic meditation, if there is one, is to become aware of one's feelings, especially in relation to one's partner. What divides the two types of orgasm, according to Nymeria, are the differences in intention.

Not viewed as simply sexual, for this individual a distinction exists between two types of orgasm: the ordinary kind that is shared between lovers and is mainly sexual, and that may be

part of a monogamous relationship. And the other sort as experienced by OM-ers, the “sacred orgasm,” which is at the center of their spirituality practice. Of course, one might argue that “ordinary” sex, because it can include emotional elements, and experiences of euphoria, can also be spiritual. However, rather than pursuing this point, let us continue examining the meaning of these binaries, between sacred and mundane orgasms, and the splits between gender that surfaced in the group.

Howard suggested that “there's no walls, [and] no conventions,” and “it's about the journey and getting to know yourself.” Continuing, he stated that the OM practice exists “because many women have not experienced orgasm.” According to this individual, in addition to men learning about the female body, OM-ing also “teaches women who have trouble orgasming how to experience an orgasm.” I could not determine if this comment was part of this person's individual beliefs. He insisted that it is the philosophy of OM. It seemed to me that, if nothing else, the practice serves as a way of reifying the female centered perspective so prevalent in alternative spirituality circles. Clearly by emphasizing the goddess in their spirituality, OM reflects contemporary feminist concerns. For example, it confronts things such as body image and self-esteem among women, and “toxic masculinity,” that is partly defined by men who are unwilling to confront their feelings or emotional dimensions. OM group practices, insofar as they focus predominantly on the female orgasm, are clearly at odds with beliefs about male sexual entitlement, and the unrealistic expectations they place upon women in terms of body ideals, such as expecting a potential mate to have a thin waist and very large breasts, or to have their sexuality revolve around male goals of penetration and climax. OM-ing thus appears to be part of an overall agenda, within contemporary spirituality groups, to foster female empowerment.

Another way in which OM-ing differs from mere sex is that it exists in a “container.” It is

a fifteen minute practice that involves a bodily meditation, by both the stroker (person whose role it is to stroke the clitoris) and the recipient. The actual activities include physical contact, in which either men or women can be a “stroker,” however the “strokee” is strictly female. I inquired about this seeming bias, and how male members feel about this part of the practice. It seems I was thinking in terms of heterosexual binaries, because my informant's response cleared up what might be a common source of confusion. Nymeria stated that OM is not viewed as favoring one gender over another. She insisted that male members do not in any way feel left out or slighted, because the benefits of the practice are not simply sexual:

I've actually had guys tell me that after the OM session they didn't feel as hungry any more for sex. Like they didn't get a boner when they were stroking me, and they were just like “wow, I feel so much more satisfied,” that was the general feeling. I feel good, I don't need to like do anything else. It sort of lowers that drive, it brings it back into balance.

Nymeria explained that despite the focus on female orgasm, “no one feels left out.” She argued that for centuries male sexuality has been given priority over the feminine. This cultural imbalance is partly what is being addressed, and is why the OM practice is centered around the female orgasm she contended. Because it is viewed as compensation for a historical bias in favor of male sexual priorities, it is obviously motivated by feminist goals.

Since the “stroker” is usually male, I decided to interview a male member, but also to balance out the potentially gendered perspectives I received. With respect to the stroking activity, my male informant mentioned that to begin with, a latex glove is worn on the stroking hand. During the process “there's an electricity between the fore finger and clitoris that causes an orgasm, not only for the woman, but also her [usually male] stroker.” He added that the female directs the type of contact and stroking. I asked him why he decided to join the group? “Because I was bored” was his reply. As we conversed I realized that I was approaching this subject with a degree of skepticism. I could not help but think of this situation in ways that a typical young man

might. Because the group involves what to an outsider could be perceived as sex, it would likely attract members, particularly heterosexual males, who generally seek sexual experiences with women who are inviting. So I asked him straight out: 'Is the OM meditation a sex alternative?' Howard replied "it's not sex, not masturbation. I tried sex and that didn't do it for me, so I figured I would try something else, sex is too hard." He mentioned that "at first it felt creepy" because "it requires focus, you need to focus on the vagina for two 15 minute sessions."

Again, thinking in terms of a typical male perspective, I inquired of this informant 'Because it seems to be in favor of feminine needs, does it seem imbalanced at all to you? Is it emasculating? It seems that the women get all the attention (the pampering and orgasmic pleasure), is there no sexual frustration on the part of the men?' He answered "No," adding that some argue men get more out of it than women do. Curious I asked, 'what do men get out of it?' He responded that "they get an understanding of a vagina and women." Finally I asked, 'did it change the way you think about women?' He answered it has allowed him "to be a better listener, a better sharer," and to "have a connection."

8.7 Sex Therapy

When asked what the overall goal is, my informants replied "to heal our sexuality," which perhaps sums up the therapeutic aspects of group practice. It is a type of encounter therapy, in which members have the opportunity to work out their interpersonal issues, and are in part attempts to rebalance gender relations. However, I wondered whether individuals could be suffering from any social or psychological damage as a result. Group therapies are generally facilitated by trained professionals. These are often credentialed therapists who have experience guiding individuals through what can be troubling cathartic processes. They are also equipped to

cope with potentially volatile effects, produced as the result of unearthing painful emotional scars from their client's past. None of the OM members are trained therapists, however they often see themselves in the role of “healer.” Frequently termed “life coach” in this milieu, individuals offer their services as spiritual guides, a position that largely amounts to being a client's therapist and/or mentor.

But in terms of group structure, one of the ways that such concerns might be addressed is through “frame sharing.” This is an open dialogue between participants that occurs at the end of an OM session, as a kind of debriefing that comes afterwards. Here members are not asking questions, but simply sharing their experiences, for example “telling about how I felt while doing the stroking experience.”

Similar to my other Peaceburgh informants, OM members stated that the meditation is a physically grounding practice. An example provided by Nymeria, of OM's being a grounding practice, is the way in which the ego and the shadow become humanized and integrated together. The shadow is the dark side of the self, and will be addressed in more depth below. But grounding in this case involves taking the ego, that part of oneself that includes one's judgments, hang-ups, resentments, etc., and cleansing them through a spiritual-sexual healing. The ego moreover represents the abstract and logical mind, that is largely out of touch with the body. OM-ing therefore grounds it within body, via sex, and in OM's case orgasm, which is perceived by members as both healthy and therapeutic. However for OM-ers, sex and orgasm are a manifestation of the goddess, and are therefore forms of divine power. Beyond having merely physical healing aspects, they possess magical qualities to transform illness and dis-ease into wellness and tranquility. Of course, the OM practice is not the only one my informants are involved with. They are also preoccupied with such pursuits as following raw food diets which

hold that plant based energy, because it is unadulterated, is more nourishing than cooked food. And also because one is getting nutrients directly from the sun, another deity.

8.8 The OM Group Intentional Living Experiment

But what should have been an ideal situation for the OM-ers, living together in a house dedicated to their practice, ended in “disaster.” When I asked what happened, my OM-er informant stated that it was “the people, the arguments, the weirdness, it just fell apart, it broke down.” Because I was curious about how small groups develop over time, and possibly expand into larger and more permanent communities, I pushed her to provide a more detailed explanation of what had occurred. It became apparent that she wanted to change the subject, but when I pressed her she said “you want me to go into the drama here?” Donning a cynical expression, she realized that I required all the gritty details. Nymeria agreed to talk about the group’s unfavorable experiences, so long as we set aside enough time afterwards to discuss her current interests.

She started off with “Right we, well that was just a total disaster!” She continued adding that “it wasn't flowing” and that throughout the whole experiment she was unhappy, “and I think that all of [the others] were too, that's why everybody was so unhappy.” I asked for her thoughts, about what she believed specifically caused the unhappiness. She stated that “the energy just wasn't right,” and that “ego got in the way” (Interview with Nymeria). This was a common refrain among my informants. A convenient way of framing group problems, most notably breakdowns in communication, is to suggest that individual egos, warped by selfishness, often cause harmonic disruptions. She further reflected that “ideas and theories about what worked were tested, and they didn't work.” When I asked for clarification about what sorts of theories

she was referring to, she responded they were testing theories “about community.”

I then inquired about what kinds of relationships emerged within the group space. She said that there was one couple, a boyfriend and girlfriend, who were the nominal leaders, and that she herself sometimes “messed around” with another couple who were also dating. These relations took shape around, but were secondary to the actual OM-ing practice. Attempting to get a clear sense of exactly what occurred, I asked her to describe literally what happened in the house. For example, I confirmed that there were eight men and women cohabiting together. These included core members of the OM group, who had been sharing the orgasmic meditation practice previously within other spaces (e.g. the group had reserved Sunday evenings at the Irma Friedman Center, which is a Bloomfield art gallery that rents out its space for various types of events). But relationships were occurring simultaneously within the group community.

8.9 Commodification of Sexuality

Another Peaceburgh member Xaena, not a participant of the OM group, commented on its being framed as a type of spirituality:

It's polygamous, with multiple partners, and at times strangers, and there's different parts of [a spiritual practice]. They obviously are touching on sexuality and orgasm, and there's sacred things about that, and that can be done spiritually, and can connect you. But the whole way the practice is set up, from what I have been taught, and how I view it, I don't consider that a spiritual practice at all (Interview with Xaena).

But making a distinction between ordinary and sacred sexuality, Nymeria affirmed her beliefs about what she was doing:

I think there's power in using sex to raise consciousness, that is one of the most forgotten and most powerful practices in this world. But you can't monopolize it, and I think that they're trying to monopolize it a little bit.

Putting orgasms into a “container” as she described the practice, creates for it a special

space apart from the ordinary sexual varieties. But doing this had unintended consequences. The example surfaced of individuals trying to gain control over the sex, or manipulating others for self-gratification, which Nymeria called “negative” and “cheap.” A type of kundalini yoga practice, known as Tantric sexuality, is geared towards harnessing sexual energy, and using it for spiritual purposes. Part of this practice involves delaying and controlling orgasms in order to conserve and store up the body's energies, which can then be used for healing purposes, acquiring insight into one's karmic condition, or to promote overall well-being (Richardson, 2003, p. 179). This Ayurvedic technique is partly what informs the OM group's practices, and is obviously connected with the group's name “orgasmic meditation.” Yet the notion of controlling sexuality, by channeling its energy into one's spiritual practice through using magical rituals for example, is at the same time something that seems inimical to the OM group's ethos of sex and spirituality being free and open.

Placing orgasm into a container, and using it for purposes beyond its pure enjoyment, imposes upon the otherwise wild chaotic force of nature, a form of rational control. This would seem to bring the group right back to the very thing they wish to escape from, namely the patriarchal ego, and trying to control women through having power over their sexuality. But does practicing orgasm in a way centered around feminine interests and spiritual perspectives alter the balance of power? In other words, by appropriating sex and orgasm, moving it away from its traditional cultural locations, and male-oriented privilege, does OM represent the liberation of sexuality? My informant argued that relocating the center of sexual power is one of the group's goals. Restoring a balance between the sexes holds benefits for both:

they [men] actually they get so much from it, and plus I mean where does this idea come from that you need any more than that? I mean there's so much male entitlement, like what's in it for the man? You're touching a vagina, what else do you need? I mean god.

8.10 Orgasm and How I Can Profit From It

Attempts to contain sexuality, in the way that the organization One Taste seems to be doing via OM, makes it into a commodity to be owned by individuals. I will not go into great detail here, but according to my OM informants, money enters into the equation in the form of classes initiates must take, to receive accreditation as group facilitators. As mentioned above One Taste is an international organization, and is a for-profit industry. To rise in the ranks, and achieve higher levels of status and opportunities within the corporation, requires money. There are various trainings, seminars, and retreats that can run into the tens of thousands for committed members. Given this highly commodified structure the container, according to Nymeria, had become constrictive:

I just think that people forget [that] when you make something into a thing, pretty soon you think “it's my thing,” and then you forget that “no it's a thing that's working through you.”

Nymeria believes that the involvement of money in the practice perhaps altered members' perspective, wherein they lost sight of the spirituality. Her concerns reflect the aversion that some New Agers display towards mixing money with spirituality. The purity of a religious ideal or ritual practice becomes somehow compromised, and darkened through being associated with notions of ownership. While reflecting on why the living experiment failed, she suggested that members became “distracted,” and that their perspective, or way of approaching the group, became warped due to economic pressures. A person's ego, she explained, becomes attached to ideas about money or ownership, which produces an imbalance such as greed. Then “it becomes about ego,” and “how can I commodify this?” as opposed to community and consciousness raising. She added that money:

makes people arrogant, [and] it makes people impatient. And then it becomes about climax, the traditional idea about orgasm, rather than the rich and subtle access to the truth.

For Nymeria, attempting to own or profit from sex and/or orgasm, is an unproductive way of working with these energies. According to her having an economic agenda is the wrong way to approach it, “because then you’re not coming from a meaningful place, you’re not coming from purpose, you’re not coming from love, and if you’re not coming from love, there is literally no point.” Having the proper intentions for the practice are critical for its success in her view. The example she gave to demonstrate this point involved the group’s decision to have a permanent place to hold their community practice. The initial intention for these particular OM-ers involved being in a house together, and living as a sort of spiritual family. One of the members, she reported, found a space for the group, and according to her he did this quickly, and without good intentions:

I felt like we kind of rushed into it. A– looked for and got this place, and none of us had seen it until we moved in. Then we went there and it's like this dank, damp, bad place [...] the energy of it was bad (Interview with Nymeria).

Nymeria felt that acquiring the group's house was done thoughtlessly, and without care. Even worse, it was later revealed that the place in question was likely chosen for the purposes of gratifying another member’s personal needs for sex. Right from the beginning the container was ill-conceived, Nymeria states, because it was “not coming from purpose or love,” but from one member’s desire to have a “sex cult” as she explained it:

Somebody wanted to have like a kind of a sex cult, and they didn't admit it. But you can't have that, because that's not this community, this sacred thing that's iridescent, because then you're exploiting people and it's disempowering, and if you want to have a community of empowerment you can't have that, because that's fake, that's a lie.

What emerged after a few group arguments was that the individual who rushed into getting the rental house primarily wished to satisfy his own sexual desires. Moreover, the place he found was also “cheap,” which only added to why the house had “bad energy” according to

Nymeria, because it was based on a cost-cutting decision. This situation is perhaps analogous to a person's renting a cheap motel room for the purposes of paying a prostitute for sex. In the view of this informant, what should have been a group decision, based upon the collective's intentions to have a space for a spiritual practice, was instead motivated by an individual's monetary and sexual greed. So there were conflicting intentions from the beginning, i.e. having sex cult versus a sacred meditation space, that undermined the group experiment, finally leading to its demise.

8.11 Embracing the Shadow

This ruinous experience, which may have been responsible for wrecking the group, had the positive effect of shining a light on the "shadows," as my informant phrased it. It is interesting how this device is used to interpret the OM group's failed living experiment. The unscrupulous member's sex cult agenda, which she described as "lame," "creepy," and "dark," was later accepted by herself and others as a learning experience. The incident exposed some hidden weaknesses in the group, by revealing its shadow side. The failed house experiment therefore served as an opportunity for the group to work on their otherwise masked issues. In other words, the negative event facilitated positive spiritual growth. Nymeria suggested that:

we can talk about love in a way that's more than just an idea now, because we know the shadows, being able to move through them, and [to] fall in love with your shadow. I really didn't know what that meant before, but now I actually feel that I do. Cause I've worked through so much stuff.

This kind of lesson is embodied within another of the group's games, the "fear inventory." Participating requires revealing one's fears and "dark things" while sitting in the hot seat. This involves simply listing resentments and fears in front of the group, and asking a higher power for help. It is similar to what happens in an Alcoholic Anonymous group meeting, admitting one's vulnerabilities in a safe space, and asking for help. But also for the OM group it

entails opening oneself up to receive healing by embracing one's fears, and "things that you see as taboo." She added that in western culture vaginas are also considered extremely taboo. So, doing "shadow work" as it is known in the community, includes confronting and exploring what is taboo, and making meaning out of it, which is at the heart of orgasmic meditation. Nymeria reflected "it's amazing that the female genital is being cared for," as part of a religious practice. Doing shadow work with vaginas involves in part a re-evaluation, and unmaking of what has been made dark and taboo by a patriarchal system she believes.

Thus, embracing one's shadow represents on the one hand rectifying an injustice, and deconstructing taboos that are dysfunctional or hurtful. But it also involves acknowledging one's dark side. Amanda stated that in truth "we're all assholes," and that "what we need is a collectivity of assholes." OM groupers encourage honesty with oneself and others, and learning to recognize and admit to one's weaknesses. This philosophy is similarly exhibited in the fear inventory exercise.

8.12 Shadows and Butterflies

Acknowledging the shadow side of "light workers" is perhaps a sort of backlash in response to New Age optimism, and its seemingly unbalanced fixation on the positives. Perhaps in response to the terrors of modernity, from its earliest days New Age messages emphasized peace, acceptance, and love. This spiritual ethos made an impact on New Left hippie movements of the 1960s and 70s. These individuals chose, despite the violent and dehumanizing forces confronting them, including nuclear weapons and the war in Vietnam for example, to remain focused on the light. This includes pacifism, and what are believed to be heightened states of consciousness, that (as mentioned above in chapter six) are both associated with advanced forms

of intelligence. Perhaps modeling themselves after Buddhist monks, or other kinds of religious personalities such as saints and martyrs who generally endorse practicing enlightened forms of pacifism, New Agers then and now choose to follow the higher and sunnier pathways in life. I frequently hear Peaceburghers state that they choose to focus on the positives. By contrast shadow work involves confronting one's darker sides, by accepting and embracing them. After decades of unwavering dedication to love and light, a change was demanded. All the talk of “butterflies and rainbows” has for some become such a ubiquitous and candy-coated trope, they have responded by questioning its truth and sense.

The dichotomy of the polite body versus the sensuous body could be compared with light versus dark spirituality. In this context light means an overly optimistic perspective, that seeks to bathe everything in a syrupy type of love. It is analogous to a kind of fake politeness, or face work in which the impression that is managed is carefully groomed and preened. To show oneself strictly from a positive angle is to publicly project a skewed image of oneself. The dark side represents the natural or raw part of something. It is a side that involves the gritty realities of childbirth for example, and other bodily functions that are typically hidden away. Many informants have remarked about how those who are supposed to be all loving and compassionate are not. But in reality they can be angry, selfish, and even violent. According to Paul Feyerabend, to seek harmony to the exclusion of all else, which includes other kinds of universal ideals such as absolute notions of “heaven” or “the good,” can be so one-sided they become forms of tyranny (1994, p. 7).

At a ceremonial gathering the notion surfaced among some members that, by following ascetic practices, such as rigorous forms of yoga, meditation, or sweat lodges, individuals could become somewhat calloused. By putting themselves through various degrees of suffering and

pain, the practitioner becomes accustomed to imposing harsh conditions on himself. But more than that, since they are being so rough with themselves, they may in turn be unforgiving in their interactions with others, possibly even ruthless. A guru who holds no quarter for themselves may hold their students to the same high standards, subjecting them to the same rigors.

8.13 Emotional Healing

Rituals are often performed for the purposes of healing (to alleviate sickness), but also to heal relationships in the spiritual community. In response to the extremism and ruthlessness observed among some New Age type healers and shaman, members of Peaceburgh see the need for making gentleness a part of their spirituality. Xaena suggests that “we need to be taking care of ourselves,” as opposed to hurting one another or via passive aggressive condescension.

But healing rituals can involve taking more time for interactions with people, and being sensitive to another's current emotional position. For Peaceburgh informant Nettle, healing means purging anger and “being nicer to everyone,” which she equates with self-improvement. As part of a general process of sacralizing one’s life world, her involvement with the medicine group’s rituals has had the effect of opening up for the person avenues of socializing that would otherwise have remained closed. For example, Nettle mentioned that when interacting with people in her life, she would just address them as part of a task or work that she had to do, and that the goal was to simply get it over with as quickly as possible. She stated that during most of her adult life she had a “no nonsense” approach for dealing with other people: “I’m just gonna do this thing, I’ll be short with this person, so I’m trying to not necessarily be spending more time with each person.” However, as a result of her new found spiritual life path, Nettle said she makes it a point to acknowledge “everyone’s humanness,” that I interpret as a response to time-

space compression. In other words, approaching life from a spiritually informed perspective, i.e. the holistic set of values about the world and everything in it including people espoused by Peaceburgh members, has altered the way my informants negotiate themselves with others in their world. Nettle explained that this involves slowing down our contact with people in everyday life, and deepening the bonds that we have with others, even if it is just a waitress we will never see again. When I do this “each person is more precious,” wherein precious can be likened to sacred. An analogous sentiment is contained in the Hindu phrase “Namaste,” and represents that moment of recognition, of seeing in another a divine light that connects all living things together as sentient beings. This as opposed to the more conventional way of interacting which governs our mainstream, or muggle-world existence: the “thank you have a nice day society” described by Marco.

Another example of an everyday type of healing ritual my subjects do is the smudging of one's house. This involves the ritualistic burning of herbs, such as sage, in places where we meditate, prepare food, or go to the bathroom. All of these are considered sacred spaces, and smudging them has a few purposes: to cleanse and purify them, so that when one inhabits these spaces, they are not psychically dirty. Also, it serves to wash them of bad energies, whether these are conceived of as malevolent spirits, or concentrations of negative energy that may have accumulated over time as dirt and dust do. Therefore, cleansing one's living spaces allows the things that are done there to be done in a space that is clean.

8.14a New Theories of Healing

The bricolagic nature of new spiritualities inevitably spills over into its associated notions of healing. These are informed by a wide variety of religious and philosophical perspectives,

everything from Hindu-Ayurvedic to shamanistic-entheogenic. Both eastern and western metaphysics, in addition to combinations of Judeo-Christian and modern scientific perspectives, are woven together to create modern New Age and neopagan healing modalities. Yet, because each individual crafts their own spiritual system, approaches to healing are as diverse and pluralistic as are the beliefs of adherents. Individuals draw their healing practices from a common pool of basic forms which includes types of meditation, prayer, yoga, massage, reiki, using crystals, doing sweat lodges, and using entheogens. These forms can be practiced individually or in group settings. However, healing is largely a personal concern that tends to manifest itself as idiosyncratic collections of various types of ritual techniques and processes.

For example, courses in healing often focus participants on such things as “being able to notice their own suffering,” or “how to be more compassionate when confronting difficulties” (Neff et al, 2014; Albertson, Ellen; Neff, Kristin, Dill-Shackleford, 2014). For this study, the subjects are exclusively women. Researchers in the field moreover suggest that “the idea of self-compassion is more attractive to females than males,” which seems to support the higher concentrations of women I have observed among my informants, and within the holistic milieu (Neff and Germer, 2013).

What defines these phenomena as spiritual, and not secular or scientific, however, is due to their focus on compassion, meditation, and mindfulness. Courses and workshops using such terminology emphasize interventions based on them. For example, the OM group’s name itself reflects this. The techniques they offer for addressing stress and suffering are framed as a type of bodily meditation. While versions of these techniques are beginning to make their way into secular and mainstream medical practices, for example as forms of art, music, or animal therapies, historically they are largely derived from Hindu and Buddhist religious perspectives.

8.14b Entheogenic Healing

While discussing the importance of the medicines used in the ceremonies, the idea of neurogenesis surfaced. Owsley, who is involved primarily with shamanistic spirituality, argued that doing Ayahuasca can heal one genetically. He believes that the entheogenic medicine works on a molecular genetic level, reorganizing participants DNA into a more harmonious configuration. In other words, aside from the social benefits and therapeutic effects that ritual structures seem to be providing participants, entheogens such as Ayahuasca, Peyote, and San Pedro cactus that are used in some of the ceremonies themselves contain healing properties. Intertwined with this explanation of healing are notions of sacred geometry, e.g. the chemical configurations of the psychotropic agents, and the harmoniously realigned DNA, both of which may be attempts by New Paradigmers to draw into their metaphysical schemes scientific knowledge (See Figures 12 - 14 in Appendix D). Through engaging with a rationalistic worldview, and incorporating scientific ideas into their belief structures, provides participants with rational justifications for what they are doing.

Owsley further defined neurogenesis by stating that “if we practice opening neural pathways and creating new neurons for neural pathways,” we gain new possibilities for acting. Owsley's comments resonate with what another informant said earlier, that spirituality practices are allowing us to reframe our interactions with others, and opens up new ways of healing ourselves and our relationships. Moreover, the chemical structures of the entheogens, that have the effect of unlocking the mind’s hidden potentials, relates back to the notion of a key, that will open the doors of perception for example, allowing an expansion of consciousness to occur in the user.

The ceremonies my informants have created for themselves are cultural complexes

involving many rituals, the primary function of which seems to be, according to group members, to produce healing and renewal. This healing can be psychological, insofar as one's ego is being diminished and or cleansed via the experiential effects of the ritual. But it can also be genetically derived. For example, by consuming the entheogenic medicines individuals are realigning their DNA, which is beneficial for both the participants, but it is also ecologically healing for the earth.

The ritual symbolism of neurogenesis involves “a broad overall cosmic scheme of practice centering on growth, fertility, decay and maternal relations” for which “the whole point is to provide an image of festivity, well-being, and renewal” (Turner, 1982, p. 77). All of these qualities are present among new spiritualities, in their various forms of ritual beliefs and practices. They are embodied by the paganistic Goddess, and notions of Gaia or mother earth, emblematic of New Age type shamanistic groups.

8.15 Summary of Healing

8.15a Enlightened Sex

For my informants healing involves love, sex, and magic. Sex is magical and mystical, and reflects the spirituality of the goddess, gods, and nature. Orgasmic Meditation is conceived as sex for the enlightened person, or how gods or ETs would be having sex. It is a more advanced expression of sexuality they argue. The meditation is also a form of therapy, and is believed to heal among other things the splits between sex and spirituality. Healing can be defined as a unification of binaries. Within the context of the OM group practice healing is viewed as a kind of sexual realignment. In other words, it is a type of therapy designed to balance out traditional male-entitled forms of sexuality with the rising feminine goddess

sexuality. Therefore, spiritualizing sex equates to healing it, which in the OM-ing example is achieved by restoring a balance between the sexes. Spiritual healing therefore includes securing justice for historically underprivileged groups, and is a coming to terms with the sexual and psychic damage wrought by a patriarchal religious and cultural bias. Thus, another key difference that exists between traditional religions and new spirituality is the place of gender.

Overall healing equates to the alleviation of pain and/or self-loathing, in the case of OM through practicing sacred sexuality. Members spoke of experiencing a “rebirth,” and of having other sorts of profound experiences, as a result. Whether these are sexually produced, or induced via yoga or other types of meditation, being renewed seems to be a general therapeutic goal, not only for OM-ers, but for all of my informants.

8.15b Renewal and Reproducibility

According to Amanda the OM house experiment, even though it ended rather uncomfortably, served as a learning experience. It not only flushed out the shadow elements from within the group’s midst, but also allowed for a kind of renewal.

so what happened in Pittsburgh, I think that in the end it was the shadow that kind of wiped it out, so that it could be cleaned out so that something better could take it's place.

In a classic Hindu, Shiva the Destroyer kind of way, the existing paradigm was wiped away, however, with the intention of creating something new. Just as life becomes fertilized by death, the spiritual community is going to reincarnate itself in a higher form, Nymeria contends. This notion accords well with member's ideas about rebirth, and the Hindu theory of the soul increasing, or elevating itself. The present community life is destroyed to make way for the next phase:

So that's why I think we're gonna have the community come back, but not that community, so it's

like that community's not coming back, a new community is gonna be born.

She added finally that these life processes, although unseemly (for example the member's impure drives that she described as “sleazy” and “cheap”), are in fact also a part of the goddess. Everything is spiritual, including greed, avarice, and the desire for material wealth.

8.15c The Secret Law of Attraction: On Manifesting Wealth

Manifesting wealth is the notion that being in touch with divine forces is materially beneficial. That is, when one's actions are in harmonious accord with the processes of nature, they are rewarded. In other words nature, or the goddess, or whatever divine power one believes in wants each of us succeed. This is especially so when one does what they are meant to do. For example, being good is one way of earning a god's support. Moral standards within any religious tradition are usually spelled out quite clearly in holy texts. Therefore, knowing what one should do is, at least theoretically, often a simple matter of following religious commandments. Of course, doing evil can also be rewarding, as there are gods, or devils, on both sides of a moral code. Making alliances with deities via prayers, rituals, or meritorious deeds, is generally viewed as profitable. “God helps those who help themselves” is a popular Christian mantra that emphasizes the importance of self-initiative and agency.

However, the question of knowing what one is *meant* to do is not as obvious. Because Hindu religions are pantheistic, their gods contain complex combinations of qualities and virtues. Good and evil are, as a result, somewhat more complicated concepts. Although gods and goddesses sometimes possess gender assignments, within eastern religions they are more impersonal kinds of forces. The term *dharma* is often substituted for ‘good’, which equates to living, or practicing faithfully ones’ *karma*. Karma is one’s level of moral and spiritual

development. The notion includes reincarnation, a process by which each individual moves through many lifetimes, accumulating life lessons and experiences. Even though karma can operate cyclically, as individuals experience ups and downs in terms of spiritual status, the overall course of development is upwards. In other words, one's soul slowly evolves over time, as it passes through multiple bodies, to eventually reach a stage of enlightened awareness. At that point, the individual becomes a fully realized "god in themselves." At the beginning of their existence one is farther from this goal, but as they make their way along a karmic path, they draw ever closer to achieving this integrated state with their own potential divinity.

My informants interpret their lives from a point of view that is similar to, and for many directly derived from a Hindu and/or Buddhist perspective. They believe they are working towards a divine goal, and that by playing their dharmic role, i.e. by being 'karmically good', they are doing the will of nature, which in eastern religions is identified with divine forces. But again understanding one's karma, and by extension one's dharma, is not so straightforward. A closer look at what my informant's attitudes and thoughts are on this subject may reveal more clearly how their spirituality is connected with economics. However, before delving into this data, let us review some theoretical perspectives which examine how religions negotiate their relationships with material interests.

8.16 Commodification and the Holistic Milieu

A good deal of modern religions are now governed by the logic of market economics. Commodification occurs when something such as a resource or cultural artifact is taken out of its natural context, and entered into a marketplace to be bought and sold. Attaching monetary value to a thing can affect it in various ways. For example, putting a price on a commodity, such as oil,

creates a demand for it. The resource is then harvested for the purposes of selling it. The consequences can be manifold, and include the development of new technologies that rely on the resource. But there may also be unintended effects, such as environmental impacts. Religions have been subject to economic forces, probably since the dawn of civilization. Religious values have been shaped by economic interests, and vice versa. Sociologists such as Max Weber have revealed how the “Protestant Ethic” played an integral part in the rise of modern capitalism. Some theorists argue that more recently new spiritualities have experienced a silent takeover by contemporary capitalist ideologies (Dawson 2011; Hunt, 2003; Roof, 1999; Sutcliffe, 2000; York, 2001). Spiritual discourses are increasingly being informed by neoliberal economic policies, whose defining features include atomization, self-interest, corporatism, utilitarianism, consumerism, quietism, political myopia, and thought control/accommodationism (Dawson, 2011, p. 131). Today market forces are actively shaping individual spirituality.

An obvious example of such commodification can be found in the US market for religious publishing, that amounts to 6.8 billion in sales annually (Einstein, 2008). Material products such as books, clothing, incense, and crystals are all for sale, and are all part of a broader process in which religion is being channeled into, and possibly subverted by economic forces. However, prior to addressing informant data, let us begin by examining the connections that exist between conventional religion and economics.

8.16a The Religious Economy

Rationalist-materialist perspectives often rest upon basic assumptions regarding the human condition. For example, the religious economy model argues that people ask fundamental questions about existence, such as “where do we come from?” and “why should I be good?”

Also, humans are assumed to be rational actors: we seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs. For the purposes of this discussion, it is not necessary to debate the validity of these sorts of essentialist claims. But according to this theory, religion exists because human existence poses more questions than everyday experience can answer. And because fundamental questions about meaning and mortality cannot be resolved through reference to finite human experience, supernatural explanations are mobilized to meet the demand generated by this lack. Religion is therefore analogous to a commercial transaction, that can be understood as a mode of exchange between humankind and supernatural agencies, such as the Abrahamic God. The nature of the transaction consists of a practical symbolic framework, a simple cost-benefit exchange:

- humans incur a range of costs: time, effort, and goods which are all forms of sacrifice
- in exchange for a given set of rewards: cosmic explanations, forgiveness of sins, and promises of everlasting life.

Religious processes are thus governed by basic profit seeking motives according to this theory. Potential members seek maximal return for minimal outlay, and individuals are drawn to those forms of religion judged to be the most economically efficient (Dawson, p. 142). Driven by the need to survive and flourish, individual religions must maximize their appeal to potential members by convincing them that they have the best products, i.e. the most cost effective, available on the market. Simply phrased, there exists a dynamic interplay between individual demand for, and collective supply of, religious benefits.

8.16b Modern Conditions of Commodification

Modern consumeristic society has given rise to an all-pervasive orientation to the world that is not limited to economic products, but characterizes the entire relation of an individual to

their culture. In the feudal period, monotheistic religions similarly tended to be homogenous and culturally all encompassing. However, due to the fragmentation of cosmic worldviews, traditional religions have fractured into assortments of ultimate meanings, with little or no coherence between them. As a result, individuals are increasingly becoming dis-embedded from collective associations and left to their own devices in terms of choosing goods, services, friends, marriage partners, neighbors, and hobbies in an autonomous fashion. The contemporary situation, for both religion and spirituality, is one of free-floating individuals who enjoy a historically unrivaled subjective capacity for free choice from among many options.

Also, due to the effects of socio-cultural pluralism, there exists a mid-range proliferation of religious groups and movements. This increases the number of options available to consumers, and results in a heightening of inter-organizational competition for resources and members. Religious groups have thus been transformed from monopolies to competitive marketing agencies: “The manufacture, the packaging, and the sale of models of ultimate significance are therefore determined by consumer preference, and the manufacturer must remain sensitive to the needs and requirement of autonomous individuals” (Luckman, 1967, p. 104). Under these conditions religious worldviews can no longer be imposed, but must be marketed to consumers who now have control over their contents. These are subject to the principle of changeability, which erodes the fixity of established traditions, and ties modern religious repertoires to the shifting patterns of contemporary fashion.

Religious choice and information overload means that in order to survive, religions must present themselves as a valuable commodity, an activity that is worthwhile in an era of overcrowded schedules. As a result religion needs to be packaged and promoted, it needs to be new and relevant, and it needs to be a brand worthy of consumer attention (Einstein, 2008). But

due to homogenizing forces, market competition between brands results in a growing similarity between religious repertoires.

8.16c The Religion of Marketing and Spiritual Consumerism

In a world of consumers that is both secularized and privatized, religions must de-emphasize their supernatural elements, and emphasize their immanent moral, therapeutic and material benefits. However, because they are standardizing their repertoires according to market demands, religious organizations must also find ways to differentiate themselves from other organizations offering similarly optimized products. Religions competing for potential clients must highlight their unique qualities. But at the same time they cannot go too far, because they risk placing themselves outside of the optimal range of institutional return. The religious differences between themselves and others must therefore be constrained. And so, in trying to distinguish themselves from their competitors, the marketing of religious uniqueness can result in the creative repackaging of the same old standardized products.

Putting the situation into contemporary economic terms, a religious system must now be sold to a clientele that is no longer constrained to buy (Berger, 1967, p. 137). Religious institutions have effectively become marketing agencies and religious traditions have become consumer commodities. Shopping around at the spiritual marketplace, a religious consumer moves freely among a heterogeneous assortment of possibilities, picking and choosing according to subjective tastes and idiosyncratic concerns. Within a pick-and-mix culture, individuals construct syncretistic, eclectic, ad hoc meaning systems whose thematic heterogeneity consists of a loose and rather unstable hierarchy of opinions, legitimating the affectively determined priorities of private life. The task “of the *bricoleur* is to cobble together a religious world from

available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful (Roof, 1999, p. 75).

What amounts to a lifelong quest for the “inner person,” modern religiosity becomes oriented around goals of self-expression and self-realization.

Reproducibility is essentially a religion’s ability to perpetuate itself, its traditions, beliefs and practices, through time. Religious organizations are thus having to adopt an increasingly strategic posture for ensuring their continued survival in competitive modern markets. Moreover, the marketing of commodities to a mass audience is exceedingly complex and expensive, and so religions must amass great wealth and influence.

One result of modern religious commodification is that a logic of bureaucracy comes to dominate the administration and day-to-day operations of religious organizations, as they gear themselves to defining, pursuing, and attaining the objectives (members, funds, influence) necessary for survival. External forms of bureaucratic public relations with consumer clientele involve lobbying with the government, fund raising (with both government and private agencies), and multifaceted types of investments with the secular economy.

However, at the same time modern religious identities are flexible. The religiosity of contemporary seekers is a fluid, multilayered, and less contained form. Their highly sporadic and volatile character tends to not encourage lasting loyalty to social organizations, privileging the individual’s own inner world (Roof, 1999, p. 39). This is even more so with respect to new spiritualities whose structures are far more malleable than traditional ones.

8.17a Commodification: The Everyday Branding of Spirituality

One way that modern spirituality manifests itself as an enduring chain of

interconnectedness is through commodification (Dawson, 2011, p. 131), in which individuals seek to integrate their private spiritual lives with pragmatic goals of having to earn a living. Many New Agers are eager to channel their religious interests and impulses into economically productive outlets. For example, yoga enthusiasts often move on to become paid instructors, and massage therapists expand their services to include forms of energy work, such as Reiki and Shiatsu techniques, to widen their appeal within the spiritual marketplace. These examples involve situations in which spiritual beliefs are being incorporated into one's business oriented practices.

In the *Protestant Ethic* Weber (1958) interpreted modern economic ideals such as frugality, thrift, and concern with material acquisition, in terms of traditional religious values. In his work Weber causally connected the new forms of Christianity that appeared during the Reformation in Europe with the eventual birth of capitalism, thus establishing the “connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism” (Weber, 1958, p. 27). Can we use this analysis to address how modern spirituality has been shaped by its emergence within a post-industrial society? In other words, what is a New Age analogue to Weber's beliefs about the connections that exist between religion and economics? If the general New Age ethos entails a preoccupation with the self, and a rejection of mainstream values that includes capitalist materialism, what does this form of religiosity lend itself to economically? In other words, what is its “elective affinity”? Andrew Dawson (2011) argues that religion is being progressively rationalized, and its supernaturalist character is being increasingly replaced by one that emphasizes the immanent here and now needs of the modern consumer (Dawson, p. 67). Among the New Age milieu this manifests as a possibility for the commodification of spirituality, or the notion that spirituality can be made attractive and can sell.

Stephen Hunt (2005) suggests that the diffuse and fragmented nature of contemporary society creates, among other things, “a culture of choice” in which individuals are free to pursue lifestyle preferences that are not bounded by class, kinship structures, or the wider community. Rather than traditional structures, such as religion and community, providing the map of one's spiritual life, in the postmodern world individual choice and reflexivity have become the reference frames in which to enact one's identity and self-enhancement (Hunt, p. 5). As mentioned above, with the modern decline of community religion is largely reduced to the private sphere, and is pursued as a matter of personal choice. One is free to participate or not, as religion becomes subject to processes of voluntarism. To survive among socially atomized individuals, traditional forms of religiosity must give way to trends that are congruent with contemporary culture, e.g. consumerism (Hunt, p. 154). One of the ways that this occurs is through the unique assemblage of the New Age self, the individual subjective construction of spirituality that involves a 'pick and mix' religiosity within what may be called a spiritual marketplace, that contains a variety of religious beliefs and practices the modern individual is free to choose from.

Just as modern consumer identity formation involves a process of choosing brands that allow one to express their 'individuality', a modern religious identity can be thought of as a spiritual form of branding. With corporate branding the individual aligns themselves with certain products, demonstrating brand loyalty (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012, p. 1055). The assemblage of a unique set of products is a way for the modern self to express its material identity, as a stylish display of one's consumer choices. A religious identity can be conceived of as a spiritual counterpart to the material self, which is expressed as a combination of religious brands.

However, the modern individual may come to identify themselves not only in terms of

economics, but also socially, emotionally, and psychologically with the products that they consume. For example, a person who uses Apple computers may conceive of themselves as a 'Mac user', as opposed to a Windows or 'PC user'. This branding portion of one's identity is involved with many aspects of a modern existence, from social interactions via email or Facebook, to creating artwork or documents, getting news, watching films, which together makes up a significant part of who they are, and what they do as a person. Someone who drives a Ford truck may establish a lifelong connection with this brand, which in time becomes a part of his or her consumer identity. Thus, the individual who finds resonance with Eastern philosophies may come to identify themselves intimately with them.

The modern self is made up of many such alliances, their consumer identities being composed of a series of products which spans all aspects of their material lives, from clothing choices to candy bar preferences. The material self is then expressed as the unique blend of these products. The spiritual self is similarly expressed as the particular beliefs and practices, chosen from among a wide array of available options from world religions.

8.17b Spiritual Aesthetics

Disparate practices such as doing yoga, using Tarot cards, and participating in sweat lodge ceremonies, must somehow be joined together and integrated into the individual practitioner. This collection of spiritual choices, insofar as they reside together within the individual, must be unified into a coherent whole, as much as individuals conceive of themselves as distinct entities. But this synthetic process, that involves an influx of new beliefs and behaviors, also shapes the individual's sense of self which must accommodate the incoming spiritual artifacts. These disparate beliefs and practices must, in other words, find a meaningful

home in the person. And so 'the person' becomes the home, or accommodating environment, suitable for housing this religious multiplicity. Consequently, spiritual subjectivities are not only manifold, in the sense that each spiritual agent is a unique combination of brands. But also within each individual there exists an identity that is a multifaceted structure containing many religious elements, that reflect the many choices of beliefs, values, and practices of the person.

Therefore, creating a spiritual identity, it could be argued, is a phenomenon primarily concerned with maintaining an aesthetic balance. Various beliefs and behaviors have to coexist within an individual coherently, and disparate elements must be conjoined into something that is livable on the everyday level. Compromises are sought, and changes are made to incorporate new religious elements. This process of self-maintenance can be likened to a form of 'spiritual gardening'. New beliefs and practices are planted into the soil of the self, where they are given attention and nurturance. These spiritual seeds are cultivated, wherein growth occurs as the practices develop, and in time mature into something which bears fruit for the individual, whether it be some sort of healing, or other satisfaction such as mastery of a yoga technique. And continuing with this metaphor, weeds must be pulled, i.e. as certain beliefs or practices act to prevent the growth of something new that assumes prominence or increased value, they are uprooted. Beliefs are discarded as they become obsolete, practices are outgrown, making way for perhaps more challenging ones. All the while the garden as a whole must be tended to, for its overall appearance and well-being. In this way, the developing self is groomed and shaped into an (individually held) ideal image of beauty or harmony, similar to the way a bonsai tree is nurtured. The spiritual self is then, if nothing else, an aesthetic ideal that is in a constant state of flux, and in constant need of care.

Insofar as spiritual commodification involves notions of aesthetics, I might have included

this analysis in the section on art-making and ritual in chapter five. However, it is interesting that a discussion of consumerism has led us back to this metaphor of gardening. It may not be a coincidence that, what are perhaps the most distinctive features of new spirituality, plurality and syncretism, naturally emerges while considering economic applications. Thus the multiplicity, agency, autonomy, and choice are features of new spirituality because they are features of modern capitalism. Being an American in the 21st century means being, if nothing else, a consumer. Economic structures have left impressions deep within the modern individual, so much so that their spirituality, something which may at first glance appear to be completely at odds ideologically with the pedestrian or mundane aspects of mainstream capitalism economics (e.g. selflessness rather selfishness; compassion rather than competition, spiritual rather than material, innocence over avarice). But even though many of my informants reject the tenets of capitalism, the greed, the money game, materialism, etc., they are indelibly stamped with its characteristics as Marxists contend, so that it affects their whole being, from their innermost cores, to their outermost displays of individualism. Or perhaps the reverse is true, that capitalist economics is receiving a New Age makeover?

8.18 Commodification of Spirituality in Peaceburgh

8.18a Is Money the Root of All Evil?

"And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves."
— Matthew 21:12–13

In this infamous biblical passage, Jesus angrily attempts to cleanse the temple by overturning the money changer's tables, and drive them out because they are perceived as

profiting from the spiritual needs of others. New Agers display a similar aversion regarding mixing money with spirituality, arguing that it contaminates the purity of a religious message, practice or ritual, and darkens it somehow. Many in the Peaceburgh community struggle over notions of selfless-ness, and the need for charging a fee for their services.

Aryana stated that one of her primary life goals is “using my spirituality and actually getting paid for it.” She smiled, as if acknowledging that she understood how difficult this will be, “realizing that what I will sell perhaps is invisible.” This condition may be what separates conventional from spiritual types of health and well-being. Many members of what is referred to as the holistic community, offer services such as massage therapy and yoga instruction. These practitioners approach their industries more or less from the perspective that what they have to offer includes first and foremost spiritually healing benefits. However, there are massage therapists and yoga instructors working alongside their holistic counterparts, who downplay this aspect of their business, or remove it altogether. What is by most measures an almost identical service, for the latter type of individual it equates to merely a therapy that holds primarily physical benefits for example. While for the former it is a deeply spiritual endeavor, for the latter yoga and massage therapies consist of largely muscular and cardiovascular value. So what is the difference? Is it a figment of some people's imaginations, that the physical acts of doing yoga, massage, or tai chi also contain hidden metaphysical qualities or dimensions?

Aryana discussed the challenges of providing metaphysically based services, mentioning the intangibility of spirituality, as it applies to exercise or business consulting. She stated that what she offers clients, in terms of her yoga classes and life-coaching services, transcends what is physically obvious and measurable. She said she understands the issue, i.e. the intangibility of her ‘product’, but exclaimed “that's what I want to do.”

She explained her service as a life coach, which for her equates to helping others free themselves. The combination of Reiki, yoga, and massage enables her clients to remove inner blockages, so they are once again primed and open for growth. We discussed how these services, of what she is giving her clients, is so much more valuable than the money they are handing over. How the money is nothing, and handing it over is an exchange of energies, and simply allows it to occur. “But then some people view that differently” she remarked.

While thinking over and discussing ways in which she planned to sell her intangible service, a related issue surfaced. During the interview, I shifted the focus of our conversation by mentioning that some members of the holistic community have concerns over charging fees for spiritual services. I provided the example of an individual, known to both of us, who conducts sweat lodges free of charge. Because I wanted to focus on the prickly issue of spiritual commodification, I added that on the same land where this person holds his sweat lodge ceremonies, another shaman proposed having vision quests there also. The vision quest is a high level ceremonial ritual connected with the Native American Church, somewhat analogous to a confirmation within the Catholic church. For this rite the initiate ventures into the woods, and sits within a circle (roughly a twelve foot diameter) for four days and nights without food or water. They are permitted to do little else than meditate while making prayer ties that involves wrapping small cloth pouches of an herb mixture, and lining the circle with them. After the four days are up the individual then participates in the rigors of a sweat lodge, still without food or water. After that the ceremony ends, and they are finally given a drink. Participation in this event is binding, because once an initiate agrees to undertake this rite, they pledge to do it every year for four years total. The rite is therefore reserved for students of advanced status.

I then recounted to her the first shaman's reactions to this proposal, and also that this

service costs participants four hundred dollars:

Dave said “Well what are you charging money for? This is my land and it's free, and you're just not having any water for four days, why are you gonna charge them money for that?”

He went on to argue that many who work minimum wage jobs cannot afford such a cost, and that creates a kind of negative stigma around the ritual. Attaching such a high price to the vision quest makes it a service for the wealthy, and encourages a situation of elitism within the community. Since this proposal goes against his spiritual sensibilities involving sharing, fellowship, equality, and freedom, Dave refused to allow this ritual to occur on his property. Aryana responded first by stating that people come to those understandings based on past life experiences. But then she reconsidered the issue by placing it within the context of standard economic processes. She used a concept from one of her business classes to make sense of the situation:

In business there's a concept called “return on investment.” I call it “return on personal growth.” I've been doing consulting pro-bono for many years now, and recently last year someone hired me and said “well we want you because you don't have any experiences with charge.” Because it's a non-profit, and they're gonna pay me, if I don't charge them the value of what I'm giving them, [it] will not be seen the same way

She explained that if no money is attached to what she is offering, whether it is spiritual guidance, Reiki massage, or business consulting, it will not be perceived to have value. She agreed that Dave has every right to object to the notion of charging people money for his services. From a purely spiritual standpoint it may be valid to argue that attaching a price to something regarded as priceless, something that should perhaps transcend economic measures, will in some way diminish its value. Complaints such as these erupted during the Protestant reformation, as Catholic officials involved with the selling of indulgences, or forgiveness, were being condemned as corrupt (Michael Bell, 2012, p. 151).

However, working within the constraints of capitalist markets, providing services such as

Reiki and yoga, almost demands charging clients. My informants point out there are overhead costs, such as having to maintain a rental space and paying for utilities. Moreover, being able to set aside the necessary time to perform these functions requires either that the practitioner is independently wealthy, or that they have some other form of income and/or zero costs. The above mentioned shaman offers his sweat lodges at no cost. Apart from being a holistic provider, he receives income through his farm and gas well revenues, and so is able to offer his lodges for free. Rather than charging a fee, he asks participants to help out with the preparation of the lodge, and to contribute food or other supplies for the ceremony. But aside from the obvious fact that one needs to support themselves while pursuing a holistic career, Aryana stressed the point that offering services for free has unintended consequences: “There are some people that, because I don't charge them, they disappear, because they don't see it as a value.”

If potential clients are not being charged, she added, it will also take them longer to experience the benefits of the service. She argued that if money is not attached to the service, the client does not take it as seriously as they would if they did have to pay for it. Because it is viewed as less serious, individuals are less committed to the practice, so the results are impacted: “the persistence that it takes to make the change vanishes when you don't put money [down].” Therefore, associating a fee with something legitimates it. If something is free, it must not be very valuable, and because anyone can have it, it must be easy to acquire. In a market economy expensive things are highly coveted, and part of their appeal is that they are unique due to being scarce. Not many people have them. Being able to show something off includes its perceived value. And so it is almost as if people will not see a service as worth investing their time in, due to its having no cost associated with it.

there are people that attend those ceremonies that if you don't charge them, it's very difficult for them to understand there's value, because their way of looking, their mind set is set up to think money equals value, especially in this society, because people do attach value to money.

Attaching a monetary value to a service also serves to validate it. One group that I attended, a metaphysical meet up, had a moderator and a membership that fluctuated each week. The moderator was knowledgeable, and did things not unlike other groups I had participated in. It contained beliefs and practices that seemed relevant and aligned with member's spiritual goals. However, it soon fizzled out. Did the fact that it was free to attend lower its perceived value among participants? Does attaching a monetary value to something give it legitimacy? If your service or teaching is worth anything then surely it must cost something, otherwise its value is in question.

8.18b Spirituality Ain't Free, But I'm Not a Used Car Salesman!

Alternative spiritualities are not the only place where this contention arises. As mentioned above affluence within a religious order has been criticized before. And there are many examples around the world that involve religious missionaries, individuals such as Mother Theresa, who offer their services for free. However, Aryana did make a distinction between charging a fee for services, and ripping someone off:

I don't to go and tell someone, "you pay me five hundred I'm gonna change your life." I'm not gonna say that, that's not my intention.

We compared her position with that of a stereotypical televangelist: "send us fifty-nine dollars and we'll send you what you need." We came to the conclusion that a key factor to distinguish this form of commodification from the ordinary capitalistic sort is that the transactions are not anonymous, and the relationships between consumers is not solely based in economics. In the case of life coaching there exists between seller and buyer a deeper sort of connection, which according to my informants usually involves spiritually supported values and

goals that transcend merely economic ones. Also, because such services involve direct face-to-face interactions, they are more therapeutically oriented than ordinary buyer-seller relationships. A typical consumer transaction may not necessitate making personal connections with people. Whereas Aryana was quick to point out that she knows her clients, they share intimate experiences which are perhaps analogous to those of a lawyer-client, or doctor-patient relationship. Perhaps these social relationships are different from the corporation that sells you a shoe, or the used car salesman who sees potential customers as marks. Although to my knowledge I did not encounter any among my informants, no doubt there are con-artists at work within the holistic community as well.

But Aryana agreed that the connections she makes with her clients are different than other kinds of connections, insofar as she is not selling an abstract product to a random consumer. She concluded that it is after all an exchange culture,

and there's always the give and take, you can't just take without giving. And it's up to you what is it that you want to give, and I'm not just talking about money.

I have found this to be common among holistic practitioners, that they will offer a sliding scale in terms of payment options. Many do have set rates advertised, but they will often adjust these if potential clients cannot pay the full amount. I encountered a few examples of bartering between consumers. As mentioned above, at Wisteria festival events there are options to trade work time for a reduced ticket price, or even free admission.

8.18c Money is Likened to the Force: It is Neither Good or Evil

But the overall impression I received from Peaceburghers is that money is neither good nor evil. During my conversation with Nymeria, money became likened to how the “force” works in the Star Wars mythology. A person who becomes obsessed with achieving material

wealth might be viewed as greedy or power hungry. The uneven quest for money or power moreover unbalances an individual, exemplified by Darth Vader, who became a ruthless Sith lord as a result. But if approached in the right way, the force can work for the good. In other words, one could use money in a way that is healthy, similar to how a Jedi uses the force, wisely and with restraint. By analogy individuals can practice the money thing in a balanced Jedi sort of way, in a tempered and compassionate way, “so you can balance yourself.”

Nymeria argued that it is nonsensical to avoid mixing money and spirituality. Because one must have it in order to live, it is necessary. And if one is going to pursue a spiritual course in life, then one must find some way of harmonizing the two, otherwise there are going to be conflicts. Having an issue with something you need is a problem she suggested. Having a problem with that, you better solve that. She gave the example of being stranded in an alien world in which one must survive:

If someone takes you to a planet where one of the ways that you nourish yourself is you get this thing, you're not going to say, “oh I don't want that thing because of this, this, and this.” All of that might be valid but you need it, so you need it, so get it. And don't hold yourself back from getting what you need, because then it's actually a self-love issue.

This thought reiterates Loki's contention, that some of the more militant post-materialists have to “get real and grow up,” which suggests that attaining spiritual maturity involves trading in a bit of one's unrealistic idealisms. For example, among some Peacheburgh members there is the idea that to be spiritual you must walk a deliberate spiritual path. Some of my informants have chosen to forsake a mainstream, nine-to-five existence in order to travel around the country, going to festivals, and living in places temporarily. They see themselves as having made a sacrifice for their beliefs. By choosing the lifestyle they believed they wanted, they consider themselves free of the binding constraints of what they consider to be a defunct economic system. The hardships they have had to endure are rationalized in various ways. However, a few

have come to notice that perhaps living what they thought was a spiritual lifestyle was only a theoretical abstraction, and possibly misguided. While bringing them a certain degree of freedom, their idealized paths have also left them without the economic and institutional resources they require, in order to raise their children, and to live comfortably for example. With hindsight, they may have realized that they wished they had followed more of a straight track in life, such as going to school and securing stable employment.

Although initially they had thought of this as a non-spiritual life course, they now realize that these more mainstream life choices are plenty spiritual. Although punching a clock for a paycheck is a different kind of life than that of a spiritual vagabond, they are nonetheless fraught with challenges and exchanges of energy that are just as spiritual as any other. And since a mainstream life also brings more financial security, some have realized that they might have had both, and having in those alternate lives just as many chances to do spiritual work.

8.19 Some Effects of Spiritual Commodification

York (2001) speculates that spiritual commodification may have the effect of sacralizing or re-enchanting the market, insofar as “the re-spiritualized panoply of the New Age spectrum could offer a source for understanding commercial exchange as a spiritual act” (York, 2001, p. 370). York’s idea relates to the notion of “gift exchange,” which involves the integration of the religious and magical with the legal and economic, and would amount to a spiritualization or re-enchantment of the secular realm.

York, however, also draws attention to how the (largely Western) New Age has appropriated culture, in the form of spiritual ideas and practices, from other traditions. He criticizes the New Age notion that all spiritual knowledge now belongs to the public domain. As

mentioned above, New Age commodification endorses a spiritualized counterpart to capitalism, part of a religious consumer free market. York asserts that this amounts to cultural theft by neo-shamans of indigenous peoples' cultural artifacts, which includes ritual practices such as sweat lodges and the use of Native American songs by a Euro-American global hegemony (York, 2001, p. 368). York compares this to species extinction and deforestation, which he points out is happening concurrently with the cultural appropriation (York, 2001 p. 368). He likens neopagans to ancient Romans who annexed indigenous shrines as a means of extending, consolidating, and sanctifying their imperial power (York, 2001, p. 369). Spiritual commodification can thus be interpreted as a way of sanctifying modern forms of religiosity. For example, there is a New Age tendency to borrow myths, legends, rituals, and symbols from ancient Celtic, Polynesian, Tibetan, Eskimo, Aborigine, and Native American cultures among others which, taken as a whole, may be generalized as earth-spiritualities. This sort of cultural regressiveness is created out of a desire to be closer to nature, but is also used to legitimate its spirituality via the rediscovery of lost secrets of antiquity, also a prominent New Age discourse (Hunt, p. 149).

But if we accept Sutcliffe's (2003) depiction of New Age religiosity as an inner life exploration, what is consumed in the spiritual marketplace becomes internalized and incorporated by the individual, and is now a part of their personal property. Notwithstanding their older provenance, ancient tradition and divine revelation are of less relevance to the New Ager than the inner voice of intuition, which assumes a higher spiritual priority (Hunt, p. 149). Beliefs and morals are demoted in favor of personal experience, which is in accordance with the private character of modern religiosity. Also, the sensual immersion in the material here and now that a consumer oriented approach to life engenders, all work to ensure that what may be considered from one perspective as cultural theft, is only a means to an end for another. The

individual, through assembling their spiritual journey, is not stealing cultural artifacts any more than they have stolen their DNA from their parents or nature to assemble their physical bodies, it could be believed. It is their right to have them, and so perhaps a sense of spiritual entitlement is part and parcel of New Age type religiosities.

New spiritualities value freedom of expression, and open access to information and cultural products, however, they are not without a cost. According to Aryana, making spiritual services free has adverse effects that can include diminished value. Associating spiritual services with money adds worth to a practice, and solidifies its importance and effectiveness among potential clients. In other words, charging a fee for a spiritual service serves to authenticate it, and perhaps reifies what is an otherwise “intangible” process. Thus, while seeking to profit from spirituality may not be considered the highest expression of one’s spiritual impulses, making money and practicing spirituality are not necessarily incommensurable activities. Money is therefore not considered to be inherently evil, or antagonistic to doing spiritual work. It is rather acknowledged as a form of “congealed energy” which can be used for good or for ill. In the view of many Peaceburgh members, it is sensible to balance one’s religious idealism against practical matters. Reconciling oneself to the material inevitabilities and demands of capitalist existence is viewed as not so much a selling out, as it is a buying in. Through becoming knowledgeable and skilled in the use of money, one is believed to gain a mastery over this challenge. But also, by channeling monetary energies into spiritual services such as healing modalities, in the end validates its use by holistic practitioners.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In response to processes of secularization, and in an environment marked by social differentiation and segmentation in which collective expressions of spirituality are increasingly being dissolved, new spiritualities have arisen as alternatives to traditional religious forms. They are characterized by an eclectic voluntarism, and due to the effects of privatization and pluralism, a subjectivization of religion has occurred in which individuals are not only responsible for their personal religious existence, but are actively involved in shaping unique expressions of spirituality that conform to the necessities and structures of modern life. This syncretistic process of religious formation is also congruent with modern consumerism, in which individuals construct both material and spiritual identities as idiosyncratic amalgamations of cultural products. Identity formation occurs through a process of branding, in which individuals align themselves with particular beliefs and practices selected from among a variety of religious brands within a spiritual marketplace.

Societalization, defined as the recent shift in the West from community to society (Dobbelaere, 2006; Wilson, 1976), has moreover caused a disruption of standardized life courses, thrusting individuals into situations of social isolation and disenchantment. In response to time-based acceleration and compression effects, New Agers and neopagans have sought to re-enchant their life worlds through the creation of post-material and de-temporalized communities, as a way to escape from what is perceived to be an unmagical, and even dehumanized existence. In what may be termed the sacralization of subjectivity (Luckmann, 1990, p. 135), new ceremonial groups endeavor to establish cultural spaces in which an intersubjective sharing of one's spirituality can occur. These alternative spaces allow for communal forms of socializing that are perhaps not available to individuals within their

mainstream lives, and who may otherwise be isolated in their personal spiritual quests.

My informants frequently defined their spirituality by contrasting it with other, more organized types of religion. One of the main differences between religion and (their brand of) spirituality lie in “what is relatively organic versus what has been institutionalized” (from Interview with Persephone). For example, informants argued that traditional religious institutions are artificially organized forms of religiosity. In addition to being both hierarchical and patriarchal, the core ideals of most monotheisms are other-worldly focused, and are abstracted from an individual’s subjective experience. While my informants suggest that their spiritualities are marked by “organic” qualities. The differences lie in following something artificial (or man-made) and external, versus following one’s own interests, and being internally motivated.

Rather than submitting oneself to external religious authorities, such as a priest or church, who acts as intermediary between individuals and what is transcendent, informants define their spirituality as a direct conversation with divine forces, or as an embodiment of them. Structured forms of religiosity are generally frowned upon, while structurelessness is defined through communities arising spontaneously, and coming together around elective affinities. Where group structures do exist, they are usually adjusted to fit the needs and interests of members. The problem for new spiritualities is less that a structure is too rigid, or that it interferes with an individual’s goals or spiritual rights, but that it continues to exist at all. In short, my informants tend to emphasize qualities such as flexibility over exclusivity, and autonomy over authority.

Alongside the demand for individual freedom, in terms of selecting one’s particular set of beliefs and practices, there is a desire among my informants for group experiences. But the need for a situation that permits the sharing of religious subjectivities, in a noncommittal type of communality, may be unique in the development of modern spirituality groups. Community

serves as an entry point for individuals who are looking for like-minded fellow travelers, to share in their spiritual journeys. For example, one person described the Peaceburgh community as being a kind of wading pool: a place where she could stand in the shallow end of spiritual waters, from where she could access various types of groups without having to commit to any. It served to put her in touch with the sorts of experiences she was seeking, and the types of people with whom she shared similar beliefs and interests. Although it eventually became obsolete for her, the community nevertheless enabled her to fulfill her quest to find a religious base. Through it she became connected with Krishnaism, in which she has become an impassioned devotee. Communities such as Peaceburgh thus function as liminal way stations: temporary social spaces which provide initiates opportunities for experimentation with their spiritual identities.

Xaena's experience is not unusual. Many Peaceburgh members move from group to group, always in search of what they feel is needed at particular points in their lives. However, I have noticed that when a group's novelty wears off, perhaps when it is no longer new or fun, but turns into work, or as one informant put it "becomes a hassle," it often ends for them. And then it is off to the next exciting adventure for the seeker of spiritual thrills. Membership in new spirituality groups is thus fluid and temporary. Noticing this pattern, members tend to explain it away by stating that, "well groups are designed to serve temporary purposes. They aren't meant to last forever, that's religion."

In terms of social change, my informants are very much in support of efforts aimed at modifying society, to better reflect the needs of historically underprivileged groups and perspectives. Yet at the same time there is, at least among some members, a kind of religious fatalism that paralyzes their will towards 'active' social activism. This attitude is rooted in two ideas: that the universe has a fundamental order to it, and that things happen for a reason.

Everything that occurs, whether it is viewed as good or bad, is natural. If misfortune should befall a person or group, it is merely an indication of karmic fate, and should be accepted with equanimity my informants suggest. Attempting to change or escape from seemingly unfortunate life circumstances constitutes a denial of one's karma, or level of spiritual development, and amounts to a missed chance for learning. In other words, social injustices which are often at the core of social movements, are rather viewed from the perspective of my informants as karmic lessons, or opportunities for working through one's spiritual hang-ups.

But because of its newness, temporariness, and faddishness, the reproducibility of new spiritualities is difficult to ascertain. What sort of longevity they may enjoy, as forms of religious culture is as yet uncertain. I can only point to qualities which I believe may lend to their perpetuating themselves: the materials that are being produced, for example the art and ritual structures, and the intentional communities whose structures, buildings, and even people may outlast the actual beliefs and worldviews. In the end, what is called spirituality today by my informants may only prove to be a brand of commonsense, held as useful knowledge for future communities. Or it may be dropped entirely, as a fad that has run its course, now useless and forgotten.

But rather than becoming solidified over time, as a firmly established type of religion, a more likely explanation is that alternative forms of religiosity are always present. Similar kinds of phenomena may have indeed given rise to many of the world's current religions. But their significance may not be in whether or not they live long enough to become a mainstream religion. Rather that such liminoid spaces are creative zones in which new cultural forms take shape, and continually feed cultural development in any historical period. Thus, new spiritualities are not necessarily a means to some definite end, but a process that is an end in

itself.

Examples include festival spaces, such as those that are present at Wisteria. These temporary communities provide what Gem calls “social sustenance.” As liminoid types of culture they exhibit a wide range of options, in terms of how individuals are able to practice community. These are typically places in which standard definitions for “norms and rules are loosened or totally discarded,” and individuals “get a chance to see who they would be, and what life would be like, if we didn't have those rigid structures.” Intentional communities are places where individuals can freely experiment with their sense of identity, outside of the institutional structures, norms, and other sorts of demands and obligations that usually affect how one may express themselves. Members can try out different versions of themselves within the safety of a protected community, in a world that is set apart from the daily grind of their mainstream lives.

Turner’s concept of *communitas*, as “a generic bond underlying or transcending all particular cultural definitions and normative orderings of social ties,” reflects member’s goals of wanting to rediscover or recreate a lost Eden (Turner, 1974, p. 68). Being a form of anti-structure, *communitas* represents “the basic human quality which underlies the structural distinctions or fictions that culture fabricates” (Alexander, 1991, p. 38). With a romantic vision of an egalitarian and pre-religious past, neopagans and New Agers believe they are reproducing prehistorical types of communities, that once existed across the planet, and gave rise to the indigenous wisdom of both pre-Columbian America, and the far East.

Holding notions of communitarian innocence and play, intentional spirituality recalls a lost essence “human beings are not in their basic humanity segmented into roles and statuses and divided by particularistic group loyalties” (Turner 1978, p. 287). Calls for a re-enchantment of the social reverberate through spaces such as the Fairy Shrine, but also permeate ceremonial

sweat and medicine lodge gatherings.

In terms of ritual practice, spontaneity is often valued over more rigid or dogmatic structures that must be adhered to unquestioningly. In response to feelings of anxiety and/or dread over feeling pressure to keep up with ritual practices, individuals have adopted an attitude of keeping practices light. By approaching ritual with a 'take it or leave it' attitude, members avoid being overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and/or low self-esteem over perceived failures. Approaching a practice, such as meditation or yoga, in more casual ways helps individuals alleviate the otherwise stress-inducing pressures to perform. Playing with ritual structures provides some leeway or flexibility, in terms of how one is able to express their spiritual impulses. The remedy for doing things too regularly is to do them spontaneously. Most Peaceburgh informants therefore advocate spontaneous practice as being more desirable than having to be bogged down by ritualistic responsibilities.

Having the freedom to create one's own rituals, both individually and collectively, has opened up religious life to experimentation. Art and religion have been connected culturally, perhaps since the beginning of the human species. From the primitive cave paintings in Lascaux France, to renaissance masterpieces such as Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, art has been infused with religious meanings and intentions. These great works were, however, collective visions of the divine, executed by artistic masters often with support of the church, or other cultural authorities. Today, with the advent of modern sensibilities concerning personal choice, each individual is free to create both their beliefs and religious identities, which includes making spiritual artifacts.

Informant Dalek's comment, that "spirituality is avant-garde religion," in its simplicity succinctly encapsulates much of the vital principle of this culture type. For Dalek and others new

spiritualities are rarified forms of religion existing on the fringes of society. Due to a capacity for unifying opposing perspectives, artistic practices perhaps offer New Agers a means for achieving more seamless links between their eclectic, and often disparate sets of religious identifications. Informants suggest that incorporating art into their inventory of practices facilitates a creative synthesis of varying perspectives, and by extension helps to harmonize disparate spiritual paths among isolated practitioners. Approaching spirituality creatively moreover allows individuals to achieve an aesthetic balance between what might otherwise be an irreconcilable set of practices and beliefs, that are perhaps at odds with one another ideologically.

But are rituals inherently innovative or conservative? Do the findings of this study support Victor Turner's (1982) contention, that rituals serve to subvert existing social structures, by calling them into question? Turner's theory of ritual and anti-structure states that rituals "invert social status hierarchies, subvert social-structural differentiation, class distinction for example, and reject a particular social structure" (Alexander, B. 1991, p. 4). Turner argues that through a process of liminal stretching of the self, participating in rituals aids in the transformation of society. In particular Gem's comments in chapter three about festival culture reinforces aspects of Turner's theory of ritual anti-structure and how it is employed, wherein new kinds of communitarian experiences become possible.

However, my informant's use of ritual also seems to support the more conventional structural-functionalist theory of ritual, insofar as rituals often serve to strengthen social bonds within the community. Group rituals in particular work to solidify communal relationships, by bringing together individuals with varying interests and goals, and aligning them around a shared purpose and/or worldview. Rituals do not seem to be a stimulus for feelings of social unrest among my informants. In other words, they do not in-themselves goad these individuals into

episodes of social activism. Rather most of them are practicing forms of alternative community which already involve anti-establishment values, and forms of protest as discussed in chapter three. This is the opposite of, for example, a culturally conservative traditional society, in which ritual may function as sources for new growth.

New spiritualities are inherently countercultural, and so do not rely on rituals as motivators to do things such as establish intentional DIY communities, or move out of the communities to conduct social activism. But once such communities are established, rituals perhaps serve to perpetuate them, which again supports the standard structural functionalist definition of ritual, as being conservative. However, ritual structures that promote experimentation with group identity, and hold a capacity for imparting new worldviews and values to members, could be said to lead to initiatives geared towards social change. But they do not necessarily produce them *ab initio*.

Finally, I would suggest that New Age ceremonial rituals are not only social enactments of spiritual beliefs, but are extensions of a general art making process occurring within the holistic spiritual milieu. New Age rituals have encoded within them creative and aesthetic notions, that often draw upon popular culture. Niffer's ritualized art making, in part based around the television series *Dr. Who*, has helped give a physical form to her beliefs. Art making also provides her with a reflective space, one that allows her to process her experiences, thus expanding how she is able to think about her spiritual activities. Art is a material set of processes, and so serves as a physical medium for tangibilizing what are otherwise intangible feelings, values, or states of mind. In other words, doing art allows one to encounter aspects of their personality in a physical way, putting into three-dimensional shape one's beliefs and ideations, so they can be more easily recognized, experienced, and worked with. Whether these

have led into specific forms of social protest cannot be concluded based on the data derived from this study. But making art gives individuals the opportunity for putting one's spiritual sensibilities into a concrete form, which perhaps makes them more this-worldly.

Psychonautics is a particular type of religious seekership, in which individuals explore the boundaries of their identities via transcendental states, evoked through the use of entheogenic plants. The dreams and visions described by my informants moreover lend themselves to mythologizing. In the chapter on psychonautic discourses we encountered creation myths involving mind-altering mushrooms, and benevolent extraterrestrials who engineered humans to facilitate their cosmic agendas. But also, through connecting themselves to collective stories such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Matrix*, individuals who imagine themselves to be knights on solitary spiritual quests, are able to find a common meeting place in which to share their otherwise unarticulated subjective experiences. In chapter seven we learned that entheogens, analogous to the mushrooms eaten by *Alice in Wonderland*, and the slippers worn by *Dorothy in Oz*, represent magical keys that can unlock the hidden potentials sleeping within these hero characters. Such narrative mechanisms, involving social and psychological processes, symbolize individual growth and liminal transformation. Falling down a rabbit hole, or entering the matrix, the hero is transported to alternate realities in which they undergo bizarre adventures that induce identity transformation. But these journeys are also undertaken for therapeutic purposes.

If there is a single overarching goal or aim for why one embarks upon a spiritual path, it would be for the purposes of healing. Healing for my informants involves everything from repairing one's DNA via neurogenesis, to alleviating "dis-ease" by priming oneself for personal growth. For many it entails an enjoyment of this world and all of its sensual possibilities, over achieving a supernatural salvation, through being transferred to an afterlife or place of eternal,

other-worldly joy. Healing among participants often equates to “taking care of each other,” in part by acknowledging the sacred qualities in others. But it is also to recognize and nurture the connections that exist between one’s physical body and the natural world.

Healing moreover encompasses both a reformation of sexuality, and a realignment of traditional gender roles. For example, orgasmic meditation places conscious attention on the female orgasm, which seeks to undo standard patriarchal definitions of sexuality that are historically male-centered. This has precipitated a shift among new spiritualities, away from aggressive and exclusive kinds of religious expression, towards more feminine and pacifistic ones. Men are encouraged to explore their feminine sides, and group encounters such as the cuddle puddle, and a “peaceful gathering of hands,” engender a therapeutic sharing of member’s thoughts and feelings. Indeed, the overall goal of orgasmic meditation, according to informants, is “to heal our sexuality.” With a focus placed upon the Goddess, new spiritualities seek to emphasize the feminine, and to rebalance gender relations within religious and spiritual life.

Groups such as OM also provide opportunities for “testing theories of community,” even though they may inevitably dissolve. Failed social experiments, such as occurred in the OM group house, nevertheless helped members to expose issues and problems hidden within the community that were otherwise unable to appear. Through being placed under a microscope, dysfunctions and forms of spiritual disease gestating within group member’s relations were forced out into the open in order to be dealt with. For example, the conflict between members, over having a sex cult versus a sacred meditation space, undermined the group’s living experiment. What should have been a joint decision, based upon the collective’s intentions to have a space for a spiritual practice, was instead motivated by an individual’s monetary and sexual greed. But the group therapy styled OM games, which actively promote confrontations

between individuals, in addition to the issues that surfaced within the OM house, are both examples of what my informants call doing “shadow work,” by exploring one’s darker sides.

The dichotomy of the polite body versus the sensuous body, discussed in chapter four, could be compared with light versus dark spirituality. In this context light equates to enlightened positivity, an overly optimistic perspective that seeks to bathe life in a syrupy type of love. It is analogous to a kind of fake politeness, or face work in which the impression, that “everything is love, light, butterflies and rainbows,” is being managed. To show oneself strictly from a positive angle is to publicly project a skewed image of oneself. The dark side represents the natural or raw part of something, but becomes carefully groomed and preened, so that what emerges is a picture of overall harmony. The frequently voiced New Age discourse, of favoring love and light over darkness, reflects similar biases inherent within other religions, for example choosing to embrace the good, while denying what is evil. Thus the one-sided belief has for some become such a ubiquitous and candy-coated trope, that many have reacted by questioning its truth and sense.

A similar kind of romantic idealism, about the benign innocence and purity of nature, provoked filmmaker Werner Herzog to comment that, “when I look into the eyes of nature I see only a mindless hunger, horror, and murder.” Speaking about the Amazon rainforest, and the supposed harmony that governs all life there, he remarked “it is only the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder [...] we in comparison to that enormous articulation, we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out of a stupid suburban novel, a bad novel. We have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery and fornication, overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order [...] There is no harmony in the universe. We have to get acquainted to this idea that there is no real harmony as we have

conceived it” (quoted from Burden of Dreams, 1982 by Director Werner Herzog).

Finally we learned that while new spiritualities value freedom of expression, and open access to information and cultural products, they are not without a cost. In other words, making spiritual services free has adverse effects that can include diminished value. Associating spiritual services with money adds worth to a practice, and solidifies its importance and effectiveness among potential clients. Charging a fee for something gives it value and spiritual weight, argues practitioners, and helps to validate a service. Thus, while seeking to profit from spirituality may not be considered the highest expression of one’s spiritual impulses, making money and practicing spirituality are not necessarily incommensurable activities. Money is therefore not deemed to be intrinsically evil, or antagonistic to doing spiritual work.

To what extent new spiritualities will be able to socially reproduce themselves over the long term has yet to be resolved. Could probability theory be engaged to discover the likely outcomes for particular forms of alternative religious culture? That is, can the likelihood of their long-term survival be assessed statistically? I would not doubt that a comprehensive quantitative analysis could yield some interesting conclusions. However, I would suggest that such metrics be combined with an in-depth study of the history of religion, to understand how new religious forms adapt, and did or did not take hold in particular cultural milieu. Something like an archaeology of religious culture would be necessary to gauge this problem, and to answer these questions meaningfully.

But what happens to particular communities, like the one at Wisteria, might be a more reasonable place to start. Do these spiritually oriented enclaves continue in more or less a similar form over time? Or do they morph into something less religious? The social spaces offer individuals experiences that are unavailable in their everyday lives. They exist due to a need, but

if the larger societal structures change, and such spaces become obsolete, then they may fall away as useless vestigial structures. Or they could transform into other types of social environments, ones providing what is needed by future adherents.

Also, more work needs to be done to assess the impact of ritual in new spiritualities, as sources for anti-structure. According to Turner, liminoid life liquefies structure. By “bracketing structural norms, liminality creates a frame within which participants can experiment with the familiar categories of culture, isolating their elements and recombining them “in any and every possible pattern” (Turner, 1974, p. 255; Alexander, 1991, p. 33). Due to its capacity for breaking free of structure temporarily, ritual has the potential for generating new alternative social arrangements, and thus may serve as a mechanism of social change. Liminoid communities, such as those existing among neopagans and New Agers, are generative of new norms, insofar as liminality works to innovate new social status and identity. But what role ritual has in particular to do with these processes is as yet to be discovered.

There is again the problem of the variegation between different types of groups and communities. However, I can envision a study with a focus concentrated exclusively upon the ritual practices of individuals within intentional communities. Such a study would take into consideration all aspects of ritual life, from individual to group sorts of practices, and attempt to correlate these with forms of social protest and cultural mutation. Most of the groups encompassed by the present study already share an antagonistic relationship with normative societal structures. Therefore, how much of the impulse for activism results from ritual practices, versus other dimensions of new spiritualities, such as its anti-establishment values, and religious deviance, would have to be determined.

Other questions remain to be resolved, such as what group membership means within the

context of new spiritualities. If there is no binding sense of commitment to any particular group, as is the case for most forms of religious belonging, what constitutes membership for individuals practicing new spiritualities? Peaceburgh and Wisteria are communities that provide individuals with opportunities for a collective experience of what is an otherwise private pursuit. Because the boundaries of Peaceburgh are diffuse, membership is largely undefined. Being a member of Peaceburgh or Wisteria is not as firmly established as it is for other types of religious belonging. Being Catholic, on the other hand, fixes one's religious identity in ways that are more exclusive and permanent. Rituals and beliefs are highly standardized, even if individuals may interpret them differently, or have different experiences of being Catholic. But membership is a matter of fact. The ritual practices shared by members of Peaceburgh and Wisteria are similarly concrete artifacts. Although these can be altered or tailored to suit local needs or conditions, activities such as doing yoga, meditation, kirtans, and sweat lodges, are more or less structurally consistent across time and space.

Thus, it is rather the case that new spirituality groups act as temporary containers for these activities. Groups are collective spaces, in which individuals can come together and participate in these shared religious interests. But because group membership is optional and non-binding, determining the limits, of where the individual ends and the group begins, remains unclear. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that, rather than being distinct social entities with their own continuity, that includes having identifiable characteristics that necessarily persist over time, new spirituality groups are instead extensions of the self. Groups are an enlargement of the self, that offer individuals experiential possibilities not achievable in isolation.

Appendix A: Interview Questions for Study Participants

The interview format used in this study was devised by Jon Bloch (1998, p. 125), and utilizes a two-part structure:

Part I: “There will be two parts to the interview. In the first part I would like for you to tell me about how you got involved with this, and what it means to you? This can involve how you became interested in [specific practice/belief system], what were meaningful events or experiences for you. You can pause, or change what you are saying in mid-sentence, that is not what matters. I just want to hear your personal story in your own words” (i.e. How did you get into this group or practice? Why did you become involved?).

Part II: “Now I am going to ask you the same questions I ask everyone. You might think that you've already talked about some of these things, but that's ok, I'm going to ask them anyway.”

1. What are the sources of your spiritual information?
2. What are your spiritual activities?
3. What is important about this to you? (i.e. what is it about alt. spirituality that excites and/or interests you?)
4. Are you involved with doing rituals?
5. What does participating in spiritual rituals do for you? (Or what purpose do the rituals serve?)
6. How much time do you spend doing these things?
7. What are your goals for this practice? What do you hope to accomplish with this behavior?

8. Do you ever meet people who share your beliefs?
9. Are many of your friends involved in this?
10. What is your experience being in a spiritual group?
11. How does your spirituality affect or impact your personal relationships?
12. Do you see these things as being different from mainstream society or traditional religion? If so how?
13. A lot of people talk about a spiritual path, or journey, is that something you relate to? What does being on a spiritual path mean to you?
14. Do you tell the story of your spiritual journey in the same way with others as you have with me? Are there situations in which you would not share your story? If so, what are they?
15. If you had to summarize your spiritual journey in one sentence what would it be?
16. Does your daily life ever present you with challenges to your spiritual beliefs? If so, how do you go about trying to resolve these issues?
17. Do you think your beliefs and/or practices are a form of religion? If not, how do they differ?
18. On the consent form I read to you, I refer to “alternative spirituality,” but I’m not sure I like this term... can you think of a better word?
19. Do you create art? (If so, why do you do this?)
20. Is there a connection between your art practices and your spirituality? If so, what is it?
21. Do you create poetry? If so, is there a connection b/w your poetry and

your spirituality?

22. Can you tell me what mysticism means for you?
23. What does spiritual community mean to you? Do you think you have one here in Pittsburgh?
24. What keeps this (alternative spirituality) alive? How does it spread?
25. Do you think it is possible to make a living from your spirituality?
26. Is that something you would like to pursue?
27. If you were conducting these interviews instead of me, is there anything that you would ask that I have missed?
28. Is there anything else you would like to add?
29. What is your age?
30. What is your occupation?

Appendix B: IRB Interview Script for One-on-One Interviews

Hello. My name is John Cuda and I'm a graduate student in sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. My research explores how alternative spirituality is practiced individually, and in a group setting, and how individual participants understand their group experiences. I would like to interview you, as a participant of such a group, for about one hour. There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you that are associated with this study and you will not receive any kind of payment for your participation. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may end it at any time. To maintain your confidentiality, no identifying information will be recorded and all recordings and transcripts will be kept in a locked office. I will be audio recording this interview with a digital voice recorder. Therefore, in order to insure anonymity, you must refrain from using your own name and the names of others during the interview. I am the only one with access to these records. If you have any questions, I can be reached at jrc87@pitt.edu or 412-330-0950.

Appendix C: Demographic Data

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 individuals. I also had several in-depth discussions with an additional three individuals, who I regard as key informants. With the exception of three Jewish individuals, all of my subjects have a Christian background. Below I provide a table of their particular denominations, in addition to other demographic information. I was unable to find any meaningful correlations between their current belief systems and their religious backgrounds. Initially I considered mentioning what religions my subjects currently subscribe to, such as shamanistic, Buddhist, or Hindu, etc., and to what degrees. However, this also did not prove very useful or informative, as more or less all of my subject's religiosities contain a mixture of these influences. Splitting hairs over these measures did not seem necessary, nor will it prove vital for enhancing the reader's understanding of the phenomena under analysis. It seems to me that if there is a preference for say Krishnaism over shamanism, while this may be due to something in a particular individual's childhood, family history, or work/life experience, as I did not have access to all of this data, in my view it was not worth pursuing.

Therefore, I have decided to focus my analysis primarily on individuals, and the groups they belong to. And rather than trying to classify them in terms of religious background or political affiliation, because they all identified as either Christian or Jewish, and more or less liberal, I will be assessing them based on their current religious and/or spiritual orientations. I will be approaching them analytically as individual, local, and unique combinations of various religious and spiritual influences, which they all however share to some extent.

Table C.1 Demographic Data

| Name | Age | Gender | Occupation | Religious Background | Position on Commodification | Hobbies |
|-------------|------------|---------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Niffer | 44 | Female | Artist/Vendor Homemaker | Catholicism | Yes | Too many to name |

| | | | | | | |
|------------|----|--------|--|--|--|--|
| Nettle | 42 | Female | Artist/Television Production | Catholicism | No | Too many to name |
| Aryana | 43 | Female | Teacher/Academia | Catholicism | Yes | Photography, Travel |
| Zack | 24 | Male | Student/Library Science Retail: Juice Market | Judaism | Undecided | Permaculture, Raw Foods |
| Star | 33 | Female | Social Worker: Behavioral Health | Non-denominational Christian | Yes/Undecided | Art |
| Zoiee | 18 | Female | Student/Unemployed Life Coach | Christian: UU* Church | Yes | Art |
| Persephone | 35 | Female | Student/Interfaith Minister | Christian | No | |
| Loki | 55 | Male | Journalist/magazine Editor | Christian: Protestant | Yes | Writing, Video Production |
| Marco | 44 | Male | Self-employed/Construction | Catholic | Yes | Bibliophile |
| Moonflower | 25 | Female | Student/Homemaker/Craft Vendor | Christian: Presbyterian; Currently UU Church | Yes | Too many to name |
| George | 65 | Male | Tarot Reader | Catholicism | Undecided | Bibliophile |
| Owsley | 24 | Male | Student | Christianity: Evangelical | No | Botany Chemistry Herbology Medicinal Plants |
| Xaena | 22 | Female | Artist/Vendor | Christian: Lutheran; Currently a Krishna | No, taking money to sustain oneself is necessary, but there is the need to give back via service | Jewelry Making Art Drawing Music: Guitar |
| Kay | 34 | Female | Holistic Medicine: Shiatsu Practitioner | Catholicism | Yes | Art |
| Gaia | 38 | Female | Accountant | Christianity: Evangelical | No | Art |
| Louann | 36 | Female | Graduate Student | Catholicism | Yes | Writing Art |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Jacquín | 27 | Male | Life Coach/Student | Christianity: Evangelical | Yes | Writing, Video Production |
| Jack | 37 | Male | Web Designer | Judaism | Undecided | Photography Filmmaking Writing |
| Nymeria | 19 | Female | Student/Unemployed | Christian: UU Church | Yes | Makes Clothes Art, Writes stories |
| Quill | 38 | Male | Secondary Ed. | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown |
| Dalek | 30 | Male | Artist/Student | Christian: Protestant | No | Too many to name |
| Gem | 31 | Female | IT, Computer Engineer | Christian: Evangelical | Yes | Music, Mathematics |
| Sun | 52 | Female | Food Coop; Teaching | Christian: UU Church | Unknown | Art, Painting |
| Howard | 28 | Male | Retail | Judaism | Undecided | Unknown |
| Tekali | 60 | Female | Psychic Medium, Healer, Life Coach | Christian: Lutheran | Yes | Art Writing |
| Other Key Informants | Age | Gender | Occupation | Religious Background | Position on Commodification | Hobbies |
| Merlin | 46 | Male | Artist | Christian: UU Church | Neither | Too many to name |
| Dave | 67 | Male | Farmer | Christianity: Evangelical | No | Musician |
| Michael | 46 | Male | Massage Therapist | Catholic | No | Writing |

*UU = Unitarian Universalist

Appendix D: Photos

Figure 1: Labyrinth in the Stone Circle



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 2: Fairy Shrine Tree



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 3: Tree Deity



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 4: Sacred Objects



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 5: Fairy Shrine Altar and Objects



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 6: Wisteria Druid Ancestor Mound



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 7: Wisteria Druid Ancestor Mound Dwelling



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 8: Wisteria Druid Ancestor Mound Altar



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 9: Niffer's Tardis Journal



Photo taken by author (January 2015)

Figure 10: Niffer's Tardis Journal 2



Photo taken by author (January 2015)

Figure 11: Niffer's Tardis Journal Exterior



Photo taken by author (January 2015)

Figure 12: Owsleys's Entheogenic Art



Photo provided by informant (June 2014)

Figure 13: Entheogenic Sacred Geometry

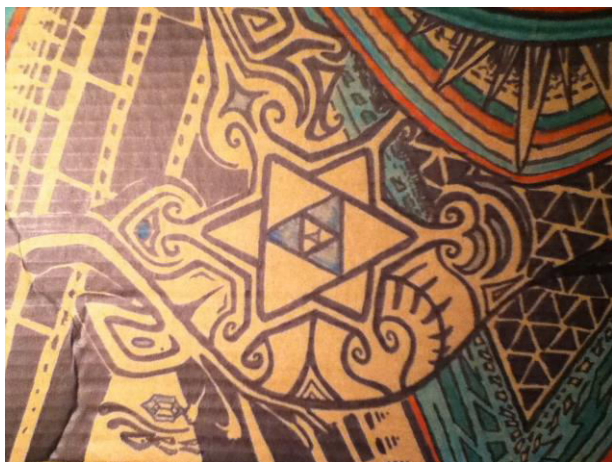


Photo provided by informant (June 2014)

Figure 14: DMT The Spirit Molecule

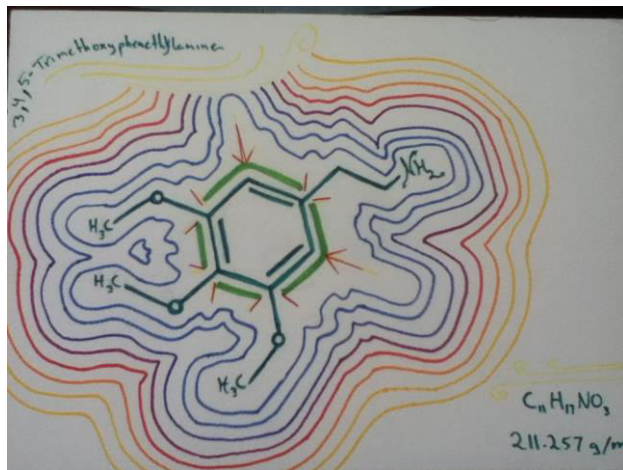


Photo provided by informant (June 2014)

Figure 15: Peaceburgh Circle of Hands



Photo taken by author (May 2014)

Figure 16: Peaceburgh: Peaceful Gathering of Hands



Photo taken by author (May 2014)

Figure 17: Peaceburghers Playing Music



Photo taken by author (May 2014)

Figure 18: Peaceful Gathering of Hands: The Point



Photo taken by unknown Peaceburgh member (June 2015)

Figure 19: Peaceful Gathering of Hands - The Point



Photo taken by unknown Peaceburgh member (June 2015)

Figure 20: Peaceful Gathering of Hands - The Point



Photo taken by unknown Peaceburgh member (June 2015)

Figure 21: Sweat Lodge Gathering Space



Photo taken by Jonathan Aryeh Wayne (August 2013)

Figure 22: Sweat Lodge Shaman Stoking the Fire



Photo taken by Jonathan Aryeh Wayne (August 2013)

Figure 23: Peaceburghers Assembling Medicine Lodge Peyote Ceremony



Photo taken by author (August 2013)

Figure 24: Assembling Medicine Lodge 2



Photo taken by author (August 2013)

Figure 25: Assembling Medicine Lodge 3



Photo taken by author (August 2013)

Figure 26: Assembling Medicine Lodge 4



Photo taken by author (August 2013)

Figure 27: Native American Medicine Lodge - Peyote Ceremony



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 28: Medicine Lodge Ceremony (next morning)



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 29: Wisteria Paw Paw Drum Circle Altar



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 30: Wisteria Fairy Shrine 1



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 31: Wisteria Fairy Shrine 2



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

Figure 32: Wisteria Fairy Shrine 3



Photo taken by author (June 2014)

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