

Technopagans: NeoPagans on the Internet and the Emergence of Virtual  
Communities

By  
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## Introduction

NeoPaganism is a new form of religious practice which emerged in the 1950s in Europe, and subsequently came to North America in the 1960s. When NeoPaganism gained popularity in North America in the late 1960s and 1970s, this new religion underwent numerous changes, losing much of the structure and hierarchical elements which had existed in the British form, and becoming more individualistic and flexible. Since the 1990s, NeoPaganism has seen dramatic increases in numbers due to the popularity of NeoPaganism on the Internet. With the numerous websites on NeoPaganism available to individuals, this new religion became more accessible, and this enabled the emergence of widespread solitary practice. Individuals could now gain access to the information without the necessity of joining a NeoPagan group in order to learn about NeoPaganism. It was at this time that solitary practitioners began to emerge as a group, creating a community of individuals who each maintained their own form of practice. This community of solitaries maintain contact with other members through the Internet, forming virtual communities at hub sites such as WitchVox ([www.witchvox.com](http://www.witchvox.com)). Although the term "community" is commonly associated with face-to-face interactions and geographic proximity, virtual communities do not rely on in-person communications. New communications technology, such as the Internet, allow members to communicate and form social bonds without ever meeting in-person. In the last fifteen years, solitary NeoPagans have formed virtual communities online and have revolutionized NeoPagan practice.

In Chapter One, background information will be provided to the reader about the nature of NeoPaganism and its roots in British Wicca. Common characteristics of NeoPagans will be provided along with the basic tenets of their religious beliefs and practices. A brief history of NeoPaganism will be explored in terms of historical accuracy and mythological origins, and the changes that occurred after NeoPaganism was brought to North America will be explored. The issue of cultural borrowing will be discussed, as this is a central concern in establishing authenticity in NeoPagan practice.

Chapter Two will focus on a review of literature on NeoPaganism and previous ethnographic works on NeoPagan groups. Past ethnographies have focused almost exclusively on group practitioners with little to no mention of solitaries. Recent surveys have discovered that solitaries make up from fifty to seventy-five percent of all NeoPagan practitioners, and yet solitary NeoPagans have largely been ignored in the social sciences. The ways in which NeoPagans form communities, in-person and online, will be explored, and the differences between group and solitary practice will be discussed.

The focus of Chapter Three is an examination of the methodology and theoretical concepts that were used in this study, and how these methods shape the research itself. As an ethnographic study, this research was based almost exclusively on qualitative data, to the exclusion of quantitative forms such as surveys and questionnaires. Participant observation, both online and in public, was the dominant method used, and was supplemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews over a period of nine months. The ethical issues of

ethnographic research, and specifically online research, is discussed in detail, along with the challenges of conducting research in an online environment. The main theoretical concepts of symbolic community and virtual community are examined in relation to NeoPagan communities, and the question of whether virtual communities actually exist is explored.

Chapter Four is an examination of NeoPagan communities, in both group and solitary forms. With the increasing numbers of solitary practitioners in the last decade, group practitioners have begun to question the authenticity of solitary practice in an attempt to bolster their own authenticity as what was once the dominant form of NeoPagan practice. The conflict over authenticity largely centers on NeoPagan eclecticism, and its foundations in cultural borrowing practices, and the intensely individualistic nature of solitary practice. With increasing individualism, the boundaries of membership have become more flexible as solitary practitioners establish a non-hierarchical and disorganized form of practice. NeoPaganism as a marginalized community is examined, as NeoPagan practitioners have internalized their marginal status as part of their religious identity. In defining themselves as a marginalized group, NeoPagans have strengthened feelings of community by creating a common bond between these disparate individuals. Issues of authority in NeoPagan communities are examined by analyzing the marginalized members within NeoPaganism, the "fluffy bunnies" and the "fundies". These three forms of conflict within NeoPaganism, the solitary-tradition debate, marginal status, and marginalizing certain members, are explored in order to demonstrate how the issues of

authenticity, identity, and authority are utilized within the larger NeoPagan community.

The focus of Chapter Five is the newly emerging community of solitary practitioners on the Internet. These individuals have created highly symbolic community boundaries, retaining dual identities as solitaries and as members of a community. This symbolic community is a prime example of what Maffesoli (1988) calls a neo-tribe, a symbolic form of community formation that is highly individualistic in nature, and is usually confined to Western societies. Neo-tribes can be seen as a type of symbolic community, since the boundaries are symbolic rather than geographic in nature. This community of solitaries is a virtual community, as it is largely an online phenomenon, and is not prevalent among group practitioners.

The purpose of this research is to examine NeoPagan community formation, with particular emphasis on solitary practitioners. The lack of previous research on solitaries has left a gap in the ethnographic literature on NeoPaganism, and much more research is needed in order to fully understand the nature of solitary practice. I have taken a case-study approach in examining online solitary practitioners through a popular NeoPagan website, and these findings are not applicable to other forms of NeoPagan communities.

## Chapter One: Background

In this chapter I will provide background information necessary for the reader who is unfamiliar with NeoPaganism. NeoPaganism will be defined, while their common characteristics will be discussed. The terms 'solitaries' and 'coven' will be explained, along with the differences between solitary and group practitioners. The perception by many NeoPagans of their marginality within the larger society will be examined, as will the apparent contradictions of predominantly white middle-class individuals with high levels of education perceiving themselves as marginalized. The history of NeoPaganism, and its origins in British Wicca, will be briefly outlined, and I will discuss the NeoPagan practice of borrowing elements from other religions and cultural groups. This practice of cultural borrowing is a point of contention not only between NeoPagans and those they borrow from, but also between different NeoPagan groups as they each fight for "authenticity". The issue of authenticity is an important element in countering the marginal status of NeoPagans in mainstream societies, as well as in the internal conflicts between Traditional NeoPaganism and eclectic solitaries, which will be the focus of Chapter Four.

### *Common Characteristics of NeoPaganism*

NeoPaganism is an umbrella term encompassing groups who define themselves as practicing an earth-based spirituality. The term is deliberately vague because many NeoPagan belief systems are highly individualistic and defy

any attempts at definition by social scientists as well as by NeoPagans themselves. While NeoPagan practices are extremely diverse, there are a few common characteristics that apply to many, but not all, NeoPagan groups. These characteristics have been compiled from the works of Adler (1979), Orion (1995), Berger (1999), Reid (2001), Pike (2001), Magliocco (2004), and Rabinovitch and Macdonald (2004) and is also based on my own research. From these sources, it has been determined that NeoPagan religions generally have no dogma, bureaucracy, or acknowledged leaders to determine orthodoxy. While there has been a movement toward institutionalization of the more popular and well-known forms, such as Wicca, this is a highly contested subject among NeoPagan groups, many of whom express a desire to remain free from hierarchy and structural organization. Some NeoPagans participate in rigorous training programs through covens or organizations, while others practice alone as *solitaries*,<sup>1</sup> with a spiritual partner, or informally as a member of a group.

NeoPagans in North America are predominantly white, middle-class, well-educated urbanites (Berger 1999: 8; Berger, Leach and Shaffer 2003: 27-30; Magliocco 2004: 7) who draw from many different cultural and historical traditions. Membership is often informal and individuals may belong to a variety of groups. NeoPaganism first became popular in North America during the 1960s in urban areas and university towns, and the first generation of American NeoPagans were mostly middle-class intellectuals and "bohemians". The expansion of NeoPaganism in the 1990s took place through the Internet and

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<sup>1</sup> Solitaries are NeoPagans who practice alone, with little, if any, participation in groups or organizations.

popular publications and was made available to a much broader audience. What was once an esoteric form of cultural critique against mainstream norms is now a more popular movement (Magliocco 2004: 75). While NeoPaganism is no longer limited to academics and intellectuals, NeoPagans still represent a hidden population. Due to fears of discrimination many NeoPagans are apprehensive about making their religious beliefs and practices public (Orion 1995: 225-227; Berger, Leach and Shaffer 2003: 231-233; Reid 2001: ch. 3). Although NeoPagans are predominantly white middle-class individuals, as a whole they feel as if they are a marginalized group. While it may seem counter-intuitive to associate white middle-class urbanites with marginality, many NeoPagans feel that they are marginalized through the negative reactions they have encountered from non-Pagans. While these reactions vary, from ridicule and disbelief to violence and the picketing of NeoPagan businesses,<sup>2</sup> NeoPagans understand this rejection of their belief systems to be a marginalizing of NeoPaganism in general. They have internalized their status as members of a marginalized group, even though others may not view them as such.

A survey conducted by The Witch's Voice, also known as WitchVox ([www.witchvox.com](http://www.witchvox.com)) in 1997 reveals that while ninety three percent of respondents were "out of the broom closet"<sup>3</sup> to friends, only sixty nine percent were open about their religious beliefs to family members. Thirty one percent of

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of negative reactions against NeoPagans, see Pike (2001: ch 3) or Orion (1995: 225).

<sup>3</sup> "Out of the Broom Closet" is a phrase meaning that the individual has revealed their status as a NeoPagan to others and does not make their religious affiliation a secret. It is a variation of the "coming out" metaphor for homosexuals.

respondents were "out of the broom closet" to neighbours, twenty five percent were open to their landlords, and only nine percent would reveal their religious beliefs to Child Welfare services. This reluctance to publicly identify oneself as NeoPagan is often due to the fear of discrimination, censure, or ridicule. While the intensity of reactions against NeoPagans varies across regions in North America, with more hostile reactions evident in more conservative areas such as the "Bible Belt" in the United States, there is a general reluctance felt by NeoPagans to openly display their religious or spiritual belief systems, which will be seen in testimonies by NeoPagan practitioners in Chapter Four.

This online survey in 1997 had 1341 responses, and this survey was repeated in 1999, garnering 2476 response. These two surveys will be used to establish some of the characteristics of NeoPagans who participate in online forums. The results from both surveys remained fairly consistent, as is shown in Appendix A. According to both the 1997 and 1999 survey, the majority of NeoPagans online are in their twenties and thirties (approximately 64%), while less than twenty percent are in their teens, and approximately sixteen percent are over the age of forty. Almost half of respondents identified Wicca as their form of spiritual practice, followed by Witch (24%) and Pagan (17%).<sup>4</sup> The other

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<sup>4</sup> The term Pagan (or NeoPagan) encompasses all the various forms of NeoPagan practice. Witch is another term for Wiccan, although some Witches differentiate themselves from Wiccans by claiming a long family tradition (similar to Hereditary Witchcraft, which is listed as a separate category in this survey, along with Traditional Witchcraft). The term Craft is often another name for Wicca, although there may be minor differences. Dianic Witchcraft is a feminist branch of Wicca, while Druids base their practices on the written evidence of historical Celtic practices. Shamans base their rituals primarily on those of Native

forms of NeoPaganism listed (Dianic, Druid, Shaman, Hereditary, Craft, Traditional, Other) each made up about two percent of both the samples. The surveys also indicate that the majority of NeoPagans are primarily solitary practitioners. In the 1997 survey, forty-five percent of respondents indicated that they were solitaries, and an additional thirty percent indicated that they were solitary, but attended up to two festivals a year. These findings indicate that approximately seventy-five percent of respondents identified themselves as primarily solitary practitioners, making solitaries a large component of NeoPagan practice. In the 1999 survey, thirty-eight percent indicated that they were exclusively solitaries, and sixteen percent were solitaries who attended festivals. However, this category in the 1999 survey only totaled seventy-seven percent, indicating that twenty-three percent of respondents did not answer this question, or that a typographical error was made. Notwithstanding the ambiguous results of the 1999 survey, solitary practitioners have been identified by these surveys as comprising at least half of NeoPagan practitioners, with numbers up to seventy-five percent; however no comprehensive study has yet to focus on solitary NeoPagans despite this demographic weight.

More consistent results were found in the patterns of practice among NeoPagans. In both surveys, approximately fifty-three percent of respondents indicated that they have only ever been solitary practitioners, and approximately eighteen percent indicated that they were once part of a group but have since become solitary. Twenty-five percent indicated that they were solitary

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Americans, although some prefer the practices of aboriginal groups from other parts of the world (e.g. Australian Aborigines).

practitioners but now practice in a group, and only three percent have only ever been part of a group. Again, these findings indicate the need for research on solitaries within the NeoPagan community as opposed to studies of the more visible coven groups, who have tended to participate more actively in past research on NeoPaganism.

The findings of this online survey closely parallel the findings of Berger, Leach and Shaffer (2003) in their NeoPagan census of the Eastern United States. They found that most NeoPagans are between the ages of twenty and forty-nine, and that 64.8% are women. Approximately ninety percent of NeoPagans classify themselves Caucasian, ninety percent have post-secondary education, and have a median income level of \$30 000 - \$40 000 USD (Berger, Leach and Shaffer 2003: 27-32). They also found that only twenty-nine percent of solitaries attend festivals (2003: 209), which suggests that surveys distributed at festivals may overrepresent those who work in groups and underrepresent those who work alone. They identified over fifty-percent of their sample as solitaries, and that seventy percent of solitaries and those working with a partner identified themselves as heterosexual.

In a Canadian study, Sian Reid found that eclectics constitute the majority of NeoPagan Witches in Canada (2001: 15). Eclectics, who are most commonly also solitaries, are characterized by beliefs and practices that are an amalgam of components that they have borrowed from other traditions. Their practices are too diverse to easily fit into categories, and are constantly being revised by participants. Reid's findings are similar to both Berger, Leach and Shaffer (2003)

and WitchVox's survey findings, which supports the claim that over half of NeoPagans are solitary practitioners and have little to no participation with groups. Berger, Leach and Shaffer (2003: 4) suggest that solitaries can remain connected to the larger NeoPagan community by participating in online NeoPagan chat groups, and this form of practice will be further elaborated in the discussion on virtual communities. The next section will provide a brief history of NeoPaganism, and its origins in British Wicca. A discussion of NeoPaganism and the myth of ancient origins will also be included, along with the implications of cultural borrowing by NeoPagans in order to facilitate claims of ancient origins. Cultural borrowing plays a large role in establishing "authenticity", which is of great importance in the conflicts among and between NeoPagan solitaries and groups, as will be seen in Chapter Four.

### *NeoPaganism: A Brief History*

NeoPaganism emerged out of one of its subgroups, Wicca, a religious path whose belief system was published in 1954 by Gerald Gardner, the credited founder of Wicca. Gardner, an amateur British anthropologist, claimed to have found an existing coven of witches in western Europe. According to Gardner,<sup>5</sup> Wicca was an ancient pre-Christian fertility religion that dated back to the Stone Age and was almost eradicated during the European Christian witchcraze of the

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<sup>5</sup> Gardner developed this idea of a pre-Christian pagan religion from the works of Sir James Frazer (1890), Charles Godfrey Leland (1899), Robert Graves (1948), and Margaret Murray (1921, 1933), who all contributed to this notion of an existing ancient religion.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Members of this religion supposedly went underground out of fear of persecution and only recently brought their religion into the public once again. The belief in Wicca as originating in an ancient pagan religion of witches is part of a myth of antiquity which Wiccans, and NeoPagans in general, use as an underlying principle of their belief systems. While it is generally accepted that NeoPaganism did not in fact originate in an ancient religious system, but rather has been based on the desire to recreate ancient pagan religions as they have been idealized over time (Berger 1999: 65), some NeoPagans argue that this myth of antiquity is literally true.

Wicca was brought to the United States in the late 1960s by Raymond Buckland, a former student of Gardner's, and soon gained popularity in both Canada and the United States. Different branches and traditions began to emerge, and in the 1970s NeoPaganism as a concept was firmly established in North America. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully examine the debate over the authenticity<sup>6</sup> of NeoPagan historical origins, it is safe to assume that Wicca and NeoPaganism, at least in their present forms, are relatively new religious systems. The issue of whether or not NeoPaganism can be classified as a religious system will be discussed in the next chapter, along with a review of relevant literary sources.

Material from different cultural traditions is used to create a link to the historical past that is imagined to have been a more spiritually authentic time. NeoPagan borrowing practices are rooted in the desire to belong to an ancient

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<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the historical accuracy of the myth of antiquity see Hutton (1999).

tradition in a cultural context that privileges the new (Magliocco 2004: 7; Pike 2001: 153). These ancient traditions are believed to possess the wisdom and knowledge that they feel is absent from their own lives, and NeoPagans create new selves rooted in ancient traditions which they feel are closer to nature than mainstream Western Judeo-Christian models (Pike 2001: 126).

While ancient religious traditions are seen to be more spiritually authentic by NeoPagans, much of North America lacks the historical depth of other cultures, where, according to NeoPagan historiography, the past has not been obliterated by industrial development (Magliocco 2004: 129). North America does not have the written historical records held by many European countries, and the inhabitation of North America by people of non-Native descent is relatively new. Over eighty percent of NeoPagans are of northern and central European descent. Current definitions of race and ethnicity locate Caucasians as unmarked in contrast to visible categories of ethnic identification. As a consequence, those who identify as white North Americans may feel that they have no ethnicity, that they are 'nothing' (Magliocco 2004: 129, 212), that they have no deep historical roots tying them to the land they inhabit. To combat this sense of nothingness, NeoPagans borrow material from different cultural traditions to create a link to the historical past, and to provide a symbol of Euro-American ethnic identity (Magliocco 2004: 7). The borrowing practices of eclectic NeoPagans can thus be interpreted as an attempt to create an historic, ethnic identity for themselves apart from the industrialized world.

Cultural borrowing has been aided by the forces of globalization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Globalization has brought even more cultures into contact within North America, resulting in high instances of cultural mixing (Magliocco 2004: 3-4). NeoPagan cultural borrowing practices have resulted in conflicts with the groups they borrow from. While in some instances there are no modern claims of exclusivity, such as in ancient Celtic or Egyptian practices which are no longer adhered to as a primary religious belief system in their countries of origin, in the case of modern aboriginal groups problems have arisen. There are two main groups in this conflict, who Magliocco calls the universalists and the critics. Universalists who borrow from other cultural traditions see themselves as part of a global community united by beliefs and practices that share many elements cross-culturally (Magliocco 2004: 224). To these universalists, elements of human spirituality are common throughout different cultures worldwide, and are thus not the property of one group. They argue that terms such as 'cultural borrowing', 'appropriation', and 'theft' presuppose a view of culture as a commodity, a thing that can be possessed, objectified, exchanged, and imitated. This view emerged during the twentieth century as cultural productions increasingly became commodified (Magliocco 2004: 216). To complicate matters, NeoPagans who borrow practices or customs from other cultures tend to modify them to fit with NeoPagan ideals and ideologies. At festivals, for example, many NeoPagans want to participate in sweat lodges presented by "real" Native Americans, but at the same time they do not wish to follow certain rules found among some Native American groups, such

as separation of genders. NeoPagans resist the separation of men and women, and refuse to comply with Native practices that do not fit their expectations of what Native Americans should do (Pike 2001: 147). NeoPagans want these cultural practices to remain pliant, so that they can be modified, but at the same time to be static and pure, in that they are traditional and therefore authentic.

Not all NeoPagans, however, are universalists. Some NeoPagans are concerned about the conflicts being raised, and refrain from using Native American elements in their rituals. They focus instead on historical European paganism, or on ancient pagan traditions that have largely disappeared from the modern world. Others believe that they are using the borrowed elements respectfully and are thus not harming Native Americans (Berger, Leach and Shaffer 2003: 5-6). While they may believe that they are being respectful, the Native American groups they borrow from do not always agree, and resist the appropriation and modification of their rituals. Even for those NeoPagans who value personal choice, and believe that they are not harming anyone by borrowing cultural practices, an important measure of certain dominant cultural notions of authenticity is still blood, meaning ethnic and racial ties to a cultural tradition (Pike 2001: 138). It is for this reason that many NeoPagans are less uneasy about going back to their own 'bloodlines' (e.g. ancient European) for inspiration than they are about borrowing from other cultures.

Critics of cultural borrowing argue that cultural borrowers are inauthentic because they have no direct relationship with Native communities. They argue that authenticity must be determined by belonging to a tradition or community by

'blood' and heritage. They are particularly skeptical of NeoPagan eclecticism, which removes practices from their cultural contexts by mixing them with other traditions (Pike 2001: 136). The controversy surrounding cultural borrowing stems from issues of representation and ownership. According to Pike, some Native Americans are resentful when white North Americans appropriate their traditions, modify them, and then advertise that they are using authentic Native elements in their rituals. The issue of ownership stems from the blood-right model, which makes the assumption that race, ethnicity, and culture are linked. This model leads to racism based on exclusivist arguments and essentialized cultural forms (Magliocco 2004: 234). Due to the history of exploitation of Native Americans, critics are reluctant to contest Native claims of cultural ownership.

It is easy to empathize with Native Americans, whose cultures have already been decimated by colonialism, when they argue against the appropriation of traditions that serve as powerful loci of resistance against white hegemony, and the commodification of their own practices and artifacts. Yet at the same time arguments become distasteful and racist when made by other groups. Any workable theory of cultural property must be equally applicable to all groups, and must not depend on the relative powerlessness of any particular group, as power differentials among various cultural groups change over time. (Magliocco 2004: 235)

The argument made by Magliocco is that theories of cultural property must be applicable to all groups, and special considerations should not be given to any group, regardless of the marginal status or history of oppression of that group.

Some Native American critics strongly disagree with Magliocco's and the universalist positions, and accuse NeoPagans of stealing the cultural property of communities who have already been dispossessed by white Europeans. Their critique is not limited to NeoPagans, but also appropriators of American Indian art and jewelry, to New Age<sup>7</sup> movements, and environmental activists who look to Native cultures to model ideal relationships with the natural world. Native American critics are unsympathetic toward middle-class white people looking for cultural authenticity, and are hostile when these "white-indians" threaten their traditions by cultural absorption and misinterpretation (Pike 2001: 125). Pike uses the example of Native American exemptions from endangered species restrictions, which could be threatened by the increasing number of NeoPagans who also make ritual objects out of endangered animal parts, to illustrate this point. The ownership and creation of these ritual objects by non-Natives poses a threat to Native communities' access to these objects (Pike 2001: 135).

It is argued by both Magliocco and Pike that when white people dress as Native Americans or borrow Native customs, they are perpetuating colonialism, racism, and "cultural strip mining". In this view, imitation is not a sign of respect, but of cultural imperialism (Magliocco 2004: 216; Pike 2001: 135). Native Americans become particularly angry when their practices are commodified, and

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<sup>7</sup> NeoPagans make distinctions between their practices and those of New Age practitioners, and highly resist being classified as New Age.

whites are profiting from Native American rituals and cultural practices. The controversy over NeoPagan cultural borrowing exemplifies the North American ambivalence about the meaning of culture itself, along with meanings of authenticity and ethnicity. These concepts will be fully explored in the solitary-tradition debate in Chapter Four.

The next chapter will examine whether NeoPaganism can be considered a religious system and a number of definitions of religion by social scientists will be explored. A review of previous studies of NeoPagan groups, both in North America and in western Europe, will be undertaken, along with the relevance of these findings for my current research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

While many NeoPagans define their practices as being part of a religious system, there have been debates, in NeoPagan as well as academic circles, as to whether NeoPaganism constitutes a religious system as defined by the social sciences. In this chapter, various definitions of religion will be explored in terms of their applicability to NeoPaganism. A review of anthropological and sociological studies of NeoPagan groups in North America and western Europe will also be examined in order to identify common concepts throughout this literature. Common characteristics of NeoPagan communities will be discussed, along with the conflicts that exist within the overall NeoPagan community. References to solitary practitioners in past research will be explored, along with the emergence of NeoPagan communities online.

### *Defining Religion: Is NeoPaganism a Religion?*

There is an ongoing debate concerning whether NeoPaganism constitutes a religious system or is just a set of spiritual practices adhered to by a disparate group of individuals. In order to justify my classification of NeoPaganism as a form of online religion, I must first examine NeoPaganism as a religion in itself, which I will accomplish through an examination of anthropological definitions and conceptions of religion.

The modern scholarly definition of a religion was set in 1871 by Sir Edward Tylor, who claimed that the essential component of any religious system was a belief in the existence of spiritual beings and in the need humans have to form a relationship with them (Hutton 1999: 3). This definition is very broad and includes many belief systems that today would not be classified by academics as religions. Tylor was a rationalist, and as such he accepted human reason as the ultimate source of knowledge. His minimum definition of religion was the belief in spiritual beings, which he called animism, but he claimed that a mere belief in souls does not constitute a religion. Religion becomes a social institution only if the beliefs give rise to communal ritual. Religion is thus explained by Tylor as an intellectual effort that has no other purpose than to understand biological events and natural phenomena (de Waal Malefijt 1968: 49-51). Numerous scholars who came after Tylor attempted to refine this conception of religion and, particularly in the social sciences, this resulted in a focus on the role religion plays in society.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim is one of the many who provided more detailed definitions of religion, and he focused on religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community (1915: 62). Durkheim's conception of religion, which was based on the structure of the Christian Church, emphasizes the cohesive nature of organized religious hierarchies and excludes less dogmatic forms of religion. This definition implies that religion is a conservative, unifying force that reflects the social order and ignores the revolutionizing effects of religion in non-Christian as well as certain Christian belief systems (for example, evangelical forms) around the world.

Durkheim approached religion from a positivist perspective, in which social phenomena have a fixed and necessary order and are governed by rational laws discoverable by the human mind. He was convinced that religious phenomena were ruled by observable scientific facts. Durkheim saw religion as a useful institution for society, and stressed the social meaning of religion. In his view, because religion is born out of the social, it follows that both have moral authority, and he claimed that religious beliefs are always group beliefs (Durkheim 1915; Durkheim 1954; de Waal Malefijt 1968: 58-63). Therefore, in Durkheim's definition of religion, group formation and solidarity is a precondition of religious activity. Religion is conceived as an expression of the unity of society, and its function is to strengthen social solidarity.

An alternative view of religion is provided by Clifford Geertz, who stresses that the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve as a source of distinctive conceptions of the world, and the individual's place in the world. Geertz defines religion as

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1966: 4)

Geertz thus departs from the functionalist insistence on religion as a strengthener of group solidarity, and instead focuses on the symbolic content of religions.

This is of great importance to studies of NeoPaganism, as NeoPagans do not generally form institutionalized or structured organizations, and instead form loose and transitory bonds with individual members. The functionalist idea of religion as an organized group precludes NeoPaganism as a religious system.<sup>8</sup>

Some scholars have proposed that NeoPaganism is not a religion because some NeoPagans use magic in rituals. However, religion and magic are not mutually exclusive terms. There is a large overlap between magic, religion, and science, and an absolute distinction between the three terms is difficult to achieve (see de Waal Malefijt 1968:12). Many anthropologists have attempted to distance magic from religion by defining magic as superstitious or evil, and religion as moral. Malinowski made a distinction between magic and religion, stating that magic could be evil as well as good, while religion is essentially moral (1948: 84-89). In both of these distinctions, magic is seen as inferior to religion, and as illogical and superstitious.

Contrary to these conceptions of magic, the NeoPagan conception of “magick”, which has a different spelling to differentiate it from magical illusions, is a complex phenomenon that is often assumed to be trivial and frivolous. In some NeoPagan belief systems (not all include magic), magick is a religious practice undertaken by individuals, alone or in concert, to effect some transformation in themselves or the environment. Magic is often regarded by social scientists as the opposite of religion, but it is more accurately distinguished

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<sup>8</sup> I have chosen not to include a discussion of Victor Turner's work because the focus of online religious practice is not ritual, but is instead a means of establishing community.

from religion by virtue of being a form of behaviour, such as acts of worship, while religion is a set of beliefs which influence that behaviour (Orion 1995: 4-5). Magick can be directly compared to prayer as a form of worship, where guidance or aid is invoked from the deity (or deities) by the worshipper. Seen in this light, magick is not so different from the religious practices of more mainstream religions.

A more inclusive conception of religion was provided by Loretta Orion (1995), an ethnographer who studied NeoPaganism and combined various elements from previous definitions of religion. Orion (1995:5) depicts religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things (Durkheim 1915) that are powerful and persuasive and that motivate (Geertz 1973) actions, both worshipful and magical, and provide for all those who adhere to them the foundation for a sense of unity based on their sharing of these common beliefs". Orion recognizes that religions are potentially dynamic and do not conform to standard constructions of belief. Individuals often manipulate myths and produce variants that promote their individual interests (Orion 1995: 4), and the accumulation of many individuals' variations produces continuous change within religious ideology itself. This interpretation of religion recognizes the dynamic and constantly changing nature of religious belief, an understanding that is vital to understandings of NeoPagan religious ideologies and will be the framework used to understand NeoPaganism. The dynamic nature of NeoPaganism will be seen in the following section on NeoPagan communities.

### *NeoPagan Communities*

NeoPaganism is a diverse, decentralized movement, is individualist, and has no established hierarchy or leaders. These are not characteristics commonly associated with the notion of community. The fluidity of NeoPagan boundaries makes it virtually impossible to determine who belongs to the community at any one time, as membership is informal and nonexclusive. NeoPaganism is not an organized movement but rather a loose association of overlapping networks (Magliocco 2004: 59), which has resulted in the development of many different traditions with varying central tenets. Since NeoPaganism is so decentralized, and each group or tradition autonomous, many attempts to create a common set of principles or a conclusive definition of NeoPaganism as a whole have ultimately met with failure.

NeoPagans use the term community in two ways: (1) as encompassing all NeoPagans, and (2) through shared experiences. The first form of community is a larger community defined by the participants' position outside the mainstream, while the second form of community refers to face-to-face interactions (Berger 1999: 66). The overall NeoPagan community is not based on face-to-face interactions, but exists as a common bond between NeoPagans based on their shared membership. What Berger identifies as the second form of community is group practice, as it is based on in-person contacts, and so excludes solitaries from this second form of community. In order to adapt Berger's classification to include solitaries as a group, the face-to-face component would have to be

removed. This type of community would instead be based solely on shared experiences, which could potentially occur in-person or online.

The ambiguity of boundaries in NeoPaganism means that the process of self-definition does not result in anyone being viewed as outside the religion, however the disparity in training results in some questioning of the credentials of others (Berger, Leach and Shaffer 2003: 3). Due to the flexibility of community boundaries, virtually anyone could just declare themselves NeoPagan without reading the literature, learning from a more experienced member, or participating in any activities. NeoPagans do, however, have criteria for identifying which individuals constitute dedicated or serious members, although there is no way to enforce these criteria. The process of determining who is a dedicated practitioner involves the issue of authority, and has resulted in large-scale conflicts between groups and solitaries, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

Unlike older religious traditions that have a tradition of predetermined hierarchy and a standardized set of beliefs and practices, NeoPaganism has virtually no institutionalized features. Some traditions have established hierarchies, but these are increasingly in the minority, particularly among young people (Berger and Ezzy 2004: 177). It is generally older members who were initiated into group practice who promote the institutionalization of NeoPaganism, and are advocating paid clergy and tax exempt status for NeoPagan organizations. However, many NeoPagans oppose the development of hierarchy and believe it will curtail their individual freedom (Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003: 186). This

issue will also be discussed in Chapter Four along with conflicts between groups and solitaries.

Within specific traditions, coven groups are notoriously unstable, and the majority of groups break up after around two years. Adler (1979: 33) states that the lack of boundedness in NeoPaganism allows individuals to move freely between groups according to their needs, but at the same time they remain within a community framework that defines itself as NeoPagan. While the basic community remains, the individual structures may change, as social needs are not equated with the cohesiveness of organized groups. While the individualist structure of NeoPaganism is attractive to many members, the lack of boundedness in NeoPagan groups creates a dilemma for NeoPagans who idealize community and strive to create it through covens, traditions, the Internet, or festivals (Magliocco 2004: 59-60). These venues serve as temporary communities that supplement the primarily individualist nature of NeoPaganism.

Many scholars have identified a pervasive trend in North America toward a greater individualism in interpreting religious beliefs (Orion 1995; Pike 2001; Reid 2001; Magliocco 2004; Rabinovitch and Macdonald 2004). According to Rabinovitch and Macdonald (2004: 10), Western cultures have developed a unique type of individualism where self-contained personalities act primarily in isolation from others, so that the goal of a good life becomes individual self-improvement. This creates the illusion of separateness and essentially removes the individual from collective religious sentiment. The focus that NeoPaganism places on the individual means that the social expression of faith is negotiated by

the individual rather than being organized around an administrative framework (Reid 2001: 104).

Rabinovitch and Macdonald use the concept of neo-tribe, as theorized by Michel Maffesoli (1996), to describe NeoPaganism as a group in the twenty first century. According to Maffesoli, the neo-tribe replaces in importance the more traditional groupings by kinship, class, and ethnicity. Rabinovitch and Macdonald (2004: 3-5) state that NeoPagans constitute a neo-tribe, since they see themselves as part of a community even when they have few in-person contacts with other NeoPagans. A sense of contact is made instead through reading the same material, visiting the same websites and participating in the same chat rooms. Neo-tribes are concerned with maintaining the ambience that defines them, the sense that everyone shares in a collective sensibility and the shared symbolic. One of the key elements of neo-tribes is that of self-identification based upon individual choice, the desire to construct oneself in relation to something broader. This construction of a neo-tribe is particularly important, according to the authors, to North American NeoPagans not of aboriginal descent, for whom there is not often a 'sense of place' calling to them. Since Canadians and Americans are very mobile people, they do not have nearly the same attachment to a physical place as those in Europe typically have. Instead, North American NeoPagans have stronger ties to national or regional identity than they do to the land itself; the sense of place is more symbolic and ideal than actual. This sense of a mythic place fills the individual with a sense of belonging, replacing the rootlessness that so typifies North Americans of European heritage

(Rabinovitch and Macdonald 2004: 49–50). The concept of neo-tribe plays an important role in discussions of virtual community, and will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Five.

As an oppositional religious group NeoPagans experience a sense of community largely as part of being a member of a marginalized group. Pagans construct their identity in contrast to that of the dominant North American (Western) culture, and oppositionality is part of the process of identity formation. At its most basic level it involves adopting an identity antithetical to that of mainstream American culture in order to differentiate the self from the other (Magliocco 2004: 185). NeoPaganism is thus a socially imagined community that distinguishes itself from the non-Pagan community while at the same time creating boundaries within itself. The process of boundary formation and its implications for constructing identities will be discussed in Chapter Four.

### *Solitaries: A Hidden Population*

Solitaries make up a hidden population in that they are not the most visible component of NeoPagan communities. Due to their visibility and the emphasis on group practice in past ethnographies, covens are the more classic image of NeoPaganism in the public mind. Solitaries have not been completely absent from ethnographies, but have been only briefly examined. Some ethnographers have only mentioned them in passing, while others have discussed solitaries in more detail.

One of the first ethnographic works on NeoPaganism was undertaken, not by an anthropologist, but by a practitioner of Wicca named Margot Adler. Her book, *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979) was an in-depth look at the emergence of Wicca as a new religious movement in North America and Western Europe. Although her focus was on Wicca, she also examined NeoPaganism as a whole. Adler traveled for three months to covens and groves in the United States and Britain, attended ritual gatherings, conducted interviews, and published a questionnaire in the popular NeoPagan journal *Green Egg*. A second questionnaire was published in *Panegyria* in 1986 for the second edition of the book, and was also handed out at three Pagan festivals, from which she received 195 responses. Like most researchers of NeoPagan groups, Adler focused her study on the group practitioner, the most visible form of NeoPaganism and the most easily accessible.

In terms of community, Adler (1979: 361) sees the instability of NeoPagan groups as a virtue, since it enables individuals to move freely between groups and form their own groups according to their needs, but all the while remaining within an overall Pagan community. Adler largely focuses on group members and on NeoPagan festivals, which she views as the creation of a national Pagan community. She recognizes that covens are no longer as central as festivals and large networking organizations, but does not speculate as to why this trend was occurring. There is also very little mention of solitary practitioners, and how they fit into this community of festivals and networks. Instead, Adler focuses on how the nature of festivals tends to break down the authority of coven leaders. The

frequent dissolution of covens and groups will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. In terms of survey distribution, it is therefore necessary to include the Internet as a means of distribution, as this has been established as the environment which NeoPagans inhabit. In order to make surveys more representative as a whole, researchers should include an online component in order to reach the more hidden solitary population in NeoPaganism.

Sarah Pike's ethnography, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (2001), examines festivals as the primary means of community among NeoPagans. Pike attended ELFest in May of 1991, an annual spring festival sponsored by the Elf Lore Family (ELF) at Lothlorien in the UK, and also attended Starwood, Wild Magick Gathering, Summerhawk, Rites of Spring, Spiral, Summersgate, and Pagan Spirit gathering over a period of several years. Pike (2001: 18) claims that it is on the boundaries between festival communities and their neighbours that NeoPagans create new religious identities through conflict and improvisation. Pike focuses on the marginal status of NeoPagans in North America and examines conflicts between NeoPagans and others through reported incidents and testimonials by NeoPagan members. NeoPagans construct spiritual space by rejecting the meanings and rituals proposed by culturally dominant Christian churches. Christianity thus becomes essential as that which is rejected, and which rejects, to establish NeoPagans' own identity. Pike suggests that it is at festivals where NeoPagans feel fully themselves, making festival communities a necessity for the individualism that

NeoPagans value. Pike's study focuses specifically on festivals, and little mention is made of solitary practitioners in her study

Orion (1995) also focuses on the festival as the locus for community in NeoPaganism. This could be because her fieldwork was with attendees of a NeoPagan festival, Pagan Spirit Gathering. She claims that by devising such large outdoor gatherings American witches have created a loosely knit national community with a shared set of beliefs and both oral and written traditions (Orion 1995: 127). There is no mention of solitary conceptions of community, although some solitary NeoPagans will attend festivals once or twice a year. Although she does not refer specifically to solitaries in this instance, Orion does recognize that NeoPagans form a loosely knit national community in spite of the fact that many NeoPagans do not maintain frequent in-person contacts. This supports the notion that NeoPagans form a community of individual members who maintain symbolic community boundaries. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three in the examination of theoretical concepts.

Berger's research was mainly executed with coven members and festival-goers, although she does indicate that approximately fifty percent of NeoPagans practice alone or with a romantic partner. She does point out, however, that most Wiccans do join a coven at some point in their religious career. According to Berger (1999: 51), coven training is viewed by many in the NeoPagan community as necessary to becoming a *real* Witch, a position that is held mainly by members of covens or of the more conservative Traditions (e.g. Gardnerian Wicca). She applies these characteristics, however, to all NeoPagan groups, for example, in

her claim that secrecy is stressed within covens and information only revealed upon initiation. This conflict between uninitiated solitaries and trained coven members will be discussed in Chapter Four in the discussion of the solitary-tradition debate.

A useful resource for this study was Sian Reid's doctoral thesis, *Disorganized Religion: An Exploration of the NeoPagan Craft in Canada* (2001), which is one of the few studies of NeoPaganism that is specific to Canada. Reid states that eclectics constitute the majority of NeoPagans in most parts of Canada, and that their practices are too diverse to fit into categories. She does identify that the beliefs and practices of eclectics are an amalgam of elements they have read, learned from others, or borrowed from other systems (Reid 2001: 15-18). Reid disputes the notion that the organizational structure is the precondition for an organized social expression of faith, as argued by Stark and Bainbridge (1985) (see Reid 2001: 101-104). From their perspective, NeoPagans are considered "unchurched" unless they are counted on the official membership lists of a large pagan organization, such as Covenant of the Goddess or the Pagan Federation of Canada. Reid (2001: 104), however, argues that the individual nature of NeoPaganism means that the social expression of faith is organized not around an administrative framework, but is negotiated by the individual.

Reid's survey indicates that, while seeking out more experienced others who have practiced NeoPaganism for many years may be desirable, a suitably dedicated individual working alone may achieve the same level of insight and personal development as one who is working in a group. She suggests that this is

because participants' self-identification as NeoPagan is something that resides within themselves, and is not a function of their membership in a group. This perception among participants exists despite scholarly theorizing about the necessity and importance of interaction in supporting a community structure (Reid 2001: 116-118). The notion that physical relations is a precondition for religious community persists in the social sciences, although Reid's study indicates that membership in a group is not a necessary component of becoming NeoPagan.

Rabinovitch and Macdonald, unlike many other ethnographers of NeoPaganism, recognize that the single largest "tradition" is that of the solitary practitioner, although covens are the more classic image of NeoPagans in the public mind. They also acknowledge that the Internet has created a massive *communitas*<sup>9</sup> space (Rabinovitch and Macdonald 2004: 217-219) in which NeoPagans can interact with one another. Along with the recent increases in solitary practice in the past fifteen years, there has also been a significant influx of high school and college students into contemporary NeoPaganism (Berger and Ezzy 2004: 175-176; Pike 2004: 18), and it is these young people who account for a large percentage of this growth of solitary NeoPaganism. According to Pike (2004: 18), the Internet has played an important role in popularizing NeoPaganism and making it accessible to young people. These young solitaries form a large part of the newly emerging community of solitaries online. These solitary practitioners can see themselves as part of a community, even when they may have few in-person contacts with other NeoPagans, through the reading of

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<sup>9</sup> Rabinovitch and Macdonald used the term *communitas* in their ethnography, which is consistent with Victor Turner's (1969, 1982) usage of the term.

the same material, visiting the same websites, and participating in the same chat rooms (Rabinovitch and Macdonald 2004: 4). The priority given to textual resources among NeoPaganism has led Cowan (2005: 36-37) to identify NeoPaganism as a common resource culture, as modern practices are derived from a common set of textual resources. According to Cowan, textual resources are the primary means by which modern Pagans access information about beliefs and practices, as this offers a less threatening entry point into what many still consider a deviant religious tradition (2005: 37). The material provided in textual resources provide the bricks out of which participants construct their idea of NeoPaganism (Reid 2001: 113-114), and the publication of books and how-to manuals often complements information accessed on the Internet. The increasing availability of these resources allows NeoPagans to choose solitary practice over group practice, whereas before the popularity of the Internet and the publication of books on NeoPaganism, individuals could only access this information by contacting and participating in a group.

Although it has been established that the majority of NeoPagans are solitary practitioners, these solitaries have formed their own community in an online environment. These individuals have formed a group identity through online interaction, while retaining the identity of a solitary practitioner. The simultaneous identity of being a solitary and of belonging to a group is the result of symbolic boundary formation. The fluidity of community boundaries among NeoPagans allows for multiple and shifting identities, and so supports the notion of maintaining a solitary identity while remaining part of an overall community.

The emergence of a community of solitaries will be the focus of Chapter Five, along with a discussion of virtual community.

### *NeoPaganism Online*

While the preceding ethnographic works have focused on NeoPaganism exclusively, Christopher Helland's doctoral thesis, *Religion on the Internet: A Sociological Inquiry into Participation and Community Online* (2004), examines the emergence of religion onto the Internet, in which NeoPaganism is one of three case studies. According to Helland it was the period from 1992 to 1995 in which the development of the World Wide Web would revolutionize computer use. Individuals could easily locate and share information and there was increased ability to network across the world. Between 2001 and 2003, there were dramatic increases (45.5%) in online religious representation. The categories with the most increases were Hinduism (125% increase), Esoteric/Occult (78.5% increase), Buddhism (58% increase), and Christianity (49.2% increase). Other categories experiencing increases were Paganism (0.4%), Divination (24%), and New Age (38%) (Helland 2004: 47). However, these categories were developed and defined by Yahoo!, and criteria for these categories are not provided. Because of the difficulty in classifying and defining NeoPagan groups, even amongst NeoPagans themselves, there are problems inherent in measuring increases in online representation. The categories of Esoteric/Occult, Paganism, Divination, and New Age could all possibly be classified as NeoPagan, depending on how the

groups themselves would define their beliefs and practices. This could mean that NeoPaganism experienced anywhere from 0.4% increase to 140.9% increase in the period from 2001 to 2003!

The majority of Internet use occurs in North America and Europe, and Helland claims that it was popular religion (e.g. NeoPaganism) and unofficial websites that first began to appear online in the mid-1990s. Helland discovered that there was a significant trend in the NeoPagan community where individuals readily shared information about designing websites through major NeoPagan hub sites, such as The Witch's Voice ([www.witchvox.com](http://www.witchvox.com)). In 1997, a Pagan Webcrafter's Association was developed specifically for this purpose (<http://the-pwa.net/>). Helland argues that a large percentage of the Western world maintains religious and spiritual beliefs without belonging to a traditional church organization, and that the Internet has become an ideal medium for non-affiliated religious participation. The attraction of online participation as opposed to in-person participation is that the individual is able to go online from home with no fear of commitment, ridicule, or reprisal for their sudden rise in religious sentiment (Helland 2004: 100). According to Helland, the expanding religious presence on the Internet is reinforcing the division between those who are affiliated with a traditional religious institution and those who are only loosely affiliated.

In his earlier work concerning religion on the Internet, Helland originally correlated virtual religious communities with Victor Turner's theoretical classification of virtual *communitas*, but he refutes this correlation in his present

work. Turner's study, he claims, focused upon the manner in which individuals experienced rites of passage and social transformation within certain rituals, and that this particular form of religious interaction provided a liminal and unstructured environment for the participants in direct opposition to the socially structured world the people normally inhabited. In order to apply Turner's theory (see Turner 1969) to online participation, the event of going online would have to represent a ritualistic occurrence where the participant is separating him/herself from one world and entering another, which Helland states is not the case in this instance (Helland 2004: 125-135).

In his case study on NeoPaganism, Helland (2004: 257-262) states that Wiccan and Pagan groups have been the most unified in embracing the Internet to develop online community formation, as evidenced by the 4 680 Wiccan chat sites present in 2003. These groups are not based upon dogma but rather on community and being in touch with other like-minded people while maintaining a great deal of individualism. Helland argues that the Internet is not replacing offline church participation, but is filling the gap in which people need to feel socially connected to a religious belief system. This is of importance in examining virtual communities, which will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Another work which focuses on online religious representation is Douglas Cowan's *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* (2005). Cowan examines Paganism on the Internet from an outsider's perspective, as he is not a NeoPagan himself and did not interact with NeoPagans very much outside of the Internet. Cowan argues that Paganism, which claims to have no standard sacred text, is a

remarkably textual culture, as textual resources are one of the primary means by which modern Pagans access information about beliefs and practices. He claims that textual resources offer a less threatening alternative to "coming out of the broom closet" and declaring oneself to be a Witch to outsiders. Paganism as a whole is a common resource culture in that modern Pagan ritual and practices are derived from a common set of textual resources, and the Internet is an important vehicle by which these are communicated to the modern Pagan community (Cowan 2005: 35-37). Cowan describes NeoPaganism as an "open-source religion" in reference to NeoPagan cultural borrowing practices, and states that it is this open-source character of modern Paganism which almost ensures that many will work alone (2005: 43-45).

In examining the NeoPagan presence online, Cowan (2005: 109, 153) states that many modern Pagans regard computer technology as an integral part of Paganism, and that computers contribute to the open source<sup>10</sup> construction of modern Paganism. Communication and interaction on the Internet entails much lower risk for participants than does face-to-face interaction or visiting a Pagan gathering. Cowan also claims that the Internet provides a venue for the modern Pagan process of identity construction and experimentation, where individuals can try on the identity of a modern Pagan. The Internet itself has challenged the meanings of identity itself and has forced us to consider the ways in which identity is being constructed online, such as the use of multiple identities by a single user.

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<sup>10</sup> The term "open source" refers to the fact that numerous people all contribute to the definition and creation of NeoPagan practice online.

In this chapter, NeoPaganism has been identified as a religious system through examining anthropological and sociological definitions of religion. The functionalist emphasis on group cohesion and solidarity has made way for symbolic interpretations of religious groups which recognize that religious membership and participation can occur in fragmentary groups or even by individuals. A review of previous ethnographies on NeoPaganism has revealed a bias towards researching group members and have largely excluded solitary practitioners, although these same studies have identified solitaries as comprising fifty to seventy-five percent of the NeoPagan population. In the next chapter I will outline the methodology I employed in this research, along with a discussion of the difficulties of conducting research on the Internet. My theoretical standpoint will be discussed in terms of analyzing the data generated from these research methods, and I will examine the main theoretical concepts used in this study.

### **Chapter Three: Theory and Methods**

In this section I will outline the research methods employed in this study, which consisted primarily of participant observation and in-depth interviews. I will discuss the implications and difficulties which arose as a consequence of my previous interactions with NeoPagans and my status as an insider. The ethical issues of online research will be examined, along with how I attempted to resolve these issues to the best of my abilities. The theoretical approach I used in analyzing qualitative data will be examined, along with my reasons for choosing this approach. The specific theoretical concepts used in this study will then be examined in detail and will be applied to my research on NeoPaganism.

#### *Methodology*

I conducted the majority of the qualitative research on the Internet, through online participant observation on NeoPagan websites and message boards, online questionnaires (see Appendix C), and personal communications with selected respondents. Of the twenty-nine participants in this research, eighteen respondents were contacted primarily through message boards and online interviews and eleven people participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews, which ranged from 1.5 to 2 hours in length. This study is not limited to Canada, but is a study of cyberspace as the location of a group. However, respondents and participants of NeoPagan websites are predominantly from the

United States, Canada, and Australia, where Internet access is more widespread than in other countries.

Rather than distribute a survey or compile statistical data, I chose to rely primarily on qualitative data collected from interviews and personal communications online. I posted a statement about my research on The Witch's Voice website ([www.witchvox.com](http://www.witchvox.com)), the largest NeoPagan website on the Internet, asking interested participants to comment on general categories and to relate to me what they, as NeoPagans, felt was important about each topic. Eleven respondents indicated their willingness to speak to me personally, and I set up interviews with them in-person (9) and on the telephone (2), whichever means the participant was most comfortable with. In these follow-up semi-structured interviews I asked participants to elaborate on some of the statements they had made in response to the WitchVox posting, as well as asking more detailed questions about their experiences of community online.

During this study I had the advantage of being considered an insider, in that I have been a solitary Wiccan for over twelve years, and this enabled participants to trust me more than they would have if I were an outsider. This is largely because NeoPagans fear that outsiders will misunderstand their beliefs and practices and depict them as Satanists, delusional, or merely playing at being witches, which they find disrespectful and damaging in the public eye. As an insider, they trusted that I would understand their points of view and not use their beliefs as a platform for my own personal agenda, such as 'a preacher using supposed NeoPagan practices as examples of abhorrent behaviour or calling upon

NeoPagans to repent'.<sup>11</sup> However, there is also a downside to studying a group to which I am an insider, and this entails separating my personal experience and conceptions about NeoPaganism from my research findings and recognizing my own personal preconceptions and biases. I have largely been a solitary practitioner, with very little group experience, and this helped me to see community from a solitary perspective. But this also limits my knowledge of community in a group perspective and this forces me to rely more heavily on respondents' reports of group experiences and notions of community. While it is not possible to be completely objective, I have attempted to minimize my own influence on these research findings by acknowledging that I have a bias toward the solitary perspective and a belief that communities can exist on the Internet. When interviewing respondents I was very careful not to ask leading questions and instead asked them to comment on general topics (see Appendix B). I was very conscious of the fact that respondents frequently alter their answers in accordance to what they feel the researcher is looking for, and so I refrained from indicating which direction my research was going, and let them decide how to interpret what I was asking.

Past ethnographies on NeoPagans, particularly concerning Wiccans or Witches, have focused almost exclusively on the festival or coven as the loci of community, but very little has been written about solitary NeoPagans' conceptions of community. The absence of the solitary perspective in ethnographic research can be explained by the fact that solitary NeoPaganism is a hidden population and

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<sup>11</sup> This statement was an example repeated by a number of participants and is not meant by the researcher as a stereotype of those from Judeo-Christian traditions.

it is very difficult to locate and contact these individuals. Even when contact is made, many solitaries do not wish to come forward and be part of a research study for fears of others discovering their religious beliefs and affiliation with NeoPaganism. My own past experience as a solitary practitioner of Wicca has helped me to see this oversight in previous research and has given me insight into the solitary perspective. Since solitaries are a hidden community, they are often more comfortable in anonymous situations, so much of my initial contact with solitaries took place online, where participants felt safe and relatively anonymous.

This study is not representative of NeoPaganism as a whole, as this is a highly diversified group of traditions and practices, but is a starting point for future research. This research cannot present definitive findings because Internet groups are not static and are composed of transient populations. Although these findings are not applicable to all Internet communities, it is reasonable to assume that many of these findings could be applied to a multitude of NeoPagan groups in a generalized way. This research is a study of the sense of community amongst NeoPagans through the Internet, and the predominance of solitary practitioners in this environment. While I talked to both solitaries and group members, I found that the majority of NeoPagans interacting within the virtual community were solitaries, and so solitary practitioners have been given precedence in this study.

### *Ethical Issues*

Since NeoPagans are a socially marginalized group, every effort was made to protect participants' identities and to safeguard their anonymity.<sup>12</sup> All respondents will be referred to under pseudonyms, even those who only identified themselves using their online name or persona, in order to prevent harassment or adverse effects resulting from the publication and dissemination of this research. Individuals who posted information on message boards have also been given pseudonyms,<sup>13</sup> even though message boards are considered to be a public space, in an effort to protect their online identities and personas from online harassment, where others bombard a person with hate e-mail or make negative or threatening comments about the person on the Internet. While there is still a chance that people who posted messages on NeoPagan bulletin boards could be identified through someone recognizing a phrase or sentence spoken by the participant, the use of pseudonyms affords them reasonable protection.

As mentioned previously, online message boards and bulletin boards are considered to be a public space because anyone with Internet access can read what the individual wrote, with the exception of members-only bulletin boards, which I did not include in this research. In all of my communications with participants online I made my status as a researcher known, along with my previous solitary experience as a Wiccan, and I disclosed the name of the

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<sup>12</sup> In the analysis of interview material in Chapter Four and Chapter Five I will refrain from identifying which participants were met in person and which were contacted primarily online in an effort to safeguard their identities.

<sup>13</sup> The only exception to the use of pseudonyms will be in relation to copywritten essays posted at WitchVox. In these instances the author's name will be used as it appears in the essay.

University, my thesis supervisor, and the Chair of the Ethics Committee in my online postings so that individuals could contact them about any questions or concerns surrounding my research study. While I have only been actively participating in online message boards since April of 2005, I have been "lurking" at these sites since October of 2004, meaning that I monitored these online communications without contributing or actively participating. In total I spent approximately 600 hours observing online activity and reading archived discussions dating back to 1997. I confined most of my lurking to The Witch's Voice, which is the largest online NeoPagan hub site linking thousands of NeoPagan sites together into an online network. The Witch's Voice, also referred to as WitchVox, was created in 1997 by Wren Walker and Fritz Jung and is open to all forms of NeoPaganism. It is also not exclusively for NeoPagans but is also open to Non-Pagans, and has information sites for people who are curious about NeoPaganism, or who have a family member or friend who is NeoPagan and has concerns about negative effects or rumours of Satanism. WitchVox is a site where NeoPagans can post essays, focused questions, surveys, and news for other NeoPagans to read and comment on. There are also listings of other NeoPagans all over the world and notices of upcoming events where one can meet others who share similar belief systems. WitchVox does not accept paid advertising and is a commercial free resource that relies exclusively on donations from sponsors to remain operating. The lack of advertising and the non-exclusive nature of the site provide NeoPagans with a neutral forum open to all adherents of various religions

and belief systems, and also provides educational materials to dispel stereotypical images about NeoPagans.

While researchers have employed qualitative research methods for centuries, research on the Internet is relatively new<sup>14</sup> and entails greater risk to individual privacy and confidentiality. Individuals are prevented from knowing that their communications are being monitored and recorded by a researcher, or that their comments may be utilized in an academic study, and often there is no way of contacting these individuals to ask their permission. Therefore it has generally been accepted, although there is still much debate, that the publicness or privateness of an online space should be judged according to how it is perceived by the people who interact within it (Knobel 2003: 194). According to these criteria, WitchVox can be perceived as an open space, and therefore a public forum. Archival discussions are also generally presumed to be public spaces, and WitchVox's essay archives are open for all to view, not just registered members. According to Graydon (2003: 20), research involving the analysis of text messages posted online is not considered research involving human subjects, as publicly accessible newsgroups on the Internet are considered to be in the public domain. As these are public spaces, researchers do not need to secure the consent of either the newsgroup moderators or the members. However, disclosing one's presence to the individuals in charge of the website or newsgroup and to the site users is necessary in order to establish a relationship of trust, and to show respect for the group one is studying. In accordance with this, I obtained permission from

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<sup>14</sup> For examples of previous ethnographic studies of online groups, see Ferguson (1998) and Graydon (2003).

Witchvox's moderators before posting a message on their site identifying myself as a researcher.

Another ethical issue with online research is the greater difficulty in obtaining informed consent. Unlike in-person interviews where the participant can sign a consent form stating that they have been informed of the purpose of the research and the nature of their involvement in it, signatures cannot be obtained online. It is up to the researcher to document discussions in order to show that the participant was fully informed and was not misled or deceived in any way.

According to the Association of Web Researchers, the need for informed consent can be waived as long as observations made in public cannot be linked back to participants (Graydon 2003: 30). Informed consent can also technically be waived if users are using pseudonyms, users can choose between public and private message functions, and users are not put at risk by the research (Graydon 2003: 31). Although some research organizations do not require informed consent in online research, it is ethically unjustified to deceive participants or to fail to disclose one's presence in monitoring conversations. Internet users have some expectation of privacy, and generally do not expect that their conversations and everyday actions online will become part of a research study. While the nature of the Internet makes any guarantees of confidentiality impossible, every effort should be made to keep subjects informed and to protect their identities.

It is also extremely difficult in online research to ascertain the individual's identity and in determining if the participant is over eighteen years of age. The use of pseudonyms for online personalities and multiple online identities makes it

virtually impossible to determine if the respondent is being truthful about their identity or age, and so the researcher must use his/her own judgment as to whether they believe the participant is being truthful. This can be done through examining vocabulary and speech patterns and through looking for inconsistencies in the respondent's stories.

The public declaration of one's role as a researcher is crucial in online research studies, and in this case I felt that it was important to also disclose my status as a Wiccan to potential respondents, as I wanted to be open with them about who I was and what I was doing. While there is no doubt that I bring my own NeoPagan identity to this research study, I feel that it has been an asset rather than a hindrance and has enabled me to obtain greater insight into NeoPagan practices on the Internet.

### *Theoretical Approach*

My research was largely based on grounded theory, meaning that my allegiance is to the data rather than any single theoretical standpoint. I have relied heavily on theoretical concepts rather than "grand" theory because I feel there is an overreliance on the work of the grand theorists and not enough focus on new emerging research that is more appropriate to our modern times. While there is no doubt that all modern ethnographic research draws from the work of past great theorists, Joseph Campbell (1968: 3) stated very eloquently that respect for past great theologians has suppressed innovation. Rather than pick a standpoint and alter my findings in order for it to fit, I am choosing a multi-perspective approach.

"The social world is socially constructed, and its meanings, to the observers and those observed, is constantly changing. As a consequence, no single research method will ever capture all of the changing features of the social world under study" (Denzin 1995 in Foster 1996: 3). Human behaviour is not one-dimensional, so it makes sense that our analysis of this behaviour not be limited to one perspective.

After analyzing the qualitative data generated from this study, I have chosen to use symbolic anthropological theories and perspectives in examining online communities, although my analysis will not be limited solely to this perspective. At times other theoretical perspectives will be explored along with those of symbolic anthropology, and these will clearly be identified when they are employed. I have chosen symbolic anthropology as the overall guiding theoretical perspective precisely because of its flexibility and interdisciplinary focus (Handler 1991: 611). The focus of symbolic anthropology is on the shared understandings among members of a society, along with studying the role of symbols in the everyday lives of that society's members. Following the approach of Clifford Geertz, I will explore "how symbols shape the ways that social actors see, feel, and think about the world" (Ortner 1983: 129). Rather than focusing on grand theory, symbolic anthropology places emphasis on studying culture from the perspective of the individuals within that culture, which is very important in determining how symbols operate within a particular culture.

## Theoretical Concepts

While the overall theoretical perspective of this research is symbolic anthropology, there are specific concepts that will be utilized in analyzing ethnographic data. I will begin by examining traditional academic conceptions of "community" and how these conceptions of community have changed in the last few decades. I will also examine how NeoPagans themselves perceive community, and how this is reflected in NeoPagan practices. It is especially important to allow the participants, in this case NeoPagans, an opportunity to define community themselves, as this is a central concept in this study. The next section will examine the convergence of community and new forms of communications technology. Academic and popular discourse about technology in general will be examined along with criticisms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as the basis for community foundation and social interaction. I will then explore how virtual communities can and do exist online, and will examine the emergence of online religious communities.

### *Theories of Community*

Community is one of the most vague concepts in the social sciences, and is thus one of the hardest to define. Dozens of definitions of community exist in anthropology alone, and not all of these definitions are compatible. The earliest and most well known theory of community was established by Ferdinand Tonnies (1957 [1887]) in his classificatory categories of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*.

*Gemeinschaft* can be defined as a form of community that is closely-knit, generally a rural village, with close networks of kin and neighbours. This type of community is thought to be composed of a multitude of overlapping personal relationships, with family members living in the same village. The opposing classification of community is *gesellschaft*, which describes modern, urban, industrial environments. This concept envisions communities as being composed of impersonal relationships with weak ties between individuals. *Gemeinschaft* is described by Tonnies as a living organism, whereas *gesellschaft* is described as a mechanical aggregate and artifact (1957[1887]: 35). The dichotomization of community into rural and urban categories serves to romanticize the rural life that preceded the industrial revolution, and reinforces the belief that modernity and industrial society have destroyed the nostalgic idea of the close community.

*Gemeinschaft* thus serves as an ideal type based upon communal society and values, and *gesellschaft* represents its opposite, the developing industrial world. Tonnies, who was highly influenced by economic interpretations of history, did not see the move towards industrialization as positive for maintaining strong community relations.

The theory of *gesellschaft* deals with the artificial construction of an aggregate of human beings which superficially resembles the *gemeinschaft* in so far as the individuals live and dwell together peacefully. However, in the *gemeinschaft* they remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors, whereas in the *gesellschaft* they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors .... here everybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others.

Their spheres of activity and power are sharply separated, so that everybody refuses to everyone else contact with and admittance to his sphere, i.e., intrusions are regarded as hostile acts. (Tonnies 1957 [1887]: 64-65)

The exclusive categories of *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* do not take into account the multiplicity of overlapping groups that exist in contemporary social life, and the flexibility of identity. The fluidity of community boundaries is best expressed in the concept of symbolic community, which is closely related to more traditional definitions of community.

Traditional definitions of community designate size or geography as a boundary, and this concrete boundary marks the beginning and end of a community. The implications of the word "community" are of a group of individuals who have something in common with each other, which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other groups. Community thus seems to imply both similarity and difference; group membership, and the similarity of its group members, is defined by the opposition of that community to other social entities (Cohen 1985: 12). Community boundaries are thus marked in order to distinguish one group from another, and to create a sense of group identity among members.

According to Cohen community boundaries are largely symbolic, and the distinctiveness of communities lies in the minds of its members. While members of a community share a symbolic core, they do not necessarily share the same meaning (1985: 98). The boundaries of the symbolic community are not fixed, but are instead malleable, allowing members to belong to multiple or overlapping

groups at any one time. Since community boundaries are not strictly defined, members can retain their own individuality while remaining part of the community, and no single definition exists as to what constitutes a member. The basis of community identity is formed through the inherently oppositional nature of community boundaries. Almost any matter of perceived difference between the community and the social world can be rendered symbolically as a resource of its boundary. This outward view of other communities forms a self-reflexive portion of their own culture, as individuals construct what they see in terms of their own stereotypes (Cohen 1985: 115). Community differences are exaggerated in order to highlight the positive and appealing aspects of one community in terms of another. The boundary schema constructs an assumption of shared homogeneity within the group and the implied differences to other groups (Barth 2000: 30), but in reality there is variety within every group. This diversity within NeoPagan groups will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

According to Cohen, in the 1970s and 1980s there were massive upsurges in the Western world of sub-national identifications founded on ethnic and local communities. This reaction against the homogenizing logic of the national and international political economies served as an attack on the old structural bases of community boundaries. In response, communities began rebuilding their community boundaries on symbolic foundations (Cohen 1985: 76-77). As the structural bases of community boundaries were undermined as a consequence of social change, community members reformed their boundaries based on symbolic bases. The result of these shifts in boundary formation can be seen in the ethnic

and religious communities within the larger society, for example, China Town and Little Italy are ethnic communities whose boundaries fall within city limits. They are a separate community and yet they are still a component of the city itself. NeoPagan boundaries are largely symbolic, allowing for dual identities. Solitaries, by definition, are individual practitioners, but at the same time they form a group, or a community, of like-minded members.

Cohen describes how the past is often used as a resource for symbolic boundary formation. He describes history as extremely malleable, and discusses how its uses in boundary formation is a selective construction of the past which resonates with contemporary influences (1985: 99). This can be seen in the NeoPagan myth of antiquity, which places NeoPagan origins in ancient times. According to Cohen, myth confers rightness on a course of action by extending to it the sanctity which enshrouds traditions and lore, and this mythological distance lends enchantment and a sense of authenticity to an otherwise questionable group. Cohen describes this "invention of tradition" (1985: 99) as a primary method for groups to symbolically create community boundaries. The very imprecision of historical references to the distant past make them ideal devices for symbolic construction and for expressing symbolically the continuity of past and present, and for re-asserting the cultural integrity of the community (Cohen 1985: 103). The NeoPagan myth of antiquity thus serves to create cohesion among individuals and to join them in a common past history, although this history is largely symbolic and does not recount actual events.

The concept of symbolic community is vital to any discussion of virtual or online community formation, as the very idea of cyberspace and the Internet is symbolic. The Internet is not a physical space, and so those who interact through this medium must form symbolic boundaries around cyberspace in order to provide themselves with a locale for communication.

The Internet has thus become a symbolic community where members communicate with one another in real time, but at great distances. These communities have become known as virtual communities, a form of community which exists primarily on the Internet.

#### *Virtual Community - Discourse about Technology*

The medium is the message.  
- McLuhan, 1965

The above quotation is a well-known phrase among theorists of technology. The meaning behind McLuhan's words has been interpreted to mean that communications technologies mold the messages we deliver in unanticipated ways. Technology influences our self-conceptions, notions of human relations and community, and the nature of reality (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 9). While scholars disagree about the degree to which communications technology impacts our lives, there is a general consensus that technology shapes our social interactions and relationships. This can be seen in the metaphors that we use to discuss technology and in the literature on technology.

Discourse about technology tends to use metaphors that imply its autonomy, and technology is portrayed as objective or independent of human beings. These metaphors have been used within the context of specific movements such as the Romantic movement. Romanticism was a reaction to the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, which involved widespread use of new technologies. The metaphors employed by the Romantics emphasize the opposition of nature and the human spirit to the machine. This movement expressed doubt, fear, and anxiety about what technology was doing to human beings (Stahl 1999: 15), and emphasized the impact technology was having on social groups and interaction. The Romantic movement idealized the rural lifestyle, as they perceived it to have existed prior to the industrial revolution, and oppose the increasing use of technology around the world. This sentiment can be found in Tonnies' conception of *gemeinschaft*, in which he states that "*gemeinschaft* starts from the assumption of perfect unity of human wills as an origin or natural condition which is preserved in spite of actual separation" (1957[1887]: 37). Tonnies and the Romantics viewed rural life as the natural condition of human beings, and see industrialization as corroding this natural state of being.

Another viewpoint surrounding technology emphasizes technology as applied science. Technological innovation provides value-free instruments or tools to human beings, who can then choose to use those tools for good or evil purposes (Stahl 1999: 14). This perspective views technology itself as passive, and human beings as the active force initiating social change. Proponents of this

view are not against the development and implementation of new technologies, but do not agree with the choices human beings as a society have made with regards to the uses of technology.

An opposing viewpoint to technology as applied science is technological determinism, which views technology as the driving force of society that induces social change. Technology is seen as the active agent of change and human beings are seen as passive operators of technology. Technological determinists have absolute faith in progress and see technology as leading us into a better future (Stahl 1999: 14-15). This perspective not only views our role as people to be passive, but equates a high utilization of industrial technology as progress. This view implies that societies who do not have access to or who choose not to use a high level of industrial technology to be unprogressive, or somehow inferior to highly industrialized societies.

All of these perspectives recognize that new technologies bring about new forms of social interaction that can change the taken-for-granted conditions of social life (Dawson and Hennebry 2004: 165). This is especially true of new communications technology, whose main purpose is to facilitate social interaction and communication. From the telegram to the telephone to the Internet, new forms of communications technology have steadily been emerging, and each brings with it a revolutionary change in the form of social communications. It is important to keep in mind that, while "the medium is the message" it cannot supercede personal encounters. It is the quality of human interaction rather than

the technology employed to facilitate it that determines the level of social interaction.

With the introduction of new technology people have found new ways in which to communicate. The Internet is one of the most recent tools facilitating social relations, and the increasing affordability of the computer during the 1990s led to its use as a communications medium (Beckerlegge 2001: 220-221). The Internet became a forum for many different groups, although it is still dominated by Western cultures, and North American and European countries have the highest levels of access to computers and Internet use (Bromberg 1996: 36). Compared to other communications media, such as television, radio, and newspapers, the Internet is unique in that it allows users to simultaneously be a publisher as well as a consumer of information (Campbell 2005: 113). This is assuming that Internet users have knowledge of web technology and the programming skills needed to create one's own web page. While many have embraced the Internet as a medium for communication, not everyone sees this as a positive trend.

With the emergence of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) came debates about the perceived dangers of this new form of technology. The underlying theme of these debates was the effects of CMC on community; the Internet, and CMC, will either create new forms of community or will destroy it altogether. Critics of CMC worry that interaction on the Internet can never be meaningful because it leads people away from the full range of in-person contact (Wellman and Gulia 1999: 167-168). Critics worry especially about those

perceived to be vulnerable to the lure of CMC, the young and the naive. Popular stereotypes of CMC users include computer nerds, social losers, and marginal types seeking to escape from the real world (Dawson and Hennebry 2004: 160). A central concern seems to be of seclusion from the outside world of in-person contacts, and there is an assumption that use of CMC leads to a complete rejection of other forms of personal communication. Sherry Turkle is one of the more well known critics of CMC who believes that CMC users will lose all touch with reality.

But is it really sensible to suggest that the way to revitalize community is to sit alone in our rooms, typing at our networked computers and filling our lives with virtual friends ... Searching for an easy fix, we are eager to believe that the Internet will provide an effective substitute for face-to-face interaction. But the move toward virtuality tends to skew our experience of the real in several ways. One way is to make denatured and artificial experiences seem real. (Turkle 1995: 235-236)

In Turkle's view, merely using computer-mediated communication will lead to skewed experiences of reality and the exclusion of face-to-face communication.

Another criticism of computer-mediated communication is that users are free to project only what they desire others to see, which Elizabeth Reid (1998: 29) claims creates a disinhibiting effect. Individuals are free to create different personas that do not necessarily reflect who they are in "real" life. A man could create the persona of a woman, or a child could claim to be an adult, etc. Users can also create multiple personas in different forums, and other users have no way

of discovering which, if any, persona correlates with the established identity of the user in face-to-face communication. Critics such as Reid claim that this creates a disinhibiting effect that encourages the user to live in a fantasy world and to reject personal communication.

A common thread throughout these criticisms is the isolation and seclusion of the individual from personal contact. This prior research has focused primarily on extreme users rather than looking at the complex ways that CMC is used in everyday life. Instead of viewing online and offline worlds as unconnected, or oppositional (Holloway and Valentine 2003: 9), it is more realistic to view them as complementary forms of communication. The online world can be used to supplement and revitalize interaction in the offline world, as it allows for more frequent and geographically convenient ways of communicating between in-person communications, or when face-to-face communications are not possible. The irony of this situation is that, despite the fact that one of the main uses of communications technology is for communication, these technologies are often imagined to be anti-social (Holloway and Valentine 2003: 11). These same debates and concerns are raised with the introduction of many new forms of communications technologies. For example, as late as the 1940s the telephone was seen as an exotic, depersonalized form of communication, and yet today telephone contact sustains kinship ties as much as face-to-face communications (Wellman and Gulia 1999: 182), and is seen as an everyday form of communication that supplements in-person interactions. In the same way, many relationships are established offline as well as online. It is the

nature and the quality of the interaction that is important, not the communication medium. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

### *Are Virtual Communities Possible?*

As seen in the preceding section, community is built upon common beliefs and some degree of common understanding. This consciousness emerges from the mutual involvement, commitment, and responsibility between a society and its individual members, and is not dependent upon face-to-face interaction. Through computer-mediated communication individuals can share a common mindset through which they can establish relationships (Foster 1996: 20). Therefore, it is not the structure of the community, but the feeling of community amongst its members, which determines whether a community is in place. There is a commonly held assumption that a community is bound by its social structure, and that the whole of the person is found in the individual's over-socialized participation in the legitimate structures of society (Waskul 2005: 61). Contrary to this view is the idea of virtual community, which is facilitated by computer-mediated communication via the Internet. Virtual communities are created online primarily through newsgroups, message boards, and chat rooms. Whether or not CMC contributes to a sense of community in these forums depends upon the way in which it is encountered by the inhabitants of cyberspace (Foster 1996: 86). Not every online group becomes a virtual community, but this does not mean that virtual communities do not exist. Communities do not have to be solidary groups of densely knit neighbours, but can also exist as social networks of kin, friends,

and acquaintances that do not necessarily live in the same neighbourhoods (Wellman and Gulia 1999: 169). Communities are not limited to geographical proximity, but also include communities of choice, where members share common interests and choose to maintain contact. Holloway and Valentine (2003: 136) maintain that online relationships are credited with sharing all the characteristics usually associated with close face-to-face ties; they are frequent, companionable, voluntary, reciprocal, and support social and emotional needs. The question of whether communities can exist online is asked largely by those who do not experience it. Participants in virtual communities do not dispute that communities exist online, and see their activity as inherently social (Haythornthwaite, Wellman and Garton 1998: 212).

Urbanization has opened up possibilities for individual choice, and this has facilitated the emergence of virtual community. The Internet and e-mail have made it possible for communities to be formed around mutual interests rather than by necessity (Berger 1999: 67). Geographic communities are being replaced by elective communities, or communities of choice (Dawson 2004: 80), where individuals not only search for information online, but are also looking for support and affiliation. Haythornthwaite et al (1998: 199) argue that communicating through computer networks is essentially a social phenomenon, and is an example of the persistence of the social in the face of the technological. Communication online is not an individual act, but requires both senders and receivers. While the transfer of information is not necessarily an act of

communication, the Internet provides a space where communication can occur, where people can meet and interact with one another.

Virtual communities do exist. Cyberspace connects people to one another. This doesn't ensure community, as the connectivity made possible by cyberspace is too often a one-way, broadcast flow of information, but where there is interactivity online, a mutual exchange, there, in a broad sense, community exists. (Zaleski 1997: 244)

While virtual communities do exist online, there are differences from communities based on primarily face-to-face communication. Virtual communities provide a flexible environment that allows for greater identity shifting (Fox 2004: 53), as discussed above. Another characteristic of virtual communities is that they are a safe mode of support where the individual maintains privacy and may join or leave at will. Bromberg (1996: 84) argues that virtual communities are often appealing precisely because they require minimal investment, and responsibility to other members is limited. This is particularly important in marginalized communities where membership could mean adopting a socially stigmatized group identity. Interacting online gives individuals the opportunity to browse the group's website without any pressure to join or make a commitment, and anonymity enables inquirers to ask questions that they would otherwise refrain from asking out of embarrassment or fear of censure (Beckerlegge 2001: 226). Communicating through the Internet is thus less intimidating to prospective group members and entails a much lower risk to the individual.

*Religious Community Online*

For most people being religious implies being part of a group, even if affiliation with the group is more symbolic than actual (Dawson 2004: 75). The emphasis on group practice in religion is largely based on a Western congregational model, which is largely absent from religious practice online. According to Helland (2004: 33) the 2004 Canadian census revealed that the changes in religious participation patterns first noted in the 1970s has continued, and while most Canadians are still interested in spiritual matters, they are now seeking answers outside of the traditional congregational model. Helland also notes that similar patterns of religious participation have also been documented in Britain, Western Europe, and the United States. The result of this trend has been a decrease in affiliation with traditional organizations in North America and parts of Europe, and an increase in online or marginal participation in religious organizations. Helland suggests that the Internet has become an ideal medium for non-affiliated religious participation in that individuals are able to go online from home with no fear of commitment, ridicule, or reprisal (2004: 100). Popular religion and unofficial religious websites were the first to appear online in the mid-1990s, and traditional religious organizations soon followed. It has only been recently that religious groups have begun to expand online, with an increase of 45.5% in online religious representation between 2001 and 2003 (Helland 2004: 47). While conventional religious sites are numerous online, it has mainly been "unofficial" religious groups who have embraced the online environment.

Despite the popularity of unofficial religious representation online, mainstream religions also have an established presence on the Internet, and the online environment challenges religions to adapt their traditional practices and encourages new spiritual expressions to emerge (Campbell 2005: 124). Helland describes the Internet as an official religion's worst nightmare.

Like the printing press, power has shifted through the development of a tool of mass communication. Doctrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day. (2004: 30)

Religion on the Internet thus accommodates those individuals and groups who wish to be religious outside the control of an organized institution. This environment is an ideal medium for NeoPaganism, which resists central authority and encourages individual religious expression.

Since NeoPaganism places such a strong focus on the natural world and the environment, a common assumption is that NeoPagans reject science and technology. However, many NeoPagans support technologies and are optimistic about the uses of science and modern technology. They do not see technology as inherently good or bad, and advocate for responsible uses of technology that limit damages to the environment. While they take inspiration from the past, they do not want to return to it (Adler 1979: 392). While NeoPagans do not reject technology, they do perceive the modern industrial world as a force that has alienated humans from a way of life in which nature was revered. They believe

that as humans became more detached from nature, they ceased to see it as sacred (Magliocco 2004: 4), and that industrial society has produced a yearning for the natural and the communal. This adherence to Romantic thought contrasts deeply with NeoPagan employment of high technology, and yet NeoPagans do not see this as antithetical.

Many modern Pagans regard computer technology as an integral part of NeoPaganism, and believe that computers contribute to the open source construction of modern NeoPaganism (Cowan 2005: 59). In order to facilitate the flow of knowledge The Pagan Webcrafter's Association was formed in 1997, and it was designed to share information about designing and building websites, as stated in the PWA mission statement:

The Pagan Webcrafter's Association is a loose knit federation of individuals, from many religious paths and walks of life, banding together to help those who need help in the Craft of HTML Authoring. Our goal is to provide a forum for sharing information within and across all of the Web disciplines. By doing so, we hope to increase our members' depth and breadth of knowledge in this Wise Craft. (<http://thepwa.net/>)

This sharing of information helps those who wish to create their own website but who lack the technical knowledge on how to do so. NeoPagans have been the most unified in embracing the Internet to develop online communities, and these groups are based primarily on shared interest. The Internet is not replacing offline church participation, but it is filling the gap people need to feel socially connected to a religious belief system (Helland 2004: 260-262).

In the examination of theories surrounding community, it has been determined that communities are not necessarily geographical nor do they rely primarily on close physical proximity. Community boundaries are symbolic, and can thus encompass a space such as the Internet, where virtual communities reside. With the emergence of new forms of communications technology, new forms of communication have developed, and NeoPagans have readily embraced the Internet as a loci of community formation.

The main theoretical concepts in this study all revolve around the issue of community. Theories of community have continued to change as the social, economic, and political climates have changed, bringing new forms of communications technologies. The earliest ideas of community were in the forms of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, the dichotomy between rural and urban life after the introduction of industrialization. Then we see a shift towards the symbolic in the examination of neo-tribes and symbolic community, which emphasizes the fluidity of boundaries in community formation. With the popularity of the Internet as a means of communication, theories of virtual community emerge in an attempt to explain this emerging phenomenon. In the next chapter, a NeoPagan virtual community will be examined. This virtual community is centered around the popular website, WitchVox, which is a meeting place for NeoPagans all over the world. Different groups within this virtual community will be explored, along with the tensions that exist between groups.

## Chapter Four: NeoPagan Conceptions of Community

Although the majority of NeoPagans today are solitaries, there exists a larger NeoPagan community to which these individuals belong, allowing them to remain connected to others who have somewhat similar belief systems. This overall community is not a homogenous entity, however, and there are many conflicts between the NeoPagan community and others outside the community, along with conflicts among NeoPagans themselves. It is through examining these conflicts that NeoPagan conceptions of community can be discovered and examined. Cowan (2005: 35) argues that NeoPaganism can be represented as three sets of paired tensions: (1) a culture of appropriation and innovation, (2) a culture of eclecticism and traditionalism, and (3) a culture of solitude and community. NeoPagans appropriate elements of other traditions, and yet create new forms of practice by combining elements from different traditions. Solitaries are extremely eclectic, but also retain elements from traditional coven practice, such as seasonal celebrations and personal rituals. Solitaries, by definition, practice in solitude, but at the same time they remain part of a larger community. The recurring themes throughout these conflicts are authenticity, identity, and authority, which will be examined by analyzing comments and discussions from NeoPagan practitioners.

The first type of conflict occurs between NeoPagans themselves, and has been called "Witch Wars" by the larger NeoPagan community. These Witch Wars stem primarily from conflicts over basic principles between solitaries and group practitioners. Groups and covens, which largely follow from the British

Gardnerian tradition or one of its offshoots,<sup>15</sup> claim that solitary practice and the growing eclecticism resulting from solitary practice are diluting the traditional aspects of NeoPaganism, while solitaries argue that they can attain the same level of spiritual fulfillment through solitary practice as that which is obtained in group practice. The growing numbers of solitaries since the early 1990s has complicated this debate, as group members, who were once the majority of NeoPagan practitioners, have now become the minority, and are trying to preserve their traditional practices in the face of this change. Coincidentally, the growth of solitary practice in the 1990s coincides with the emergence of the Internet as a widely used tool for communication, and it is through the Internet that solitaries have created their own community of individuals. This debate centers around issues of authenticity, as both group practitioners and solitaries attempt to establish themselves in the NeoPagan community.

The second type of conflict involves NeoPagan feelings of marginality in Western society, and the problems NeoPagans face as the result of misunderstandings about their beliefs. This can involve everything from verbal harassment to physical violence, and a case study from a recent legal case will briefly be presented as evidence of this later on in this section. NeoPagan identification with marginalized groups, and their perceptions of being marginalized by mainstream society involves issues of identity, as they construct both individual and group identities out of their marginal status. These identities

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<sup>15</sup> Group practitioners generally follow the main Traditions, such as Gardnerian, Alexandrian, and Dianic NeoPaganism, which all emerged out of British Gardnerian practice.

are formed through recounting incidents of abuse and harassment and through the establishment of organizations which provide legal aid for victims of religious discrimination.

To complicate matters further, there are those within the NeoPagan community who are marginalized by both solitaries and groups, and I call these individuals "the marginalized of the marginalized". NeoPagans place a lot of emphasis on their status as a marginalized religious group and advocate tolerance, and yet they in turn marginalize members of their own religious community. Derogatory nicknames like "newbies" and "fluffy bunnies" are given to new members who do not have much experience or knowledge and so ask a lot of questions online. Along with these fluffy bunnies are the "fundies", which is short for Pagan fundamentalists, and refers to those who take NeoPaganism to extremes, often causing embarrassment to other NeoPagans through their public appearances and actions. Parodies and jokes about fluffy bunnies and fundies are very common online, and this is a major complaint from young NeoPagans, who are often called fluffy bunnies by older members, even when these young Pagans have practiced for many years. This conflict embodies issues of authority, as older members attempt to establish their authority over younger members, and at the same time attempting to enforce what they believe are the criteria for being a dedicated member. Issues of authenticity also arise, as "fluffy bunnies" are presumed to be uninitiated solitaries and so carry the characteristics of eclectic solitaries and the battle for authenticity into discussions of authority.

In this chapter, the conflicts stemming from the solitary-tradition debate will be examined, along with the implications for online religious participation, which is primarily a solitary activity. It is through the Internet that solitaries have created a virtual community, which will be the focus of Chapter Five. The status of NeoPaganism as a marginalized community will be explored, along with how members of the NeoPagan community marginalize their own members. Through examining these conflicts, the issues of authenticity, identity, and authority will be explored in terms of NeoPagan communities.

### *The Solitary-Group Debate*

With the growth of solitary practice since the 1990s, and the resulting decrease in group practice, conflicts have emerged between the two forms as each tries to justify their importance to the NeoPagan community and promote their continued practice. I will begin by looking at solitary practice and eclecticism, which often go hand-in-hand, and then I will examine group and coven practice, also called Traditional<sup>16</sup> NeoPaganism.

Before the growth of solitary NeoPaganism in the 1990s, many solitaries chose the solitary path out of necessity, as there were no other NeoPagans in their area, or else local NeoPagans living in their area were unwilling to accept them as new members. Solitary practice was seen by Traditionalists as substandard to group practice, as the coven was considered the only true way to practice

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<sup>16</sup> Many NeoPagans define Traditional NeoPaganism as the main traditional forms of NeoPaganism, which are Gardnerian, Alexandrian, and Dianic. Traditionalists place more emphasis on coven practice and maintain the more structured elements of British Wicca.

NeoPaganism.<sup>17</sup> Today there is a lot more acceptance of solitary NeoPaganism, and more and more Pagans are choosing this path as a viable alternative to covens. Taliesin Govannon,<sup>18</sup> a Wiccan from Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, describes the emergence of eclectic solitaries in the following passage which was posted at Witchvox.

This was at a time when most Wicca was of the Traditionalist (Gardnerian, Alexandrian, Welsh Traditionalist, etc.) variety. It was very structured, very ornate, and very British in nature. It had definite rules as to how to gain entry, and how new covens could form. There was little solitary practice (outside of former coven members of Seax Wicca). Eventually, there were many who wanted more freedom to experiment, and to break away from the British Traditionalist mold. They wanted a more flexible way of working, and they wanted to break away from the old system of establishing covens (initiation in an established coven, working through the degrees, and then hiving off). Thus, eclectic Wicca was born. (Taliesin Govannon; January 1, 2006)

While coven or group practice contains barriers which can limit entrance or impose certain regulations, solitary practice is open to all, and there are no regulations on how to become NeoPagan. The boundaries in solitary practice are thus more fluid than those of group practice. Taliesin Govannon goes a step further, saying that eclecticism and solitary practice have revived NeoPaganism,

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<sup>17</sup> This was stated by many informants and has appeared in online discussions.

<sup>18</sup> Taliesin Govannon has requested that her public e-mail address, [taliesingovannon@yahoo.com](mailto:taliesingovannon@yahoo.com), be listed so that interested parties may contact her. She also has a website, [www.vtvnetwork.com/witchcraft](http://www.vtvnetwork.com/witchcraft), which she encourages people to visit.

although she has some reservations as to how this will impact the authenticity of NeoPagan practice.

Even though I have a great love for pre-eclectic Craft, by and large the eclectic reformation was a good thing for Wicca. Some of the old Trads had become moribund and fossilized (in direct opposition to what Traditional Craft is all about), and some dysfunctions (like declining initiatory standards amongst other things) needed to be addressed in a way that only a big shakeup could. And shake things up the eclectic movement did. Also, it opened up the Craft to a much wider range of people by making solitary Wicca much more acceptable to the Pagan community at large. In fact, solitary eclecticism is now the dominant paradigm in Wicca today, and our numbers are growing faster than ever. However, there are some downsides to this, and some of them are troubling. For one thing, rampant eclecticism has degraded standards so much that some even question if Wicca has standards as to who is and isn't a Witch. This has allowed the lazy and the incompetent to hide behind the word 'eclectic' to cover for their own lack of knowledge. (Taliesin Govannon: January 1, 2006)

This passage exemplifies the stance taken by group practitioners in regards to the effects of solitary eclecticism on the authenticity of NeoPagan practice. While Taliesin recognizes that solitary eclecticism is now the dominant form, and has rejuvenated practices which were becoming too routinized, she voices a common concern which is largely held by group practitioners, that eclecticism is turning NeoPaganism into a free-for-all with no boundaries defining who is and who is not a member. This will be discussed in more detail later on in this section.

While it may seem that one must choose either group or solitary practice, there are those who maintain contact with both forms of NeoPaganism. Elizabeth, a solitary from New York who also maintains group contacts, says:

More and more, Pagans are solitary practitioners by choice. Even in the midst of nearby thriving communities, Pagans choose solo practice for a variety of reasons. There are also people like me who maintain both a group and solitary practice. I am proud to be an active member of a coven, a tradition and a community, but I still identify myself as a solitary practitioner .... Through my own rituals and meditations, I feel the presence of the Divine inside me and around me. I have experienced their energies in direct ways and I know that they are dynamic presences in my daily life. (Elizabeth; December 26, 2004)

Although Elizabeth maintains contact and participates with local groups, she still chooses a mainly solitary path, and identifies herself as a solitary practitioner. While some, like Elizabeth, choose to experience both solitary and group practice, many others choose to remain completely solitary. Nancy, an eclectic solitary who has practiced for two years, describes how solitary practice is more suitable for her religious needs.

I am a proud Eclectic. Scott Cunningham's *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner*<sup>19</sup> was the first book I read when I realized that Wicca embraced the Goddess-centered theology, Nature worship and animism that had been calling me for years. Cunningham's tone was nurturing, loving,

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<sup>19</sup> Cunningham's (2002) book is a popular introductory book on solitary NeoPaganism for beginners.

supportive, accessible and all-inclusive - probably the very traits to which his critics object. If the first book I'd read had told me that the only way that I could become a Witch would be to find a coven, be welcomed into their fold, study a formal Tradition and be initiated by their High Priest and Priestess, I would have slammed the book closed and never looked back. The idea of studying a formal Tradition turns my stomach. I have endured at least one lifetime of hierarchical, organized religion, and I want nothing more to do with it. (Nancy; July 12, 2004)

For Nancy, the organization and structure of group practice reminded her too strongly of her former religious affiliation, and she preferred the more individualistic and unstructured solitary practice. It is precisely this attribute of solitary practice which attracts many NeoPagans to the solitary path and to NeoPaganism in general.

Melanie, from Massachusetts, has also chosen the solitary path. While she agrees with Nancy's position that group practice is too hierarchical and structured for her tastes, Melanie does not see coven practice as an inherently bad thing, and recognizes that covens provide the structure that some people are looking for in a religious system.

The independent spirit of modern Paganism is one of our faith's most appealing aspects. Many of us become Pagan or Wiccan because we felt our old faiths were too constrictive, and we truly love the freedom that Paganism provides. Individuals are free to explore the nature of the divine and the nature of their relationship to deity. We are largely free to learn at our own pace, in whatever order we choose, with or without fellow seekers. For those wishing a more structured learning experience,

numerous covens and groups dot the country, all offering something slightly different, but similar enough that we can (usually) understand each other. (Melanie; February 6, 2005)

The most common description of solitary eclecticism from interviewees and online participants was of "freedom". Participants expressed this sense of freedom as very appealing, in direct contrast to their former experiences in religious groups and organizations, both NeoPagan and non-NeoPagan. This sentiment is best expressed by Gary, an eclectic solitary from Tilburg, Netherlands.

Being a solitary means being free. A mind that searches for knowledge shouldn't wear the straightjacket that dogma usually brings with it. I know that quite a lot of Pagans have a well-founded aversion against this word. But regardless of how liberal the rules may be, when you compile a set of rules that must be followed to the letter, you have planted the seeds of dogma. A solitary doesn't have a figure of authority constantly looking over his shoulders, searching for things that aren't right. One is free to make one's own mistakes, to say the wrong thing, to blunder without fear of being told off. The 'eclectic' part of it gives him the freedom to pick and choose what feels right, to experiment, to combine, create, to put his own personal stamp on everything he does. Paganism is a religion of freedom, and being an eclectic solitary stands at the pinnacle of it. (Gary; July 3, 2005)

The idea of freedom stands in direct opposition to what many solitaries imagine group practice to be like. Many NeoPagans have participated in a group or festival at least once in their time as a NeoPagan, and choose to take the solitary

path. Others have had no prior contact with groups, but are afraid that joining a group will take away the freedom they enjoy as solitaries. Gary shares his fears about joining a group, and how it could potentially impact his relationships with other NeoPagans.

I must admit, I'm a little bit apprehensive about seeking out and joining a coven. This belief system is much too important to me, and first impressions do matter. I'm going to sit on the sideline for quite a while before I decide to take this step. I definitely don't want my first coven experience to be a disappointing one. Covens are small gatherings of humans, and humans are imperfect beings. My worst disappointment would be to discover that those entrusted with the running of the coven regularly go on an ego trip, and use their position to climb on a pedestal just to be a little bit taller than everybody else. I would hate to discover that inside the coven small games of power politics are played. (Gary; July 3, 2005)

Gary values the individuality he retains from solitary practice and fears that joining a group will result in having to make compromises in order to accommodate the specific beliefs and practices of others. The appeal of solitary practice for Gary is that this form of religious practice is tailored specifically around him as an individual, and is designed to meet his spiritual needs. Many solitaries like Gary fear joining a group, not only because they will have to compromise in terms of their individual spiritual needs, but also because of the power struggles that have tended to exist within coven groups. There is no established hierarchy within NeoPaganism, and so there are no appointed leaders in many groups. This has resulted in challenges of leadership and in-fighting over

the direction the group takes, what Gary calls "small games of power politics".

While Gary is not against group practice in itself, it is his fears over internal group conflict that prevent him from experiencing it.

Jeremy, an eclectic solitary from Washington, also emphasizes the freedom found in eclecticism, but he has a different interpretation of where eclecticism stands in terms of traditional practices. Jeremy does not see eclecticism and tradition as dual opposites, but sees them in a much more fluid way.

Eclecticism is both traditional and non-traditional. It is a blending of all of the ideas and philosophies from around the globe. Eclecticism is found within many different religions, including Christianity .... Eclecticism gives us the opportunity to blend hidden mysteries and available knowledge into a compendium that modern scientists call 'the human brain'. And, if something we discover does not fit within our beliefs, then it can easily be put up on a shelf for later evaluation. Basically, Eclecticism is about freedom, unity, open mindedness, and a willingness to grow beyond the limits and boundaries we have placed in our lives and on ourselves. It is also unique in that you, as an individual, are free to create our own personal belief structure that only you could possibly relate to.

(Jeremy; May 8, 2005)

While many place eclecticism and traditional NeoPaganism at opposing ends of the spectrum, Jeremy sees eclecticism as traditional as well, in that it incorporates traditional ideas, albeit in a less structured fashion. While group members have often used eclecticism to diminish the authority of solitary practitioners, Jeremy sees it as an advantage, as eclecticism allows the individual to "grow beyond the

limits and boundaries". Eclectics are thus not limited to what others have done before them, and are not routinized by a reverence for tradition. Their practices are continually adapting and changing as each individual grows and changes in their spiritual needs. It is the freedom of not having limits which appeals so strongly to solitaries like Jeremy.

The solitary-tradition debate and the conflicts which emerged from it appear to have begun when groups began to criticize each other over legitimacy, with each group claiming to hold the most traditional practices. The most common arguments made by groups are that solitary practice is not authentic because the solitary was not initiated into NeoPaganism or the specific form of NeoPaganism they have chosen to follow. For these group members, initiation and the ritual aspects of NeoPagan practice are vital to the authenticity of NeoPaganism. They tend to trivialize solitary practice by inferring that solitaries are not serious about NeoPaganism.

Then there are those who believe that anyone who hasn't studied a formal Tradition and been initiated by a Priest or Priestess hasn't earned the right to call herself a Witch. Those of us who consider ourselves Eclectics, Green Witches, Hedge Witches and the like fall into this category. Evidently, we're just play-acting; Witch wannabes. (Nancy; July 12, 2004)

To group members, uninitiated solitaries generally fall into the category of "fluffy bunnies", and are taking up NeoPaganism as a fad or a trend. Solitaries are not seen by them as "real" NeoPagans because they have not received knowledge or

instruction from another member, and have decided to learn on their own.

Solitaries have countered this position, arguing that solitary practice is just as valid as group practice, and that a formal initiation ritual is unnecessary.

Some say that only a Witch can make another Witch. I believe that Witches are born, not made ... I suspect that it's this attitude that is at the heart of the fluffy bunny controversy. Eclectics such as me have claimed the right - and the power - to mold our religion to meet our needs, rather than conforming to the religion; we are heretics. I am not play-acting. I have been seeking this path for a long time, and I set foot on it only after serious deliberation. I've read volumes on Wicca and Witchcraft, have developed a relationship with the Goddess in some of Her many forms (and to a lesser extent, the God and His) and am acutely aware that I have much to learn. This is my religion and my life, not a phase, not a fancy. (Nancy; July 12, 2004)

Solitaries such as Nancy are arguing that they do in fact take their religious practice seriously, and that formal initiation is not required. Nancy does not claim to be an expert who knows everything there is to know about NeoPaganism, but acknowledges that she is still in the process of learning. She argues that this knowledge can in fact be obtained without the guidance of other NeoPagans, that it is for her an individual journey.

Gary argues that, although formal initiation does not take place in solitary practice, self-initiation occurs when an individual accepts NeoPaganism as their religious belief system, and that this self-initiation is as valid as one conferred by a coven. He believes that exploring one's spirituality is an internal process, and

that everyone must discover their path on their own. While this process can be undertaken with external guidance from others, the final steps must invariably be taken individually.

Another argument often used to dismiss self-initiation as invalid is that one needs to be initiated into the mysteries of the coven. I admit, this is very important. But let's stop for a moment and ask ourselves: what is a mystery? In my view, a mystery is a collection of practices and information specific to a certain type of coven. They come into existence as a compilation of all the experiences past members have had, with a little bit of divine inspiration thrown in for good measure. These mysteries are hidden and known only to insiders. Well, ladies and gentlemen, this is exactly what a solitary eclectic does. He studies, meditates, gains insight, until something hidden is revealed to him, by whatever means, including divine revelation. At that point he is transformed. Because the information he gained is private, we cannot know what it is; it may be rubbish or perhaps something important. That knowledge is related to his level of spiritual development. It is a hidden knowledge: a mystery. He received his initiation from the divine itself. And because the divine is inside us, he has in fact self-initiated into his own tradition... Some Pagans hold the view that initiation is something one receives inside a tradition. This is a narrow view of this process. Perhaps they see it as only the recognition that the person who undergoes it has complied with the requirements that tradition has. I don't deny the value of lineage. I think it has a very important role to play, but I have a problem with the view that an initiate can be created only within a coven. The broader view I personally take, is that initiation is something that happens above and independent of any traditions .... In my view, every initiation is a self-initiation. It can happen overnight, without any ritual needing to be performed. At that point, that feeling of belonging to something new becomes real. I see an initiate as

someone that has reached a certain level of knowledge and experience. A coven ceremony that recognizes this is a nice occasion that marks this important milestone, but the initiation actually occurs independent of that ceremony. (Gary; July 3, 2005)

Gary argues that initiation can occur without a ritual or ceremony to mark the occasion, and that this initiation is an internal process that occurs inside the body. The knowledge gained is not dependent on the ritual itself, and the ritual only serves as a mark of authentication for the individual receiving it. Without the symbolic conferral of a degree or rank that has been achieved by an external source, there is no regulation of who has attained the requisite knowledge. Initiation into a group thus serves as part of the authenticating process used by groups to increase their legitimacy.

Another argument used to criticize solitaries is that the eclecticism at the heart of solitary practice is causing a dissolution of boundaries, making it difficult to determine if someone is a "true" NeoPagan. This argument also involves the issues of legitimacy and authenticity, as an attempt is being made to define who is a legitimate NeoPagan and who is merely pretending to be one. Before there was NeoPaganism there was Wicca, the largest and earliest form of NeoPagan practice. It was from the offshoots of Gardnerian Wicca, and the new traditions inspired by this return to Pagan traditions, that NeoPaganism emerged as an entity which encompassed all of these groups. When Wicca was the only form of Pagan practice, it was much easier for members to define membership.

The fact of the matter is, Wicca ISN'T the only game in town anymore. The overall Pagan movement has grown, and non-Wiccan Pagans are everywhere. To be a Pagan, even without the form and structure of Witchcraft, is widely accepted. In other words, if you just can't bear to live with the few basic rules regarding what Wicca is and what it isn't, then it's okay ... go be a Pagan. It's an equally valid path. You don't have to be a Wiccan to love the old Gods. You don't have to be a Wiccan to celebrate the rhythms of the earth and of the seasons. You don't even have to be Wiccan to practice magick. All these things and more are available for the Pagan, and the boundaries are definitely more fluid! (Taliesin Govannon; January 1, 2006)

Taliesin Govannon appears to be accepting of the fluidity of boundaries in NeoPaganism in general, but the tone in this passage shows that her alliance is to the group perspective. She sees definitive boundary formation as an important component in identifying who is a NeoPagan. Taliesin goes on to say:

Some have such an amorphous idea of the definition of Wicca that they have a difficult time putting it into words. Like it or not, however, there are parameters and boundaries in Wicca. Those who try to push the boundaries out too far risk reducing the terms 'Wicca' and 'Witchcraft' to meaninglessness .... limits are not always a bad thing. Boundaries are essential to our understanding of our world, and can be nurturing if handled correctly. Wicca is an individual path in the NeoPagan world, with its own rules, rites, and structures. While it has become more elastic in the past two and a half decades, it is still not anarchic or limitless. Even those who label themselves 'eclectic' still must follow certain guidelines in order to be 'Wiccan' as opposed to being more generally 'Pagan'. And, in our present day, that's just fine. (Taliesin Govannon; January 1, 2006)

Taliesin differentiates being Wiccan from being Pagan in terms of boundaries. She identifies Wiccans as maintaining very strong boundaries, while Pagans have little to no boundary formation and thus little definition. According to Taliesin, it is the boundaries maintained by Wicca that prevents it from becoming "anarchic or limitless", which is what she suggests NeoPaganism to be. It is the lack of boundaries surrounding NeoPagan membership which Taliesin identifies as a problem, as there is no criteria for establishing membership. Solitaries oppose establishing set criteria for precisely this reason, as they highly value their individuality and the freedom these elastic boundaries allow them. They want to cultivate their own individualistic beliefs and practices while still remaining a part of the larger community, giving themselves a group or community to identify with without the exclusionary criteria of membership. This phenomenon of remaining individualistic while at the same time identifying with a group will be examined in Chapter Five.

Many solitaries have become frustrated with the criticisms made by group members, and have pointed out in public forums, such as WitchVox, that these criticisms and arguments over legitimacy are in direct contrast with the NeoPagan ideals of tolerance. As a marginalized religious group, NeoPagans have been advocating religious tolerance for decades, and solitaries have pointed out that it

is hypocritical to promote tolerance while at the same time dismissing other forms of practice as invalid.

Being a solitaire myself I find that my personal beliefs are dismissed by many because I'm eclectic. Some believe that I have no real beliefs and truths of my own because I have 'borrowed' from many. Don't they see that in the end we all have the same goals? We have each chosen our paths. We do that because we have that right. We should hold that right as precious over all others. More importantly, we should respect the right of others to do the same. Never again should a criticism of someone else's beliefs or path cross our lips. Let us represent our chosen paths with the dignity that they deserve. Think before you speak out against another who is different from you. As Pagans, Wiccans and Witches we should hold this religious freedom dearer than most. What has our fight for freedom from persecution been about if we practice it on each other? (Jonemmah; August 7, 2005)

Andrew and Nancy express similar sentiments to Jonemmah's in the following passages.

I have heard it said just one too many times now that eclectic Wiccans are not true Wiccans. I have heard that as eclectic Wiccans, we will soon be using soda instead of the traditional wine or cookies or cereal instead of cakes<sup>20</sup> .... All of my ceremonies are solitary because of the life I have lived. Not everyone has the ease of finding other Pagans or Wiccans. Many of us live in small-minded communities and small towns, and more of us have found that a coven that we can feel as one with is even harder to find. And let's not forget that finding

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<sup>20</sup> At many NeoPagan celebrations, rituals, and festivals it is common to serve wine and cakes.

a teacher outside of a coven is an even harder task.  
(Andrew; July 3, 2005)

I don't doubt that some Traditionalists are sincerely concerned about Wicca becoming a spiritual free-for-all that dilutes the essence of our religion so thoroughly that it will be indistinguishable from any other New Age practice. But this is where faith comes in; we Wiccans can either 'live and let live' and trust that our religion will evolve as the Goddess wills or we can spend our time and energy sniping at each other. The latter choice will serve only to widen the chasm between the Trads and Eclectics. Do we really want to perpetuate the 'us and them' mentality that divides Catholic from Protestant, denomination from denomination?  
(Nancy; July 12, 2004)

Today, both solitaries and group members are advocating a stop to the arguments, the criticisms, and the Witch Wars in general, as they believe it does not display a favourable impression of NeoPaganism to the general public. As seen in the above testimonials from Jonemmah, Andrew, and Nancy, many NeoPagans, both solitary and group members, are attempting to end these conflicts over authenticity and are advocating a recognition of both forms of NeoPagan practice as equally valid. In the passage below, George argues that it would be beneficial to groups to end the fighting over authenticity, as this would reduce overall conflicts within NeoPaganism and would make group practice more appealing to some who have refrained from joining a group out of fears of conflict.

We evolved separately in our traditions, practices and beliefs. We grew apart and lost our unified momentum which has been the biggest tragedy

since we earned our legal right<sup>21</sup> to exist as a religion. We got so confident in our small isolated groups that we began to argue all over again about who was legitimate, which paths were authentic, etc. How did we expect other people outside the Craft community to respect us when we were trashing each other's traditions and legitimacy to the new apprentices in our own individual circles and traditions? Our internal bickering over extremely superficial issues made us look like a joke. Don't believe me? Why do so many modern practitioners still stay solitary? I promise it's by choice. I have been invited to join three Covens. I have joined none, and I quit hanging out with a group that started referring to themselves as a Coven. I bounced. (George; January 15, 2006)

The constant arguing and bickering is, according to George, one of the main reasons why he chose to remain a solitary, and possibly is why the number of solitaries continues to increase. In examining the topics and discussions listed at WitchVox from 1997 to 2006, I have seen a trend in the last two years toward this new perspective of creating an alliance between solitaries and groups.

Practitioners from both forms of practice have been advocating a change in the ways groups and solitaries interact, arguing that it would benefit all NeoPagans and would increase feelings of unity in the overall NeoPagan community. Further research on this new trend is needed in order to fully understand the reasoning behind this dramatic shift in attitudes.

The conflicts between solitaries and groups have divided the NeoPagan community and has created rivalries between members. As a community which

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<sup>21</sup> George is referring to the case of Dettmer v. Landon (1986) in the United States which recognized Wicca as a religion under the United States Constitution, thereby affording Wiccans protection under anti-discrimination laws.

defines itself as marginalized, many have argued that the Witch Wars have fractured the community even further, making NeoPagans more vulnerable as a whole. In the next section, NeoPaganism as a marginalized community will be examined in terms of how this marginality is internalized in NeoPagan identity formation.

### *A Marginalized Community*

Many NeoPagans have complained of discrimination as a result of their religious beliefs, but it is difficult to substantiate these claims because of the private nature of many of these incidents. The most frequent complaint is of verbal harassment in which derogatory or hateful comments are directed at NeoPagans in the course of their daily lives. In rarer cases, vandalism of NeoPagan homes or businesses occurs or physical violence is directed at NeoPagans themselves. These incidents are not reported as hate crimes, however, because NeoPaganism is not widely recognized<sup>22</sup> as an established religion. These attacks are the most frequent in highly conservative areas, such as the "Bible Belt" in the United States, and are the least frequent in large urban centers and more liberal areas. These feelings of marginality are internalized into NeoPagan identities and contribute to many NeoPagans fears of coming "out of the broom closet". A few testimonials of verbal abuse will be provided in this section, along with a case study of a more public incident which received a lot of

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<sup>22</sup> Although the Supreme Court in the United States recognized Wicca as a religion protected under the Constitution, this does not apply to all forms of NeoPaganism, and is limited to the United States.

media attention in 2001, the lawsuit of Darla Wynne against the town of Great Falls, South Carolina.

Teresa lives in Pontiac, Illinois and has seen firsthand the difficulties of openly being NeoPagan. Her troubles began when she became pregnant and her neighbours took offense at a Pagan being a parent.

I am from a very Christian town; as a matter of fact there is a family of very Christian people living right across the street from my husband and me. I am currently pregnant and make no effort to hide or cover the fact that we are practicing Wiccans. I have heard all sorts of comments from 'You are going to Hell' to 'I cannot believe you are going to damn your child like that.' Some of this has even come from my husband's very unsupportive family. I feel the best thing for my child is for my husband and me to be true to ourselves and tell people that we can believe as we like. We have even had people threaten to call DCFS<sup>23</sup> on us and have our child taken from us after birth, claiming we may try to sacrifice him or her. I am only two months along or so but I am afraid people may actually attempt this. (Teresa; January 1, 2006)

The threats and verbal abuse from her neighbours has made Teresa feel like a marginal member of her neighbourhood community and has made her feel unwelcome due to her religious affiliation. The threats to have the state remove her children from her custody have led Teresa to question her decision to openly present her family as NeoPagan.

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<sup>23</sup> DCFS is an acronym for Department of Child and Family Services.

Sally, a Wiccan from Texas, had a similar experience of verbal harassment.

A few months ago I had a bit of a culture shock. I moved from extremely liberal sunny Southern California to dead center of the Bible Belt - hot and humid central Texas. (Make no mistake - this was not my choosing). The first few weeks when my husband and I were here I felt like the only Pagan that lived in Texas .... I was so afraid that I was going to be burned at the stake if someone happened to come across my beliefs. It seemed like everyone and everything was Christian and I was a lone freak. Luckily for my husband and me we made some friends who are Pagan. So I don't feel like there is going to be an angry mob with pitchforks knocking at my door anytime soon. However I have been bombarded by an overwhelming amount of ignorance from people. Both here in Texas and in other states. For example, my best friend has a guy who has been demanding attention from her and had a chance for a date. Well needless to say he ruined his chance big time .... Now this boy is educated and intelligent for the record (at least in regards to books - in a few minutes you will see that he is not so smart in the social arena). He has since decided that it is good and proper to make fun of her and her friends' beliefs. He also said, and I quote, 'The only reason why you and your friends are not going to hell is because I am praying for your heathen souls'.

(Sally; July 17, 2005)

Living in a highly conservative area in the southern United States, Sally has experienced much name-calling and mockery from those who disapprove of her religious practices. The experience of this form of marginalization has led some NeoPagans to develop a victim complex, and to see discrimination and prejudice where none really exists. People who internalize their perceived marginality to

such a degree also tend to blame Christianity for their "persecution" and view all Christians as intolerant. This will be discussed further on in this chapter in the discussion of Pagan "fundies", or fundamentalists. The type of verbal abuse from the above passages is the most common form of harassment against NeoPagans, but in some cases this verbal abuse can escalate into vandalism and physical violence. This escalation can be seen in the case of Darla Wynne.

#### Case Study: Darla Wynne vs. Great Falls, South Carolina

The information provided in this case study is from an interview with Darla Wyne by Roxanne Brawley Poole, and can be found at Exploring the Cauldron ([www.exploringthecauldron.com](http://www.exploringthecauldron.com)). A transcript of this interview is included in Appendix E. In 2001, Darla Wynne sued the town of Great Falls, South Carolina over a series of incidents which occurred at the town council meetings. Wynne attended one of these meetings in order to complain about a trio of drug dealers who hung out at a stop sign on her way to work, and who were making obscene comments and gestures at her as she drove by every day. The council would not hear her complaint about the drug dealers, and instead criticized her for her Pagan bumper stickers. After being called a heathen and a Satanist, Wynne requested that a non-denominational prayer be said at the meeting instead of a Christian one, as the council members were directing comments at her during the opening prayer. Her request was denied, and soon after this her vehicles were vandalized, her house was egged, and bricks were thrown through her windows. She continued with her complaint and filed a

lawsuit against the town for religious discrimination. During the course of the trial her cats were poisoned, her house broken into and vandalized nine times, a cat was gutted and hung from a planter in her bedroom, another cat was beheaded and its heart cut out, with a note attached saying "You're next", her dog was blinded, and she was physically assaulted. The local police were ordered to ignore her, and all of these incidents were not investigated. After running up legal fees totaling over \$65 000, Wynne won her lawsuit. The town appealed to the Supreme Court, but the ruling was upheld, and the town of Great Falls was ordered to replace the opening prayer at town council meetings with a non-denominational one. Darla Wynne is in the process of suing Great Falls for her legal fees, but the case has not yet been resolved at the time of this writing.

As shown in the above case study, the more common verbal harassment can rapidly escalate into violence. A disagreement over "offensive" bumper stickers at a town meeting escalated into violence, vandalism, and harassment, and was taken all the way to the Supreme Court. Instances such as the case of Darla Wynne are infrequent, and it is commonly only verbal abuse or minor vandalism that NeoPagans are faced with, but this is often enough to keep the majority of NeoPagans "in the broom closet". As a marginalized group, it is surprising to see NeoPagans in turn marginalizing their own members. From "fluffy bunnies" to "fundies", these individuals often feel unwelcome or isolated from the NeoPagan community. They are mocked on the Internet and seen as a great source of embarrassment by some NeoPagans who feel that they are

perpetuating a negative image of NeoPaganism in the eyes of the general public.

The labeling of certain members is an attempt to impose guidelines for membership. This is largely done by using the achieved authority of older members to denounce the practices of newer members, thereby undermining the authority of "fundies" and "fluffy bunnies" in the minds of the public.

#### *The Marginalized of the Marginalized: Fluffy Bunnies and Fundies*

Within the larger NeoPagan community there are those who are mocked or seen as undesirable members, namely the fluffy bunny and the fundy. Fluffy bunnies, also called newbies, are seen as a source of irritation by elder members, as they tend to ask a lot of questions and frequently make simple errors. Fluffy bunnies are generally classified as very young, usually in their teens, who have taken up NeoPaganism as a fad and will soon tire of it. Fundies, on the other hand, are not just irritating to many NeoPagans but are also a source of embarrassment. Fundies tend to be very vocal about being NeoPagan and are quick to point out what they perceive as discrimination or prejudice. Fundies usually do not like Christians in general and believe that Christianity is responsible for their marginalization. While some NeoPagans complain about the actions of fluffy bunnies and fundies, many others use humour to mock them and to undermine their status within the community. The following excerpts are from

a posting at Witchvox by Erica, an eighteen year old from Pennsylvania. She describes the stereotypical fundy in four of its forms, including fluffy bunnies.<sup>24</sup>

In the Pagan world, we have our adversaries. One of the most profound 'enemies' of ours goes under the unaffectionate title of 'Fundie', which is short for Fundamentalist. When a Pagan hears the term 'Fundie', a Bible-thumping, preaching, overzealous, slightly balding Republican comes to mind .... I've noticed we have little figures of our own. Our own type of 'Fundie'. You can't deny it is there, because every one of us has run into at least one type of Pagan Fundie.

#### The Femi-Fundie (*wimminus worshippus*)

The Femi-Fundie is a very well known figure in a Pagan circle. She - yes she - is rather easy to spot. She tends to wear skirts with a t-shirt, and, if you manage to capture one and inspect it further, sometimes wears no bra. This stems from the thought that bras are constricting and a tool of man. Long, unbound hair is another common trait. Some radical Femi-Fundies are very contemptuous of men of all varieties, and write in code, using words like 'womyn', 'shye', or 'wimmyn'...

#### The Fluffy-Fundie (*annoyus newbus*)

These Fundies are perhaps the easiest to find, since they want to be found. However, there are two sub-species of the Fluffy-Fundie. The first is the Doe-Eyed Fluffy (*newbus teenus*). The most common type of Doe-Eyed Fluffy is a female juvenile between the ages of twelve and sixteen. The Doe-Eyed Fluffy is often clad in peasant tops, if female, and long skirts with no makeup. A distinguishing mark among the sub-species is a large pentacle worn around the neck, about the size of a soup can lid .... The second sub-species of Fluffy-Fundie is the Dark Fundie (*gothicus teenus*). This species is characterized by all-black clothing, gaudy lace,

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<sup>24</sup> Fluffy bunnies are not generally considered to be fundamentalists, although Erica has chosen to include them in her caricature of fundies.

extensive metalwork, and ankhs. They have dark markings, especially around the eyes and on the lips ... Large pentacles are, again, a common trait.

**The Martyr-Fundie (*victimus persecutionus*)**  
... They tend to be very defensive about their faith, jumping on anything that would perhaps belittle it in any fashion. Much of their attention seems to revolve around their victim complex, and as a result, they are either very depressed individuals, or very suspicious little buggers ....

**The Angry-Fundie (*christianus loathus*)**  
... While this type of Fundie is not physically violent, verbal abuse is prevalent. They seem to have only one prey: Christians, and they are non-discriminate in what kind they choose .... Even if the person is kind-hearted, the fact that the person is Christian is reason alone for vicious verbal attacks. Many non-Fundie Pagans are greatly embarrassed by the Angry-Fundie and tend to shun them, as hatred is not a Pagan value ...

(Erica; October 3, 2004)

Along with bringing up the issue that Pagan fundamentalists do exist and are not limited to the stereotypical Christian fundamentalist portrayed by NeoPagans in message boards, Erica mocks what she sees as embarrassing or inappropriate behaviour by other NeoPagans, including the attire and behaviour of young neophytes who lack knowledge about what is deemed acceptable behaviour.

Pagan fundies, with the exception of fluffy bunnies, are most commonly what Erica would call the Martyr-Fundie and the Angry-Fundie, and are sometimes a combination of the two. As mentioned in the above section, these individuals have internalized their marginality to an extreme degree, making it an integral component of their identity. Fundies in general tend to express anti-

Christian sentiments and to have a victim complex, pointing out all of the ways in which Christianity has supposedly caused discrimination and persecution in their lives. These fundies, however, compose a small portion of all NeoPagans, but are also some of the most public faces of NeoPaganism. They tend to appear at public events and to volunteer to be in newspaper articles and on television as 'representatives' of NeoPaganism. Many of the participants in this study expressed embarrassment and contempt for fundies, and believed that the actions of these NeoPagans were detrimental to the image of NeoPaganism presented to the public. It is generally their intolerant attitudes of fundies which cause irritation.

Indeed, there are any number of Pagan fundamentalists. They can be found wherever a 'hard line' is taken during a conference, or in the editorial practices of a magazine. Insisting that only a certain set of beliefs is 'accepted' - on a path heralded for not setting dogma or doctrine for its followers - nullifies much of the beauty of that very diversity which has brought together people from all walks of life, all cultures, around the world.  
(Clinton; January 8, 2006)

In the above passage Clinton, a NeoPagan from Indiana, laments the intolerant attitude of fundies. Largely due to past experiences of intolerance by those who misunderstand NeoPaganism, many NeoPagans disagree with reflecting this kind of intolerant attitude back at non-Pagans, as they feel this is not a productive way to educate others about their belief system. Clinton maintains that diversity is a

cornerstone of NeoPaganism, and that this diversity should be celebrated instead of repressed. Sally, a Wiccan from Texas, echoes these sentiments.

Every religion has their fundamentalists that feel whole-heartedly that their chosen path is the correct one. There is currently a war being fought based on some of those very ideals. The finger is pointed in all sorts of directions, saying who is right and who is wrong. The fact of the matter is that no one is right or wrong on this. Everyone has a chosen path in this life .... My mother used to tell me, 'Never put God in a box. He is bigger than that'. By us saying that there is only one religion and only one path to enlightenment, aren't we just putting God/the Gods in a box? Is it really too complicated for people to see that no matter what religion we look at to seek out the Gods, isn't it just good enough to see that there is a higher calling or purpose for us here?

(Sally; July 17, 2005)

Sally, like Clinton, advocates tolerance for the religious diversity within NeoPaganism as well as outside of NeoPagan practice. She says that it is difficult to argue against intolerance towards NeoPagans when members of NeoPaganism are expressing intolerant attitudes about certain groups of non-Pagans. Sally expresses one of the ideals of NeoPagan practice, that every individual must choose the path that is suited to them, and that there is no right or wrong path, as the divine is present in all deities around the world. The name one gives the divine is not important, but rather the sentiment behind one's beliefs and practices. This ideal is not conducive to fundies, who argue that NeoPaganism is the right path and Christianity is the wrong path.

One of the most interesting responses to the issue of fundamentalism was from Paige, a fifteen-year-old<sup>25</sup> solitary from Essex, England.

"That's right! I'm a Witch! Which means I'm peaceful and tolerant to everyone! Ya, that's right, you stupid Christian! My religion is better than yours!" Makes you roll your eyes, doesn't it? Surely you must have heard young beginning Witches shouting this around with smug looks on their faces. Well I have. Total over-feminist hypocrites who have just gone too far ahead of themselves. Of course I should know. After all, once upon a time, I was one! And strangely, I'm not ashamed to admit it. Because coming out of that phase just made me grow stronger and wiser and become the young woman and Witch that I am today. (Paige; July 31, 2004)

Paige identifies fundamentalist attitudes with beginners who lack deeper knowledge of NeoPagan history. These young beginners typically come across the idea of the Burning Times and unquestionably accept the idea that the persecution of NeoPagans and Witches had been going on for centuries. Paige is one of the few participants to suggest that this form of fundamentalism is a phase that one grows out of as knowledge and intellectual maturity is gained, and is the only NeoPagan I have come across in the last thirteen years to admit to once being one. This denial of past fundamentalist attitudes could possibly be out of embarrassment of having once been an undesirable member, but further research is needed to explore this issue in more depth.

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<sup>25</sup>I did not interview or make contact with Paige, or any other underage NeoPagans. I have only reproduced comments which were posted online in an open forum.

Although some NeoPagans such as Erica in her classification of fundies would label fluffy bunnies as fundies, others see these "newbies" as forming a class of their own. The backlash against fluffy bunnies has largely settled on teens, who receive the brunt of the hostility and mocking attitudes. Sarah, a Shaman<sup>26</sup> in her early twenties, became a Pagan at the age of thirteen, and remembers the difficulties she faced as a teen NeoPagan.

There is a stereotype - an extremely common stereotype - out there that all young Pagans are not serious or are 'going through a phase'. Well, I have to ask the question: When are they 'of age' to be 'serious'? What is the magical number of years that makes a student a 'true Pagan'? .... To my mind, I was a Pagan as soon as I began to study. I was a serious Pagan because I knew in the depths of my soul that this was my path, this was the haven for my spirit. It didn't matter that I was only thirteen, or that other people thought I was just going through a phase. Six years later, I am still Pagan. And while my Path may have changed slightly in scenery (I am far more into Shamanism than Wicca), it is still a Pagan path. It still leads to the Goddess, and her Consort. (Sarah; March 13, 2005)

As a teen NeoPagan, Sarah experienced what it was like to be considered a marginal member of her own community. It is especially difficult for teen NeoPagans to gain access to material on NeoPaganism as they are not financially or legally<sup>27</sup> independent, and their parents can maintain some control over what

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<sup>26</sup> Shamanism is a form of NeoPaganism where the practitioner takes his/her inspiration from Native Americans or other traditions with a history of tribal shamanism.

<sup>27</sup> Many NeoPagan groups will not allow underage teens to join due to fears of legal retaliation by parents.

they have access to. It is doubly difficult to be a teen NeoPagan when the NeoPagan community also excludes you. This has led many young NeoPagans to rely on the Internet for networking with other NeoPagans, as they find more acceptance online. This will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

Gwinevere Rain, a Gothic<sup>28</sup> Pagan from Tampa, Florida also faced these difficulties as a teen seeking access to NeoPaganism.

Teen Wiccans don't always feel welcome in their own religion. Sometimes, they are ostracized, looked down upon or stereotyped. I know because I became Wiccan when I was fourteen and spent a lot of my practice trying to overcome challenges set before me due to my age. On message boards, in chatrooms and within group settings, older practitioners aren't always respectful towards young adults. They are ignored, mocked and even banned from joining members of the same faith simply because of being a teen. (Gwinevere Rain; September 25, 2005)

Both Sarah and Gwinevere felt unwelcome due to the attitudes of older members towards fluffy bunnies. These older members are exerting their authority over younger members who they feel are not taking their religious practice seriously. Similar to attitudes towards fundies, these older members fear that NeoPaganism will be seen as a fad by mainstream society and that their beliefs will be trivialized and not taken seriously. Along with age, certain forms of

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<sup>28</sup> Goths are part of an underground urban sub-culture whose members are identifiable through black clothing, dyed hair, and heavy silver jewelry. Goths are anti-authoritarian and place emphasis on death and the darker aspects of life (see Kilpatrick 2004).

NeoPaganism are seen as the arena of fluffy bunnies, in particular Gothic Paganism.

Maybe you've been called a 'fluffy bunny' or put down because you are an eclectic or non-traditional. Words can impact us on many different levels, especially spiritually. Teens seem to be an easy target, I think because ageism isn't taken seriously enough. Goth Wiccans also take the brunt of hostilities. Shouldn't makeup, jewelry and clothing choice be personal and individual? Does it truly affect you if a group of teenagers would like to be both Goth and Wiccan? I don't believe in that 'well it gives us a bad image' nonsense. What truly gives Wiccans a bad name is NOT being accepting of our differences. There are a lot of great, friendly Goth Wiccans and I am proud to have a religion in common with them. (Gwinevere Rain; September 25, 2005)

Gwinevere, as both a teen and a Goth, was doubly targeted as a fluffy bunny.

Although many NeoPagans do not specifically mention Goth Pagans when they refer to fluffy bunnies, many describe teens who wear all black and large Pagan jewelry, and they do point out that they feel these individuals are playing into the stereotype of what a witch should be. It would seem that individuals who potentially could embarrass the NeoPagan community by making it appear trivial, either through inexperience or public image, are denounced as fluffy bunnies in order to safeguard the reputation of the larger community.

In the last two or three years, teen NeoPagans and those in their early twenties have begun to fight back against the classification of young practitioners as fluffy bunnies. This reaction against the attitudes of elder practitioners has

largely been seen online, where young NeoPagans have the opportunity to express their views without censure. Phoebe, a young NeoPagan from New Bedford Massachusetts, posted the following passage at Witchvox during a discussion of fluffy bunnies.

It has come to my attention as of late that some of the 'Elders' in our local Pagan community have decided that it is time to go 'underground'. Their reasoning is that they are 'tired of the new Wanna-Be's who don't know a damn thing.' I don't know if this is occurring in other communities, but what a sad state if it is .... I do wonder what it is that they hope to accomplish by hiding. Will it bring Paganism to the forefront and force people to see it for what it is? Will it gather and foster those of like minds who have questions and seek answers? For many years these same 'Elders' complained that they weren't taken seriously, that no one understood them, and now that Paganism is becoming more mainstream and more people than ever are seeing it for the wonderful path that it is, they decide that it's not the way they feel it should be and as a result ... are going to return to hiding like they did so many years ago. (Phoebe; August 21, 2005)

The decision of some elder practitioners to cut off ties with the largely younger NeoPagan community is seen by many, including Phoebe, as a reaction against the growing numbers of both solitaries and young practitioners. As these elders age they are encountering a very young community who have largely turned away from traditional coven practice. Instead of reaching out to these new members, some have decided to distance themselves from the community.

Progress is inevitable; that's not going to change.  
The way I look at it you have a couple of choices.  
You can either sit back and do nothing but complain  
about it, and when that doesn't work ... hide from it,  
or you can work with it. What a wonderful way for  
someone who has been practicing for such a long  
time to share what they know and do it the RIGHT  
way. How is it that all of these 'new Wanna-be's'  
are supposed to learn and grow if those who are in  
the know are not willing to share and to teach. I so  
hope that some of these 'Elders' rethink the  
progression of their position and decide that this is  
the opportunity they have waited many years for.  
This IS the reason that they opened their shops and  
started their classes and became outspoken about  
the many misconceptions out there. People are  
listening and people are asking questions. Take this  
opportunity and USE IT. Just imagine the  
possibilities ... (Phoebe; August 21, 2005)

Phoebe is not the only one to criticize this withdrawal by elder members. Sarah also discusses the issue in terms of finding available teachers, as new members often seek guidance from more experienced practitioners.

Today's youth will become tomorrow's Elders.  
How we want our Future Teachers to act, to teach?  
What kind of example do we set if we are  
constantly isolating and driving away those that are  
struggling to have open minds and rid themselves of  
ignorance and mindless fear? Yes, some young  
people come to the Craft as a rebellion, or because  
it is cool .... Those that are meant to be Pagan shall  
be Pagan; those that are not quickly lose interest.  
(Sarah; March 13, 2005)

Sarah points out that the young people who take up NeoPaganism as a hobby or a fad will not remain so for long once they discover that it requires actual work, and that those who remain should be encouraged, as they will become the next

generation of elders. Sarah believes that older practitioners should use their authority to teach younger members rather than attempting to ostracize them.

Regardless of the motives behind using the term fluffy bunny, some NeoPagans, such as Henry, argue that it is a derogatory term that should no longer be used.

On the other hand, should we be accusing one another of being fluffy bunnies because they've got their histories a little mixed up? Again, no. In my opinion, calling a Pagan a fluffy bunny in our community is like a white person calling a black person a nigger, or a straight person calling a gay person a faggot. But it's made even worse in the fact that both parties are among the same group, so it's like creating a private club within a group.  
(Henry; November 13, 2005)

As more and more NeoPagans are becoming members at a young age, and have been labeled fluffy bunnies in a derogatory fashion, there is now more sensitivity<sup>29</sup> to the impact of this label on new members, and it is not used as frequently as it was only a few years ago. The growing numbers of young solitaries, and their dominance on the Internet, have made online virtual communities a haven for young members who do not find acceptance from older practitioners. It is for these reasons that online communities are largely formed by solitaries, who tend to be younger and are more comfortable using online technology. The focus of the next chapter will be examining these virtual communities, and the benefits they provide in particular to solitary practitioners.

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<sup>29</sup> This was discovered through the observation of message boards and from personal interviews.

In this section, three main forms of conflict within the larger NeoPagan community were examined, and certain issues were found to be central among these conflicts. In the solitary-tradition debate the issue of authenticity was used in attempts to legitimize one form of practice over another. In the examination of NeoPaganism as a marginalized community, issues of identity and the internalization of marginal status were examined, along with NeoPagan fears of "coming out of the broom closet". The marginalization of certain members within NeoPaganism revealed the issue of authority at the center of this conflict, which doubly marginalized certain NeoPagans. These conflicts have revealed the reasons behind the growth of solitary NeoPaganism, and the creation of online communities in an environment where young solitaries can find acceptance and a feeling of community.

## Chapter Five: Solitaries and Virtual Community

As new communications technologies emerge, new forms of social interaction are developed. The popularity and widespread use of the Internet in Western societies has allowed for new forms of community to emerge, as our definitions of what constitutes community are challenged. Our ideas of community have begun to change, and people are realizing that community formation is not dependent on geographic proximity, but is rather built upon common beliefs and some degree of common understanding. In the past ten to fifteen years, NeoPaganism has embraced the Internet as a realm of social interaction, and virtual communities have emerged. Solitary practitioners have formed a virtual community online as an arena where they can find a sense of belonging, while not having to compromise their individualistic forms of practice. Young NeoPagans in particular have formed the majority of this community, as they find acceptance and an opportunity to interact with others without censure. Western societies in the twenty-first century have had a tendency to value individuality, and conceptions of what constitutes community have evolved to meet the needs of industrial life (Bromberg 1996: 82-84). Virtual communities are often appealing because they require minimal investment and responsibility to other members, while receiving the benefits of belonging to a community.

This chapter will focus on the virtual community of solitaries which has emerged on the Internet, and the benefits its members believe virtual communities possess. I will explore how solitaries find acceptance in an anonymous environment where they have no real responsibility to other members, and how

this appeals to the individualistic nature of solitary practitioners. This virtual community is mainly utilized by solitaries as a networking device, bringing them in contact with other like-minded individuals and providing an opportunity to test their NeoPagan identities through debate and discussion.

### *Networking*

NeoPaganism has been described by Pike (2001: 220) as "the ideal postmodern religion". The eclecticism of cultural borrowing and the creation of virtual communities follow from the belief that identity and tradition are not fixed, but malleable. NeoPaganism has adopted postmodern thinking by creating highly symbolic community boundaries, and by adapting their practices to meet the needs of the twenty-first century industrial world. Brad has been a NeoPagan for twelve years, and lives in Detroit, Michigan. Brad believes that the emergence of NeoPaganism onto the Internet fueled the growth of NeoPaganism, as it allowed for greater access to information.

I believe that there is a real parallel between the latter 20th century/early 21st century flowering of NeoPaganism and the growth of the Internet just as the moveable type printing press led to increased literacy, cheaper books, and the eventual schism of the Protestants from the Catholics. This new technology has allowed for lone Pagans isolated both in small communities and those who understandably wish to remain anonymous against prejudice to come into contact with co-religionists and create networks. (Brad; July 25, 2006)

Brad identifies one of the very appealing aspects of NeoPaganism online for many solitaries, the maintenance of anonymity. Solitaries have the opportunity to meet and interact with other NeoPagans without having to "come out of the broom closet". Joining a group and meeting others in-person brings the risks associated with visibility, as the members of the group may be known as or identifiable as NeoPagan. Online, the risk of one's true identity being discovered is minimal and affords solitaries protection against discovery. Religious sites online also accommodate individuals who wish to be solitary outside the control of an organized institution. Cheryl Lynn Bradley, a NeoPagan from Richmond, Ontario, argues that people in modern society no longer feel the need to be affiliated with an organization in order to be spiritual, which she attributes to the challenges of industrial life.

We live in a world that is increasingly busy and businesslike. We see the erosion of the family and of mainstream spiritual and religious communities. This doesn't mean that people are any less interested in religion or spirituality, or their family, but is more indicative of the constraints of time and money on individuals. It is also a very great sign that more and more people are self-constructing their spiritual practice to reflect their own individuality. (Cheryl Lynn Bradley; October 2, 2005)

Online religious communities thus allow individuals to remain non-affiliated with a group or organization. Minimal responsibility is required by members in this online environment, meaning that members do not have to invest a lot of time or

energy into their community life. These online communities form a neo-tribe, as members retain their individuality while retaining a feeling of membership with like-minded individuals. As discussed in Chapter Two, neo-tribes are associated with industrial societies as they embody the increasing individual nature of Western industrial life. The Internet is appealing to many NeoPagans because it gives them easy access to information about NeoPaganism. It is the increased access of information through the Internet and the publication of books by NeoPagan authors that have allowed for a community of solitaries to emerge. Practitioners are no longer constrained to group practice to obtain the necessary knowledge, and has become a largely textual culture. In Chapter Two, Helland (2004a) identifies NeoPaganism as a common resource culture, and it is through access to textual resources that NeoPagan virtual communities have formed. Phoebe describes how NeoPagan websites have been beneficial to her, particularly sites such as WitchVox.

Paganism is progressing; there is no doubt about that. The Internet has been a huge factor in that, and I am personally grateful for the abundance of information that is now available to me. Sites like Witchvox and others are an abundance of wonderful tools available for anyone who needs them. The information is out there. Some good, some not so good, but it's there and it's accessible and you can take what you learn and work with it. After a time you learn to sift through the information and you know what's good and what's not. (Phoebe; August 21, 2005)

Phoebe voices a common piece of advice given by proponents of NeoPagan communities on the Internet, that those seeking information visit numerous sites in order to identify commonly held beliefs and practices as opposed to radical ones. The individualistic nature of NeoPagan practice makes finding a consensus difficult, as Andy explains.

You have to be careful researching information about Wicca on the Internet. There are many sites and a lot of them give incorrect information. Paganism is very open to interpretation, so you may meet two people who claim to be Witches, but disagree completely on their practices. I am an eclectic, meaning I pick and choose what fits for me from other paths. (Andy; July 21, 2005)

Danielle also advocates the same approach, advising newcomers to spend a lot of time browsing numerous websites in order to separate the useful and informative sites from those that are not.

The trick with the Internet is just going to a whole truck-load of sites on the same topic, so that you can get an idea of what is Universally true and what is opinion or sectarianism. I think that is where a lot of people get lost. It can be very confusing .... I know that many online religious organizations offer online audio and visual presentations of sermons. I believe this could fill an important role for those who are drawn to a spirituality, but cannot get to a center of worship in person .... It just shows that religion is adapting to the technology of the times. I am also aware of the cyber-coven in the online Pagan world. I've read a bit about these, and I'm still on the fence about them, but only because I have no direct experience. It would be interesting to see exactly how they functioned, raised collective energy, etc. (Danielle; July 21, 2005)

Danielle acknowledges that the abundance of NeoPagan sites available can be confusing to newcomers, but also identifies this as a positive aspect of online religion, as many different opportunities and viewpoints are available to the individual.

Online communities allow individuals to test their modern Pagan identities online, moving from internal resonance to external performance (Cowan 2005: 172). Through message boards and chat rooms, individuals can reinforce their identities as modern Pagan authorities by answering questions and providing resources to newcomers. Their identities can also be tested through discussions and debates with other practitioners. Cheryl identifies these forums as important to NeoPagan practice, as feedback and advice can be given to other members in a similar fashion to instruction given within a coven or group.

The use of discussion groups, chat rooms and forums allows for continuous and instantaneous feedback from all participants which aids significantly in the planning and implementing of group worship and rituals. This also allows for a wonderful spontaneity that can be absent in more traditional forms of worship. Language and the ability to articulate and express oneself well in a dry format is extremely critical - we lose facial expressions and tone in Internet discussion lists and forums. This can lead to significant misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Clarity in communication becomes a critical component of success. We have extensive foundations now for Internet Radio and Television broadcasting, as well as the technologies to create audio and video files for the individual to access at their own

convenience. The access to webcams and online microphones also allows for a completely interactive experience, for those who have these apparatus at their disposal, to participate in a ritual or ceremony in Real Time. (Cheryl Lynne Bradley; October 2, 2005)

Cheryl acknowledges the difficulties of communicating online, with the subtleties of body language and tone of voice absent. The absence of these indicators has resulted in netiquette,<sup>30</sup> a socially approved form of online interaction. Those who do not follow the rules of netiquette are either ignored or admonished by community members, and their conduct is considered rude or offensive. In the next section I will examine the prevalence of young solitaries in online interaction, and the generation gap between those who became NeoPagan before the introduction of the Internet and those who were raised with the Internet as a common resource.

#### *Generation Gap: Youth and the Internet*

There appears to be a generation gap in terms of who participates in virtual communities. The majority of members are in their teens or twenties, with very few active members in their thirties and forties, although there are some exceptions. Peter, a NeoPagan in his early thirties, explains how those who became NeoPagan before the Internet became widely used are considered to be

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<sup>30</sup> Netiquette refers to Internet etiquette. Certain rules of conduct online are followed by members in order to obtain the social approval of other members. For example, writing in only capital letters is considered rude, as it indicates shouting or aggression. For an examination of netiquette in virtual communities, see Wellman and Gulia (1999).

elders, as they were trained in a coven at a time when solitary practice was virtually nonexistent.

Things have changed so rapidly that a person such as me might already be considered by some to be part of the 'old guard' because we began apprenticing in a coven before there was an Internet. We had to find teachers who would accept us into their groups, train us and guide us through the initiatory process. And all of this took place in small groups within the privacy of our teachers' homes. Not so long ago, there were not that many books on Wicca and Witchcraft. Today, of course, there are many authors to choose from, many of whose books are intensively researched and shed new perspectives on our history, lore and methods, and others that seem totally free of facts, insight, or wisdom. Either way, there is more to choose from, not to mention the thousands of websites, which range from the sublime to the ridiculous. (Peter; October 30, 2005)

Peter recognized that it is primarily younger members who grew up during the time the Internet was popular and easily accessible who choose to be solitary practitioners, and that members who, like him, were initially taught in a coven or group environment, will continue to give precedence to group practice.

The dividing line in this debate seems to be that the people who were trained in small home-based covens will largely continue to practice that way, while those who came into Wicca as solitaries who shop and network online will largely continue to refrain from joining such groups, although a minority will seek to affiliate into small covens .... The future of Wicca, like any other religion, depends on bringing new people into the community. We seem to be two-tiered in our growth and development, with a larger community

that visits websites, comes to gatherings and open events, and a smaller community that works in small, home-based groups, but we all network outside of our usual comfort zones on occasion. We are at a crossroads because in the beginning we only had a small group model but now popularity and technology have combined to offer larger, more open format models. (Peter; October 30, 2005)

With the large numbers of online solitaries, and the smaller numbers of group practitioners, it is possible that in the near future coven practice will become more and more rare as the younger generation gives increasing precedence to online community, although this is only speculation at this point in time. Elders such as Peter are beginning to withdraw from the public sphere, as was discussed in Chapter Four, and so it is the younger solitaries who are becoming the more visible component of NeoPaganism in the public eye. While there are still groups who maintain an active role in the public domain, they are now in the minority.

As discussed in Chapter Four, young NeoPagans find acceptance online from other young members, and are not excluded from group or ritual practice because of their age. While there are still some instances of young members being mocked as "fluffy bunnies", these are not as common online as they are in a group setting. It is this environment of acceptance which makes virtual communities attractive to many young solitaries, along with the anonymous nature of interactions, the minimal investment required of them, and the opportunities to network with others who share common interests.

## Conclusion

With the popularity and widespread use of the Internet as a communication device, the online environment has emerged as a new venue for ethnographic research. This type of research brings with it new difficulties for the researcher, particularly the problems of establishing the identities of participants and the problem of obtaining informed consent. As more online communities begin to emerge, more and more researchers will flock to this "space" as an opportunity to examine newly formed communities. Virtual communities do not exist in the physical world, but exist in a symbolic space often called "cyberspace". It makes sense that communities which are formed in this symbolic realm should maintain symbolic boundaries of community formation and membership.

The increasing numbers of solitary practitioners in NeoPaganism have resulted in the Internet being used more frequently for religious purposes. These young NeoPagans grew up with the Internet as a common tool for communication, and have utilized the web for establishing contact with other like-minded individuals. This change from group practice as the dominant form to a largely solitary population has occurred as the next generation of NeoPagans have adapted NeoPaganism to meet their twenty-first century lifestyles. While solitaries practice in a very individualistic fashion, and do not frequently meet other NeoPagans in person, these solitaries have formed a community of solitary practitioners who interact almost exclusively through the Internet. Being a solitary practitioner no longer means being isolated from the larger NeoPagan

community. Individual members create a community of solitaries through the bond of common membership, which is established by demonstrating knowledge of the common tenets of NeoPagan practice and through ongoing debates and discussions about certain issues. Establishing oneself as an authority ensures that others within the group will recognize the individual as a legitimate member. The larger community of solitaries provides individuals with both a support network where they can discuss problems and feelings of marginality, and with a means of accessing large amounts of information and knowledge from other members.

The online environment is ideal for many young solitaries, as they find acceptance from other members and have opportunities to meet other members and learn from them. This virtual community of solitaries provides a forum for solitaries to test and develop their NeoPagan identities, as they discuss and debate important issues with other NeoPagans, and can establish themselves as an authority in NeoPagan practice by answering questions and mentoring new members. There is more accessibility to teachers or mentors online, as geographic proximity is no longer a barrier, whereas in the past it was necessary to find a teacher living in one's own area. Even if there were such individuals living in close proximity, it was not guaranteed that those individuals would agree to take on new students. It is much easier to find a mentor online, where one has access to millions of people around the world, and could potentially be taught by multiple individuals at the same time.

Virtual communities are also thought to be ideal for twenty-first century life. Minimal investment of time and resources is required in a virtual

community, which is beneficial in modern life where time is increasingly in short supply. Virtual communities can easily accommodate the busy schedules and multiple interests of members, and there are ample opportunities to meet new people. The open source nature of online communities is also considered to be ideal for eclectics, as it enables them to access multiple sources of information from around the world. This gives eclectics the opportunity to borrow from different traditions and practices than they would have had access to if they relied exclusively on being taught through in-person communication.

Virtual communities also allow NeoPagans to remain “in the broom closet” and to maintain anonymity in their interactions with other NeoPagans. As members of a marginalized group this is a primary concern for many solitaries who wish to keep their religious beliefs private. The internalization of their status as marginalized individuals has led some NeoPagans to become fundies, developing a victim complex and becoming hostile towards Christians. Many NeoPagans find this intolerant attitude embarrassing, believing that it gives NeoPaganism a bad public image. The larger NeoPagan community attempts to isolate themselves from these individuals by trivializing them, much in the same way that they trivialize fluffy bunnies. As younger individuals become the majority of NeoPagans, the trivialization of their practice no longer remains effective, and this trend is beginning to become apparent as younger NeoPagans stand up for themselves in online forums. It is through virtual communities, where young solitaries dominate, that criticisms of using the term fluffy bunny have appeared, as young NeoPagans assert their legitimacy and their authority.

At the same time, Elders have begun to withdraw from the public sphere, giving young solitaries more opportunities to be heard.

Over the next ten or fifteen years, research will be needed to examine this newly emerging trend of increased solitary practice, and the formation of virtual communities. As the founders and original members of NeoPaganism from the 1960s and 1970s age and remove themselves from public life, it will be interesting to see how the next generation of NeoPagans will react. Will group practice become a thing of the past while solitaries dominate NeoPaganism, or will there be a resurgence of group practice by members who do not wish to lose their tradition? It is impossible to know at this point in time which direction NeoPaganism will take, or if NeoPaganism will go a completely different route.

As communities continue to form online, there will be increased opportunities for researchers to examine these new forms of community, and will be able to track the evolution of virtual communities over time. Online communities are still a relatively new phenomenon, and more research is needed in order to fully understand these dynamic and highly adaptable communities.

### Appendix A: WitchVox Survey, 1997 and 1999

#### *Age Groups*

	<u>1997</u>	<u>1999</u>
20s	39%	40.2%
30s	24%	23.3%
Teen	18%	19.2%
40s	15%	13.8%
50s	3%	2.9%
60+	1%	0.4%

#### *Form of NeoPaganism*

	<u>1997</u>	<u>1999</u>
Wiccan	46%	43.5%
Witch	24%	23.5%
Pagan	17%	17%
Dianic	3%	2%
Druid	2%	2.1%
Shaman	2%	1.6%
Hereditary	2%	1.1%
Craft	1%	1.3%
Traditional	1%	0.9%
Hedge Witch	1%	1.5%
Other	N/A	2.7%

#### *Form of Practice*

	<u>1997</u>	<u>1999</u>
Solitary Only	45%	37.9%
Solitary, but attend rituals	30%	16.1%
Coven	15%	14.4%
Member of Temple, Grove	8%	6%
Family Tradition	3%	2.6%
Self Dedicated	79%	72.8%
Initiated into Tradition	18%	14.1%
Not Initiated	N/A	6.4%
Hereditary	3%	3.1%

*Patterns of Practice*

	<u>1997</u>	<u>1999</u>
Solitary	53%	53.8%
Solitary, but now Group	25%	25%
Group, but now Solitary	18%	17.4%
Group	3%	2.8%

Source: <http://www.witchvox.com>

### Appendix B: Witchvox Posting

Greetings,

My name is Leslie Prest and I am a Graduate student at Carleton University. I am currently doing a research study on NeoPaganism and its growing popularity on the Internet. Since you are all participants in the online practice of NeoPaganism, I am asking for your thoughts on this project. If you are interested in participating, please e-mail me your thoughts on

- (1) NeoPaganism on the Internet
- (2) How important is it to participate in covens, or is solitary practice equally valid?
- (3) the emergence of religious practice online
- (4) the popularity of NeoPaganism among teens and young adults

Feel free to comment on any topic relating to this project, or even your thoughts on the validity or usefulness of my research. It would be helpful if you included some background information, such as which path you follow, how long you have been Pagan, any previous religious membership, what country/state/province you live in, etc., although it is not required.

This research project has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Carleton University. If you have any questions or concerns about ethical issues pertaining to this study, you may contact my thesis supervisor, Professor Brian Given, or the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at Carleton, Professor Antonio Gualtieri.

Professor Brian Given  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
(613) 520-2583  
[brian\\_given@carleton.ca](mailto:brian_given@carleton.ca)

Professor Antonio Gualtieri  
Research Ethics Committee  
(613) 520-2517  
[ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)

You may contact me at [leslie.prest@gmail.com](mailto:leslie.prest@gmail.com), or through the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University (Ottawa, Ontario). You will be referred to in the research study (M.A. thesis) by a pseudonym, and all personal information which could possibly identify you will remain confidential. I would advise you to use a private e-mail account to send your response, as e-mail networks in offices and businesses are commonly monitored by administration. You may also post an essay on WitchVox on this topic, as I will be monitoring the content of this website.

The findings of this research project will be made available online, and I will post a notice at this site as to where you can access it.

Thank you for your assistance,

Leslie Prest

### Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. Background Information: age, education, occupation, single/married/partner, children, etc.
2. What form of NeoPaganism do you practice? (Solitary, Eclectic, Wicca, Discordian, Seax, Asatru, etc.)
3. How did you become involved in NeoPaganism? How long?
4. What appealed to you about NeoPaganism?
5. What were your previous (if any) religious beliefs or affiliations? Your parents?
6. Do you network with other NeoPagans? If so, how? How frequently?
7. What do you think about the Solitary vs. Group debate?
8. How open are you with others about your religious beliefs? Family/friends? Others?
9. How did you learn to become NeoPagan? (self-taught, belong to group, teacher)
10. Do you believe there is a connection between NeoPagan traditions and ancient pagan beliefs or practices?
11. Is there anything I haven't brought up that you feel is important to an understanding of NeoPaganism?

#### Appendix D: Glossary of Terms

**chat room** - enables users to communicate with other network users by typing messages to each other, which instantly appear on both screens

**CMC** - Computer-Mediated Communication

**coven** - a form of NeoPagan group in which members meet in person to perform rituals and to worship together

**cybercoven** - a group of people of an earth-based spirituality who interact primarily, if not solely, through the Internet

**cyberspace** - the world created behind the computer screen

**dogma** - a set of religious principles laid down by an authority

**eclectics** - a form of NeoPaganism where beliefs and practices are borrowed from other religious systems and combined to create a very individualized form of religion

**"Fluffy bunnies"** - a somewhat derogatory name for young adherents to NeoPagan religions, who are often depicted as immature and merely "dabbling" in NeoPaganism as a fad

**"fundies"** - a term used by NeoPagans to refer to fundamentalist groups, both NeoPagan and non-NeoPagan in origin

**ICT** - Information and Communication Technologies

**Internet** - global computer networks connected by telephone lines

**lurking** - monitoring online chat rooms/message boards/newsgroups without participating

**NeoPagan** - an umbrella term encompassing groups who define themselves as practicing an earth-based spirituality

**newbies** - recent adherents to NeoPaganism ; they are differentiated from "fluffy bunnies" in their serious spiritual interest in NeoPaganism

**newsgroup** - electronic bulletin board centered on a particular topic

**"out of the broom closet"** - a phrase indicating that the individual does not keep his/her religious beliefs a secret

**Romantics/Romantic vision** - a nostalgic reverence for nature and the natural world as it is perceived to have existed before the intrusion of industrial technology

**solitary practitioner (solitaries)** - NeoPagans who practice their spiritual beliefs alone

**Threefold Law** - a principle based on karma, whereby the nature of the actions (good or bad) undertaken by the individual will return to that person threefold

**Traditions** - more organized and structural forms of NeoPaganism with specific criteria for membership

**virtual community** - a communal experience whereby members meet online and do not necessarily meet in person

**virtual reality** - the "reality" generated electronically by a computer

**Wicca** - an umbrella term for the various traditions based loosely on Gerald Gardner's initial teachings, and who follow the Wiccan Rede and Threefold Law

**Wiccan Rede** - a Wiccan ethical principle, stating "And it harm none, do what you will"

**Witchvox (The Witch's Voice)** - the largest NeoPagan hub site linking thousands of other websites and providing an online forum for discussion

**World Wide Web** - a global computer system created in 1991 that links text, graphics, sound, and video

Appendix E: Interview with Darla Wynne

**Modern Day Witch Hunt**  
**An Interview with Darla Wynne**

By Roxanne Brawley Poole

**Exploring the Cauldron – Roxanne Brawley Poole:** Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me and the viewers of Exploring the Cauldron. I will apologize in advance if some of my questions seem repetitive to you. I am sure you have been asked these questions a million times, but I feel that it is important for everyone who reads this article to fully understand what you are currently going through, as well as what has lead you here.

**Darla Wynne:** Thanks Roxanne for your willingness to talk with me and share my story with your viewers. I don't mind repetition, due to the fact that it doesn't matter how many times someone hears what has happened in this case, to me, my animals and my property, they still put their own twist to make the victim the villain, so I feel it is important to continue to say it until they hear the truth.

**ETC:** You were once the Assistant National Director of Witches Against Religious Discrimination (WARD). Can you tell us more about yourself? What brought you to the small town of Great Falls, South Carolina?

**Darla:** I am a Beltane child, born at 3:55 am in Hobbs, NM on May 1, 1964 to 2 very young parents with a lot of problems. I lived a large portion of my youngest years with my father's parents, whom my grandmother was blind, my grandfather illiterate, which meant Mrs. Roberta took care of all of us to some degree, which was rare in that day because she was black, but it also helped shaped my life to how it is now because I have never been prejudiced, nor do I hate because of simple things such as differences, which my grandfather primarily taught me. I can remember his neighbors not being open to Mrs. Roberta handling their finances, being a part of our family and they would brag about hanging people from trees and Papa would walk Mrs. Roberta to the car with a gun and telling our neighbor he had no problems filling him full of holes.

Once my parents divorced and remarried, they began to utilize me as a tool to harm the other for many years later and longed to be with my grandparents, who practiced the Old Ways along with Mrs. Roberta. Before my grandmother went blind, she was an herbal healer and my grandfather communicated with plants and animals, which I believe is also where I receive my gifts of herbal knowledge and my love and passion with animals.

I left home at 10.5 years of age, only to return a few more times and was married by the age of 12.5 and from there 3 more times by 1990.

I took Dr. Leo Louis Martello's Witchcraft course when I worked in Bethel, AK, in the late 1980's, became a Rosarian as well in that time period and was so for 10 years. I also joined Martello's group, Witches Anti-Defamation League and was the AK Chapter Director until my High Priestess and Martello had a falling out and WARD was created, which I changed groups.

I arrived in the Carolina on October 17, 1997 at 2:30 am, a move that would affect

the rest of my life.

I worked as a Certified Medical Assistant, EMT, Flight Medic, CNA, Phlebotomist, Legal Secretary, Secretary, Book Keeper, Payroll clerk, Bartender and Dancer in AK and when I arrived down here, waiting for my medical license to get transferred I worked at a battery factory in Statesville and then for several temporary agencies as a CMA or CNA, it didn't matter to me which one as long as I worked.

I moved to Great Falls in the fall of 1998, joined the Great Falls Rescue Squad and gave a lot of my medical equipment from the Assisted Living Home I had up North to the Great Falls Senior Center.

I am now in the Tradition of the Sidhe.

ETC: Did you know anyone in Great Falls, SC before you moved there in 1998?

Darla: My mother. I moved down to be closer to my mother, whom last year moved back to Florida, to build a relationship with her, which now I know was a mistake. She had issues about my case and didn't want people to know she was my mother, so unfortunately, I have chosen to not have anything else to do with her at this time because that has hurt me that she is ashamed of my faith and me.

My mom was a typical southern woman, always in your business and originally I lived very close to her and when she drove by and saw a car, she would stop to see who they were and if it was a man, she would make sure they knew I wasn't legally divorced even though I haven't lived with my husband since 1993. I began to look for a place to put some space between us, not much, just a little to give me privacy when I read an ad that said "rent to own" and I fell in love with the drive and rented, but then eventually found this house I live in now and bought it, which I have no mortgage.

ETC: What was your first impression of living in a small town, in the middle of the Bible Belt, with a population of approximately 3,000 people?

Darla: I grew up in a small town and then I lived in the Bush of AK for 8 years and I really liked it. I didn't notice all the churches at first. I originally thought they were my kind of people. At the Flopeye Cafe, the very first day I stopped there to look at that house for rent, they had all of my favorite foods and it reminded me of my home town, Springhill, LA; fried okra, squash, green tomatoes, peas and cornbread, they even had buttermilk! I was in love with this town from that moment!

ETC : Most of us are aware of the lawsuit that you filed in 2001against the town of Great Falls. According to the Great Falls newspaper The News & Reporter, your lawsuit against the town was to remove the name Jesus Christ from its opening prayers at town council meetings. Is this true?

Darla: Actually, I would like to correct that because it was to make it a nonsectarian prayer, to where no specific deity could be called upon, not specifically to remove JC's name, but to stop the promotion of one religion over another.

ETC: What lead you to file the suit? At the time, were you involved with Town

Council Meetings and if so in what regard?

Darla: I moved over here in the Fall of 1998, by the Spring of 1999, I had bought this house, which put on me on the other side of town, which meant my route to work changed and had me stopping at a stop sign on a daily basis that 3 crack dealers occupied as well on a daily basis. Because I didn't buy their drugs, they became obscene with me, by grabbing their crotches and telling me they had 12 inches for my backside. This went on for almost 6 months before I had my fill and an argument with them, which by this time they were already driving by my house and if I was outside they continued the obscenities.

I made them mad when I cussed them out at the stop sign one day and they decided to jump in their car and chase me down, and I pulled over to play whoop ass with them, but 2 guys from the Big A Auto Parts store came out and they took off. They told me I needed to go to the police and being the biker babe that I am, I didn't want to be a snitch but was informed that in this town, everyone went to the police with their problems, it was the way things were done, so I did.

The police told me that they were only allowed 2 undercover operations a year and that if I wanted anything done about it I would have to go to a council meeting and talk with them, which I did, but I had never been to a council meeting prior to that and had no desire to do so and would have never went back had they not made my bumper stickers and my faith an issue and dealt with my issues of the drug dealers.

I had no problem with their prayer at the council meeting, matter of fact I participated in it. I stood, bowed my head and said amen at the end, just like everyone else. When it came time for me to talk, I got a sentence out and then they informed me my bumper stickers were offensive and wanted them removed and my time ran out, so I had to go back 6 times and each time I prayed with them, but by that time, I was interested in why it took so long for them to hear me and why did I have to accuse them of making money from the drug dealers to get action, so I continued.

Then when I didn't remove my stickers the prayers began to be directed at me or at least that is how I took it when the prayer, "may everyone find JC including the heathens" was said. At the next council meeting, I didn't bow my head and they waited for me to bow my head and then publicly pointed out that I didn't bow my head and people called me a Satanist and told me I wasn't wanted and I could get burned out during the meeting and none of my council said anything about these comments. So then, I asked for a generic prayer or to have members of the community alternate the prayer and they created a policy, which banned members of the community from giving prayers, and went to the churches and requested resolutions and petitions and got them against me and my request. From there, it just escalated to the point of having to file suit, but during all of this the first of the vandalism on my vehicles began and they were throwing bricks through my windows, egging my house and the first of the cats began to be poisoned, so they pushed me to the point of putting a stop to this organized hateful attitude towards differences.

ETC: I have researched your case online and it amuses me that from 2000 to present there are seventy-seven articles referencing you in The News & Reporter, the newspaper that serves Chester County, South Carolina. It appears that the Mayor and City Council Members in Great Falls are very close-minded

individuals. What is the most upsetting in these articles is that your house has been vandalized and your animals have been injured and even killed. Can you reflect upon what is happening there?

Darla: In the Spring of 2003, when we were in the planning stages for the PPD event in Great Falls, the police chief Mike Revels told me that town council had ordered him to ignore me, I recorded a conversation with him telling me this again, on August 27, 2004.

Prior to PPD of 2003, the problems were as I stated above, just starting, but then we were originally going to hold PPD in this town and one of the Council members, Glenn Ross began to collect signatures to stop it and writing letters to the editor to me and my God from him and his and also began to preach at me at the council meetings, which seemed to really inflame the public with me. We had a race riot on the 4th of July weekend, where Juicy Brown was murdered and an elderly man shot when he stepped out on his front porch and we cancelled the event and I went to the Council meeting to let them know that and Glenn Ross, claimed "that God was looking over the balcony and didn't like what he saw, so he spite the evil pagans down and that this was a great day for the residents of Great Falls and that every citizen should rejoice in God's glory," or something to that affect.

I went to PPD in Charlotte with a friend's husband and my Goddaughter and when I arrived back home after a wonderful day with friends and family, I walked into a home, that a front door and windows were broken and spray painted, cabinets tore down, poop in microwave, cat box dumped in my bed, spray paint on the walls that said, "die witch," refrigerator and stove flipped over and everything out of the drawers and it was totally demolished. I called the Chief and then I went to the police station only to be given a security catalog and told he would be jeopardizing his job. I went home and attempted to clean up and from that day forward until August 11, 2004, my house was vandalized a total of 9 times. I have redone my home 5 times and am working on the 6th now. During that time, everything except one piece of furniture survived in its entirety, which is a dresser from a beautiful bedroom suit. How it survived I don't have a clue, but one of my friend's reminds that he feels it is because when he came over and saw it flipped on the floor and offered to turn it back up, I told him to leave it that it would only end up there again and he said he thinks that saved it.

During this time, I did try to get, as much of my stuff that wasn't broken or broken too badly outside in the shed or on the front porch, but it didn't save my animals.

I walked in once to find a cat gutted and hung from a planter in the back bedroom, my African Grey, Little One beheaded and her heart cut out, with a note attached saying I was next, cats poisoned, murdered, my horses almost killed, my oldest Yorkie was blinded when she was 14 and then attacked again this year, which now she is completely blinded and just recently had to undergo surgery which they didn't think she would survive due to her age. I have been pulled over my fence and beaten. Even my male raccoon was taken and I think they were going to kill him, but possibly attempted to torture him first by shaving him, which was their mistake, because he got away and came home. They killed my iguana, Sammie, which she was 6 feet long, my black shark and due to the attacks I had to give my horses away because I couldn't be in 2 places at once, my 9 foot Burmese as well.

I don't want to go into the juicy details of it all because it makes me cry when I think of my animals being hurt and I have been struggling with depression since December of 2004, or maybe even sooner than that, but I know it hit me hard in December and I felt like I just wanted to die because I felt so inadequate due to my inability to keep my animals safe and my poor Blue Fronted Amazon who was Little One's companion, cried every day and made the sounds, which I believe were Little One's last sounds, would send chills up my spine and make the hair raise on my arms. It got to the point, where I had to put the birds in the back room so I could shut a door I just put up because I couldn't stand to listen to it any more.

I can't afford to allow depression to take hold again because it is important to me that I continue with the work on my house so that I can live in a home that feels like a home again. The people here have attempted to run me out by making my living conditions unbearable and for a while they were.

ETC : Is the local Police Department doing anything to resolve these issues? Do you feel like they are there to protect you?

Darla: They sometimes will do an incident report and other times they don't. As I stated they are under orders to ignore me. On August 11th, Officer Melton is the one who arrived to investigate the killing of Little One, which he didn't even bother to come inside my home because he said it wasn't necessary and he walked around my home to where in the back, under a window that had the screen removed was a lawn chair, which he thought he saw a finger print, stood up in the chair and ran his finger through it and then declared it a smear and that there was no evidence of forced entry. He also threw the note that was attached to Little One's back in the garbage can, which my attorney had me pull it out and dry it out and take it to the cop shop and demand it be put in the file the following day, which I did.

Every incident report claims it is still under investigation, even the ones that go back to 2000. The police department hasn't lifted a finger to do any form of any type of investigation into anything that has occurred to me. Matter of fact, the Chief has often asked me to do the investigation for him, such as find out where my ex room mate is and so on.

ETC : I am sure you have been asked this question a thousand times, but why do you stay in a place that does not want you there?

Darla: I stay here for many reasons, but the primary reason I stay is that I will not reward this behavior by giving them what they want because then it sets other people up to be victimized when this Town decides they don't like them because they are different, but also, I will not leave here until someone is charged and convicted for killing my bird. Plus, this is America, we have the right to pursue happiness and liberty and to live where we want, and I fully intend to follow my dreams where ever they may lead me.

ETC: The legal costs have to be overwhelming?

To date, the legal fees have totaled \$65, 490.91, but I can honestly say my attorney hasn't asked me for a dime, and is hoping to get the \$ back from the now battle of getting the town to reimburse him, but I am not sure if I will be responsible if the award of legal fees does not cover the full expense and to be

honest with you, I haven't even bothered to ask, because I am not prepared to hear the answer yet. If we end up in a second suit, I am sure there will be other fees that I will have to pay upfront, so am planning to deal with all of that as it comes my way.

ETC: Have the Pagan's in South Carolina and/or North Carolina showed any support for you?

Darla: There has been about a dozen that have showed me support.

ETC: A dozen? This makes me angry. When I first heard about this case, it truly upset me. I am disappointed in the Pagan Community! We should all come together and help in some way. How about religious organizations? Have any of the religious organizations come forward to offer you assistance?

Darla: I get moral and legal support from AREN. Sheila Jackson of the SC ACLU Piedmont Chapter, is a UU and she has gone to a UU meeting and 4 UU's have come together and are planning to come over in October to either do an assessment of my home or possibly to begin working on my home to get it livable again.

ETC: Do you see yourself staying in Great Falls, SC for the rest of your life? I understand now, it is more of a fight, a challenge to prove that the people of that area cannot run you out. You want to insure that this sort of treatment will not happen to other people who move into the area. I totally support you. But, is this where you want to grow old and spend the rest of your life?

Darla: No, it's not. If I ever recover from this and get back on my feet, I fully intend to go back to the Bush of AK. I want to live somewhere close by a river that in the Summer time you can get in by boat, or in the wintertime fly in or sled in. I hope to one day be able to buy me many acres there, build a solar paneled home and write some books on my favorite subject and connection with animals.

ETC: As I said, this situation makes me angry and in my opinion, I think we as Pagan's, Witches, Wiccans, etc. should come together and help you fight. Therefore I am going to start a fundraising campaign for you. All money that is collected on your behalf can help you with repairing your house, paying attorney fee's, feeding yourself and your animals. I am willing to help you fight this, because this subject touches me in a way that I cannot begin to describe. I am angry and saddened to know that you live this way. This is America! We have freedom of religion.

Darla: Thank you Roxanne, but please don't expect a lot from our community. It seems many people feel that I have jeopardized their safety by filing this suit. I appreciate your support more than you will ever know, but this has been happening for 6 years and people have known this for all of that time and I feel that if they were going to come be by my side, they would have already done it and the majority of them haven't and I don't expect them to now. They are afraid to stand up and say, we are Pagan, we are People, we demand Equality, you can't Harm us and get away with it, because I have learned I am not the first that this has happened to, nor will I be the last, but the only thing I hope to accomplish from this interview is to give people something to think about for the future for the next victim, which as we speak something similar is occurring in it's infancy in NM; that our community doesn't allow this to happen to another one of us and

if they do, I think it is shame on them and when it happens to them, I hope they understand the precedence they have set within our community and that they have the strength and the ability to survive it.

ETC: You may be correct Darla; the Pagan community may not do anything. It is possible that some people are not aware of the situation. Some people are new to the Pagan community. Regardless, I think that deep down in my heart something must be done. That is why I am going to do everything I can to make EVERYONE that I can aware of this situation. If everyone everywhere, that is touched by this story or simply just does not agree with what is happening to you, would donate a dollar – one dollar, it will make a difference!

If you are interested in helping stop the current Witch Hunts, please email [help@exploringthecauldron.com](mailto:help@exploringthecauldron.com).

Additionally you can donate to Darla Wynne fund by clicking below or send donations to:

Exploring the Cauldron  
Darla Wynne Fund  
PO Box 213  
Landis, NC 28088

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