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**Creating a New Understanding of Affiliation in the New Age and Neo-Pagan**

**New Religious Movements**

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**Department of Religion**

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## ABSTRACT

### Creating a New Understanding of Affiliation in the New Age and Neo-Pagan New Religious Movements

Jessica Suzanne Kaufman

The study of affiliation and disaffiliation from New Religious Movements has until now focused exclusively on communal groups that are in high tension with society. This study shows that in New Age and Neo-Pagan New Religious Movements, both of which are at a state of low tension with society, the process of leaving and joining these movements are radically different. Issues such as leader intervention, group pressure and community bonding do not pressure those within the religion because the religions are of such an individualized nature. Questioning the authority of the individual to seek out religious fulfillment and the challenges to find a community all influence the process of learning what each person needs from their own religion. The creation of the Internet has created a community for religious seekers that exists nowhere, yet gives security and support to those who wish to explore religion in privacy or those who are geographically or otherwise physically isolated. It will be argued that this changes the process of affiliation and disaffiliation in these groups into being an accepted and necessary learning process for each individual.

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## **Introduction**

Academics studying apostasy in New Religious Movements as such have studied four groups in particular, the Hare Krishna (ISKON), Children of God, the Unification Church, and the Scientologists. These three groups have been scrutinized by studies of various disciplines from their inception. These groups have caused the most direct challenge to contemporary North American society which maintains largely Judeo-Christian affiliations. Much of previous material has focussed on the 'how' and the conflict that comes from the family when a member joins or leaves a more restrictive or higher commitment NRM.<sup>1</sup> Partially because this affiliation has become so culturally acceptable, people who are not members of New Religious Movements (NRMs) cannot conceive why anyone would freely associate with, or commit oneself to a group that is voluntarily marginalised from the rest of society. Other NRMs that do not conform to the high standards of commitment that are found in these four groups have been overlooked for study's concerning themselves with the affiliation and disaffiliation process. Groups that are large, amorphous, non-communal, unorganized and low commitment are not as easy to localize, and are generally left out of academic study because they present unique challenges to the researcher.

Part of what drives research in this field is the desire for understanding why individuals within North American society choose beliefs that are non-traditional. It involves understanding the process by which they could have changed the world view that they have been socialized into

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<sup>1</sup>Barbour, John D. Versions of De-conversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994

Bromley, David G. Shupe. "Affiliation and Disaffiliation; A role theory interpretation of Joining and Leaving New Religious Movements". Thought 61 (1986): 197-211

Freed, Josh. Moonwebs. Toronto, Ontario: Virgo Press, 1980

by their peers and family and enjoined another that is radically different. Although this process may mean leaving behind family and friends in search of new meaning, there are those who manage to separate their religion from their public life and live religiously inspired lives that do not require them to reject or remove themselves from society as a whole. This does not imply that conflict is absent between the two dichotomies of public life and private religion, only that it is possible. The numbers of people who are involved in these private religions are incalculable, but given the popularity of the ideas, it is safe to assume that people participate in greater numbers than those who involve themselves in the aforementioned higher commitment NRMs.

The other question that must be asked before pursuing further study into these low-commitment NRMs is, where does one draw the line between a member of an NRM and someone who is a client of a health or religious service that is considered to be based on New Age or Pagan beliefs? Just how much does new religious thought influence Western society? Herbal medicines, massage therapy, yoga and meditation have become increasingly mainstream and accepted by those involved in traditional religions. Far more people are involved with these low commitment ideologies than ever before to the extent that mainstream psychology and popular culture are now imbued with these religiously inspired ideals. This leaves the researcher to make a distinction between those who use the material but are not specially affiliated and those who self identify with a particular lifestyle.

It is undeniable that since the nineteen-sixties there has been a greater main-stream interest in ideas that have been influenced by Buddhist and other 'Eastern' traditions. Spiritualism under Helena Blavatsky and Henry Oilcott being the some of the fore runners of introducing North American and European countries to such ideas as re-incarnation, meditative



techniques and 'ascended masters', all of which are now staples in the New Age and main stream culture in general. Even North American pop culture has been imbued with these new age beliefs to the point where television hosts like Oprah Winfrey have begun using the terminology associated with the New Age to relate to her viewers.

My own interest in the subject of NRMs revolves around an undeniable curiosity and desire to understand why people believe what they believe. In particular, why people would find it desirable to engage in the search for alien life, discuss the nature of reality with Ascended Masters or learn their past-life goal. Often rejecting their own families culture to pursue these goals, people find it rewarding to study these things and involve themselves with others of similar interest. It also happens, often, that those who are interested in these goals, will then disassociate themselves with their self chosen group and will change their goals to something different yet again. Perhaps changing their beliefs to encompass the ways in which new gods and goddesses from many different traditions can empower them to live a more peaceful life. After that they may want to talk to someone about this change, or after talking to many people about their spiritual ambitions, will want to keep it as private as possible.

In many ways I can understand wanting to explore many different spiritual paths. After being raised in a very liberal family with no defined religion, but a large supply of religious books from such diverse areas as Rosicrucians, Buddhists, Spiritualists and Confucius. My parents also encouraged me to attend the religious establishments of family and friends, hence I have no established religious boundaries. Religion in my family was as diverse as Catholic masses, to meditation to nature walks. Because of this I have always assumed that people searched for the spirituality, wether they grew up in a religious household or not. By extension

this means that I assume that everyone must either reject or accept (in part or whole) the religion of the parents or culture. Implicit in this is the link between religion and law as well as convention, and the unconscious need to form opinions and individual ideals within or outside of the family unit.

After attending a Catholic highschool, I came to the realization that some people did not need to search, or explore or question, and they are content to believe what their parents believe. As I was told by a young Mormon girl I knew: "Why would I question my parents? This is what I believe"(personal communication, 1993.) At the time I did not even realize that Mormons were not any different than Catholics. It was only after studying NRMs that the insight of the conscious choice of this highschool friend meant that like her parents, she too was choosing to follow an unorthodox path.

This study grew from the idea that seems to be foreign to that friend (and many others, I soon learned) that religion is an experiment for many people. They join a group or read a book or attend a lecture to explore themselves and what they believe. After that a filtering process takes place determining what works with individual beliefs and discarding the rest. This is a process that is lifelong for many people, and it does not stop with youth experimentation. Nor is there any logical reason that a personal need for religion would cease when someone leaves home or starts a family. If anything, this study will show that especially within the areas which are the focus of this study, the New Age movement, Pagan and Wiccan's, it is a joyful challenge to imbue their lives with the spirituality and religion of their choice. It is the wish of those who continue to experiment in the relative freedom of their private lives. Only some feel the need to make it their community as well, extending their religion to the public realm. Nor should my

conclusion be surprising, that people change their ideas as they grow and learn.

There are a variety of reasons that people begin to study religion in a piecemeal fashion. For one it may simply not be practical for some people to try and learn in a group setting with an established community. If there are no groups in their area, are they simply to put their religious desire to the side until they can become independent enough to move to a place that does have the physical capabilities of fulfilling their religious needs? That seems archaic in this age of the computer, Internet and knowledge sharing. People can and do learn on their own, they can study religion on their own and they can be religious all by themselves, regardless of their physical location. How far they want to take this process of learning is their personal choice, and it *is* legitimate religious expression.

I chose the two groups of my study New Age and neo-Pagan (or Pagan, which for the purpose of this study includes sub-groups such as Wiccan) because members require a minimal commitment to be affiliated, and have encouraged the idea that physical location does not determine one's status in the community. This is in part because they believe that all human possess a spirit that is separate from the body and can connect to others regardless of distance. It is also part of their mandate that individuality and freedom of expression are highly prized. To make the choice to become part of one of these groups and hence, part of the community as a whole is to immediately have some bond and a certain amount of access to everyone else involved. The leaders of the movement encourage the idea that the physical is of equal importance to the spiritual, but only to the individual. Spiritually speaking, what we cannot see is of greater value. Not to say that these ideals are not regularly challenged, as shall be further explained, but as a whole, the extended community continues to strive towards what they would

consider a common goal.

My aim in this paper is to prove that people join and leave low tension NRMs such as various New Age or Pagan factions because they are on a spiritual journey that is not available to them in more culturally accepted forms of religion. As current theories of apostasy do not take this into consideration, I will not use the term 'apostasy' as I do not believe that it accurately describes individual movement. I will refer to the process of joining and leaving as either disaffiliation, or leave-taking. Being involved in these religious groups may allow individual to be in contact with others of like minds but it does not guarantee community in the physical sense. People feel it is acceptable to join or leave the physical community, or to change their ideas about particulars within the framework of the larger movement because a *meta-community* exists and supports them regardless.

This leads into what I will be developing as an idea of the "meta community"; that is an existing community with a language that exists as a method of discussing the religious community that is not necessarily a legitimate physical community. But a language has been developed to describe the feeling of the non-physical community (mental, technological, spiritual, or psychic) connection that replaces the requirements of a permanent physical community.

## **Methodology**

I gathered information about this process from three basic sources; traditional secondary resources, personal communication, and the Internet. The secondary resources were fairly limiting, as there are not many studies that even touch on the subject, but the ones that were

pertinent were very helpful in establishing the criteria for my research. Primarily I used John Barbour's book Versions of De-conversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith, David Bromley's article, "Affiliation and Disaffiliation: A role theory interpretation of Joining and Leaving New Religious Movements" from the magazine *Thought*, and his book Falling From the Faith; Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy. Also a good overview of the New Age in North American society was given by Richard Kyle in The New Age Movement in American Culture, which helped to contextualize the sources from the Internet, and the interviews with affiliates and former affiliates of both the New Age and Pagan religions. Margot Adler's book Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today gives a very good introduction and overview of both the history of the neo-Pagan movement and where it stands today.

To find people to interview I drew from the resources I have established in three years of studying NRM's and I also interviewed people who I knew to be involved in personal spiritual searches. The interviews were held between January 1999 and February of 2001. For the privacy of those involved, their names and specific personal material has been altered. The criteria that I used when establishing an interview was that the person had been involved, and identified themselves as being part of a particular New Age or Pagan group, and had been a member or affiliated with other groups in the past. I tried to interview people who were involved with a large variety of religious traditions. Therefore, when I introduce a person as being neo-Pagan it is because they follow a general spiritual path. If a more specific term such as Wiccan or neo-Alexandrian, Druid, Celtic or any other title is used it is because the person self identifies to that title. In any given NRM site, there are many different histories given and explanation

provided to inform the reader, this is essentially the practitioners' way of asserting what they believe and the historical context for it.

The Internet gave me my greatest methodological challenge, in verifying and interpreting the data. The Internet is notorious for being a vast but shallow informational tool. For the dedicated researcher sifting through primary resource material is a slow but rewarding task in any medium, and if regarded in this manner, no different from any other. Overall I focussed on seventeen separate web-sites, eight of which were specifically New Age, eight are Pagan or Wiccan, and one which deals with those involved with the ex-cult movement. Of these, the ones which are of particular interest are the Spirit Web site, the *Utne Reader* site, and the Avatar Search because they are places of community or involve a specific chat network. Often on these sites, there are links to personal web sites, or there is personal information given for people who wish to extend contact to others who are interested. This can be in the form of an email address, or a listing for an ICQ or MSN Messenger number. Both of these instant messaging services are very useful for those who are maintaining contact over the computer.

Since there is no protocol for gathering information from these types of sources I have followed a routine that I feel allowed me to gather and disseminate information in the least invasive way possible and with the fullest consent. Although technically the material is in the public domain, I tended to take very seriously all warnings that "all material and images are property of the web-site" which is a copy write that is frequently posted on personal web-pages. If I wanted to use any material on the page I would email the person who maintained the site and told them my intentions for the material I wanted to use, and asked if they wished to add any further comments. If there was no response I did not use material off that site.

In the use of larger, more general informational web sites such as Avatar, which also functions as a search engine, or *Utne* which is also a magazine, I treated the information as any other secondary resource. I often attempted to contact the web-master of the site for information and comments. The responses I got from both sources were invaluable to the conclusions that I have drawn from the material collected.

The conclusions that I have drawn from these three areas are: Affiliation in NRMs that have low tension with society and within themselves follows similar patterns to higher tension or more demanding religious movements but the results because of the low tension is that it is much easier for an individual to follow a coherent and continuous spiritual path. Also rejection of material is not a break with the 'tradition' because within these low affiliation NRMs challenge and new ideas are viewed as part of the religious or spiritual path.

As was told to me in a personal email by the President of the Meditation Society when I asked him permission to use his site in this work,

And it is this very diversity that produces an atmosphere for all to grow in understanding of the human condition and even the divine. As the Native Americans so wisely state, "You only know a man when you have walked a mile in his moccasins." The richness of the various experiences that so many different backgrounds of our members and students have had let us all benefit and progress towards at least being on the path that allows us to feel comfortable no matter whose moccasins we wear. (Personal communication, October 18 2000)

## Chapter One : What is Religion?

### Defining Religion

As a preliminary to these studies, it is necessary to define the subject matter at a basic level. It is therefore required to create a definition of religion that is specific and yet fluid enough to embrace many different ideologies that are part of such a vast rubric. Surely a definition does not keep someone from being religious, nor does it matter to any of the religious practitioners who get studied by academics whether or not their specific kind of religion counts as part of the definition of religion. For the purposes of this study the definition that will be represented by the term religion will need to meet the challenge of including within it the types of religions that I am studying which are often classed as 'para-religions' or 'quasi-religions'<sup>1</sup>. However due to the nature of this study it is only practical that the definition includes these practices within itself. For this study religion shall be defined as, *a framework in which people, both alone and together, form a system by which they understand the universe. Through actions, both public and private they devote themselves to this system. Religion is not something that takes any kind of definitive form, being transient through time, cultural and personal history.*<sup>2</sup>

How can we now relate this definition of religion to the New Age and Pagan groups which are the subject of this study? All groups encountered are classified as 'New Religious Movements' yet there is a hesitation in naming them as 'religions' per se. Perhaps after

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<sup>1</sup>See Bird, Fred. Reimer, Bill. "Participation Rates in New Religious and Para-Religious Movements"

<sup>2</sup>This definition first appeared in an unpublished paper written for Prof. M. Despland in February of 1998 entitled "Defining Religion".



considering what Christopher Hellend writes in his Master's thesis entitled, *Science and the Sacred: New Technologies Within New Religions, a Reaction to Secularization and a Reinterpretation of Myth*: "New Religious Movements provide something real. They allow practitioners to benefit from a community of like minded individuals, gaining experiences from interactions and membership. They also provide moral and ethical frameworks, friendships, and a sense of belonging and support for individuals considered marginal."(17) Interaction and participation is not limited in these cases to religiously proscribed interactions. There exists a common bond in the very marginality that the community of the NRM can share.

The academic studying NRMs should not be confused or distracted by the fact that many of these NRMs are a broader category for sub-movements within each. For example, you can be part of the New Age movements and participate in a wide variety of spiritual techniques, such as channelling, Dances of Universal Peace . Lightworking, different techniques in Healing Touch, each in and of itself being a valid religious practice, but also part of a greater system. Many Pagan's and Wiccan's I have interviewed were currently studying such diverse areas as Kabbalah, Hebraism, astrology, and different meditative techniques. All of these religious and spiritual ideas integrate within the individual's practice and thus become part of the personal religion.

In terms of participation, I do not want to make a distinction between those who would consider themselves members of any specific group or those who are peripherally interested and involved in the study of a certain religion or religions. Sociologically speaking, most of the people in my study would be classified as 'affiliates' rather than members. Unlike in Bird and Reimer's study entitled "Participation Rates in New Religious and Para-religious Movements" I

am not interested in how long someone has been a member of this or that groups, as they prove that, "For most persons, participation is temporary and involves them only in the periphery of these groups. It is impossible to conclude that such involvement is without much significance for the individual, of course, but is possible to argue that this significance would be different were typical participants to become more involved"(293). These authors do make a valid point that greater participation within NRMs does produce more 'typical results'. However missing from this paper is the knowledge that whether the person is or was involved in a spiritual groups makes no difference to the person. For most people this affiliation is indeed short lived, and is temporary become it is viewed as a step along the journey of their spiritual path, and not a goal in and of itself.

Most New Age and Pagan practitioners view religion as a 'spiritual supermarket' to take the phrase from Robert Greenfield's book entitled *The Spiritual Supermarket*. Unlike the negative connotations of Greenfield's book, the positive experience of 'shopping' allows practitioners to grown and learn in the areas in which they believe are important. Greenfield wrote his book after the course of his search for a religion, he came across the Divine Light Mission, which was the groups started by the Maharishi Yogi. This was one of the many groups that started in the sixties with the influx of eastern religious thought. Much of the New Age thought is borrowed either directly or indirectly from Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism - for example of most of the New Age thought relies on the idea of reincarnation and 'cosmic' karma.

The concept of the supermarket is used by many practitioners as a metaphor of the experience of seeking those ideas that will spiritually nourish them. New Age, Paganism and

Wicca throughout their modern inception have allowed the idea of shopping in the form of the spiritual quest. This manifests itself in such authors as Casteneda and Lynn V. Andrews who publish 'autobiographical' works (the veracity of which has neither been ascertained, nor does it matter) that detail spiritual quests through contemporary North American experiences with mystical and spiritual results.

### **A Brief History and Explanation of the New Age and Paganism**

The New Age is an umbrella term for the many different ideas and practices that make up an overarching idea. As Richard Kyle says in *The New Age movement in American Culture*, what the 'New Age' is a code word for, is not one specific thing. It is not one group or person, and there is no one leader or even a group of leaders. It is a network of people sharing similar ideas about life, spirituality and the future. Kyle states, "moreover, the New Age is a cultural movement in transition. Consequently, it is constantly shifting"(198). Most people who fall into the category of New Age practitioners would say 'oh no, I just like to meditate and read these books and sometimes I go to workshops'. These can be negatively defined as people who practice similar ideas but are not members of other religious movements or NRMs who involve themselves in similar activities.

The New age is not a movements as such but a manner in which some people perceive the world, so although they may feel part of something larger, they may consider themselves distant from that whole at the same time. "What unifies the New Age is it's world-view and assumptions regarding reality, God, human nature, and the basis of the human predicament"(Kyle, 198).

There are many good histories of the New Age and how it evolved from the Spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century and the occult movement of the same time period.<sup>3</sup> Most authors will trace the name of the movement back to Emmanuel Swedenborg who was an eighteenth century Lutheran. He spend much of his life in pursuit of the human soul and began have visions of heaven and hell and once they began, he was constantly having what he called 'waking visions' of the spiritual world. This included conversations with non physical beings such as angels and spiritual beings, about the true nature of reality. These ideas that have been elaborated upon by successive New Age authors and practitioners such as Jane Roberts, Carlos Casteneda and Lynn V Andrews have clearly influenced the New Age that has been in practice for the past thirty years. The idea that it is possible to speak with higher spiritual beings is very prevalent, as is the fact that these being wish to spread their knowledge to those people who are in contact with them. Swedenborg prophesied that every two-hundred years there begins a 'new age' of humankind. It was his words that spurred on some participants of the then young Romantic movement and then the Spiritualist movement. Through his 'New Age' theory his followers came to believe that the human race was involved in consciously guiding its' own evolution, which is an idea that heavily influences the practices and ideologies it espouses. The Swedenborg Foundation still exists today.

The other major influence of western thought that created the New Age was the influx of eastern religious thought into North America in the sixties. In addition to the larger numbers of immigrants from China, Japan and Korea, there was also the introduction of Indian

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<sup>3</sup>For example, *New Age Spirituality: as Assessment* by Duncan S. Ferguson, ed. And *The New Age Movement in American Culture* by Richard Kyle.

spiritual gurus which began to heavily influence the younger generations of North Americans. Then, blended with the sixties and seventies social and technological revolution, the New Age movement evolved into the present incarnation that continues today.

People who are involved in the New Age are often termed as 'apocalyptic' because they believe that a 'new age' of humankind is on the verge of becoming a reality: or we are just beginning to realize the truth about the new reality, which is already here. 'The Age of Aquarius' is one term for it, but there are many others. Along with this change, we are expected to meet and learn from other races within our universe. Learning to evolve all of humankind both spiritually and physically is the main goal of those involved in the New Age movement. One of the attitudes that expresses the ideology of the New Age was written by Rene K. Muller who is the mediator for the New Age web-page *Spiritweb*: "The established religions are valid for the people who are able to relate themselves to a certain view of the world, of God or All-That-Is, but certainly there is a new but actually and ancient way to discover spirituality beyond dogmatic scriptures and beliefs but based on personal experiences."(*Spiritweb*) That is, all of the various different practices are to be used for the benefit of all humankind in search of a better existence.

Although many New Age people claim to be in contact with aliens or 'spiritual masters', it is usually in the form of channelling their voice or words through automatic writing or trance states. "Channelling is a process of passing information from within yourself, which may be perceived as your inner voice, or if you are more open, may be perceived as Spirit Guardians or your Higher self (Non-embodied self)."(Muller, *Spiritweb*) Many of the articles on *Spiritweb* are given by people channelling Ascended Masters of higher aspects of themselves. There are many other examples of this in books such as the Jane Robert's *Seth* series, or her *Education of*

*Oversoul Seven*. There is also the Kryon series which is, "Channelled information from Kryon, a love-filled and empowering angelic being."(Liljergren, *Kryon*) And the *Urantia* book, which is of a similar nature to the *Kryon* and *Seth* books, and which I will describe in more detail later. Many other web-sites of similar information exist, the aforementioned *Spiritweb*, *Lightworking.com*, *Earthlink Mission 2001:Journey to the Next Millennium* and many others which have their stated purpose as helping to enlighten people through the knowledge given by these being who exist on a plane of higher spiritual evolution.

Many histories have been posed by various individuals such as Starhawk, Scott Cunningham and Margot Adler to explain the Pagan/Wiccan/Neo-pagan/revivalist movements. One simplified explanation of the movement as a whole is given by Lynna Landstreet on her web-site *Wild Ideas*; "Basically, Paganism is a large category that includes a number of different religions that share the common characteristic of being polytheistic (worshipping lots of gods) and/or nature revering."(Landreet, *Wild Ideas*) And although there are a lot of crossovers between the two traditions of Paganism and Wicca they often exist as distinct groups which may oppose each other. "Wicca is one specific type of Paganism, which draws on both Pagan folk traditions and the more elaborate ceremonial magic that was being practised around the turn of the [nineteenth] century."(ibid) The Pagan/Wiccan movements have many and diverse (often dubious) stories of its beginnings. Margot Adler's book *Drawing Down the Moon* is a seminal text for the study and history of this movement. In her section entitled "the Wiccan Revival" she gives an excellent account of the history and controversy surrounding the resurrection of Paganism and Witchcraft in the world today.

Most of the controversy has been surrounding the mythical beginnings of witchcraft,

which is supported by some as complete truth; i.e. that Wicca is a direct survivor of the goddess and fertility cults of pre-patriarchal (sic) communities, much like many New Age people believe that some of their techniques are ones that they are 'remembering' from past lives living on Atlantis. Paganism would be the direct decedents of as various people as the Druids, and so called 'folk religion' that existed before the Christians came to Europe. Authors such as Margaret Murray who was an Egyptologist who interpreted certain discoveries in a manner that was somewhat questionable, eventually led to the creation of Dianic Wicca, a group that admits only women. Although there have been many changes in people's understanding of the creation of modern Paganism and Wicca, Adler notes; "Until about a decade ago (1976) most of the Wiccan's took almost all elements of the myth literally. Few do so today, which in itself is a lesson in the flexibility of the revival"(Adler, 46)

For the purposes of this study, I have gathered here a brief history that encompasses the most common and plausible bits of history about the Wiccan and Pagan revivalist moments. Most of the rituals and aspects of modern Paganism come from Gerald Gardener. Many of the rituals and chants that are written today are influenced either consciously or unconsciously from Gardener's or those who followed his movement. What we know about Gardener is that he was an English gentleman who began a Wiccan group in the 1930's into which many prominent people (such as the daughter of Annie Besant, leader of the Theosophical movement) were either members or friends. The contradictions and controversy that surrounds this comes from the undocumented beginnings that cannot not be verified. Gardener produced a book of rituals, that some say was written by Aleister Crowley, which he claimed to be authoritative and authentic. Although most people now do not believe this is the case, there is no doubt that his

works remain a definitive step towards creating the movement as it exists today.

Much of what Gardener is recorded as saying or writing is not known to be entirely factual, but was undocumented at the time and later pieced together by hopeful historian and the later taken as gospel. This caused some controversy because there are factions to whom historical veracity is more important and those who rely on reconstructed history, such as Starhawk.

Most contemporary practitioners of modern forms of Paganism keep all of this information in mind but do not regard any of it as gospel. The importance of these historical roots in day to day spirituality is minimal. From my interviews with Pagans and Wiccan's, the focus is more on direct experience with the divine and developing personal spirituality. In the web-age *A Mystical Grove*, Dragonhawk describes the basis for Paganism as magic, which is:

Very simply put, Earth Religion recognizes that there exists a Universal Energy afloat everywhere and at all times. Every object in existence is made up of this energy. In essence, all objects are alive with this energy. This energy is the "creative Energy". So then, this energy is the foundation and creativeness of the God and Goddess. (We believe in a balance of female and male powers-hence two figures). (*A Mystical Grove*, Dragonhawk).

This movement away from the historical aspects of Wicca and towards direct revelation and experimentation with different ideas and different religious traditions is weakening the necessity of the past forms of Paganism and Wicca from influencing what is now considered to be modern forms of the religion. This is reminiscent of mystic and gnostic Christian traditions that are of increasing interest to Pagan and Wiccan practitioners. Many people who are Devoutly



Wiccan will quite cheerfully use Egyptian symbols, Mayan symbols, or any other religious tradition's gods and goddesses because they are all simply aspects of the Divine principle. To further quote Dragonhawk from the *A Mystical Grove Web-site*:

To take a picture of the 'Craft would reveal a star-like object. Rather than the light radiating out from the star, though, picture the light approaching and enter the star from all directions. These rays of light are the many different beliefs that compose the 'Craft. The light of the star that is the 'Craft, the glowing that your eye can see, is created by the diversity of beliefs. Now, this is not to say that there are not some common beliefs among most all practitioners, but the diversity heavily outweighs the commonalities. While the commonalities are what causes 'Craft practitioners to gather, it is the diversity among them and the freedom to personal beliefs that makes the 'Craft glow brightly.

Note how there is very little allegiance given to one person or to one idea. In fact the mixing of ideas is a source of pride for these practitioners, allowing them to be inclusive and therefore open to ideas that will enhance their personal spirituality. Paganism draws on the freedom that Wicca gave to pursue spiritual goals of this nature, but mixed them even more heavily with Druidism, Celtic religions and other naturistic ideas such as animism and other Native traditions.

### **Categorizing New Age, Paganism and Wicca**

Roy Wallis' three categories of New Religious Movement<sup>4</sup> have become the standard by which NRM's can be classified. The three titles he uses are, World Rejecting, World Affirming

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<sup>4</sup> Wallis, Roy. "Three Types of New Religious Movement". Dawson, Lorne L. Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998

and World Accommodating religions. The New Age movement contains characteristics from all three categories, but I think should be classified as World Accommodating. The New Age is a more ambiguous movement than Pagan or Wiccan groups, as it contains apocalyptic tendencies in the idea of the coming of the 'New Age', which a major trait Wallis attributes to World Rejecting religions. "Such a movement may anticipate an imminent and major transformation of the world."(41) But the New Age does not contain the other main traits, a life of service to a master or guru, and a condemnation of urban society. Such would be counterproductive as most of the practitioners are urbanites.

The New Age movement contains more traits of the World Accommodating religion, "Movements approximating the world-affirming type claim to possess the means to enable people to unlock their physical, mental and spiritual potential without the need to withdraw from the world, means which are readily available to virtually everyone who learns the technique or principle involved."(52) There are aspects of the New Age movement which fully meet the criteria of the World Affirming religion including much of the channelled information, which encourages self reflection and assumes that once the individual has learned and accepted the knowledge that is offered their life will improve and the person will become more aware of the true reality of the world.

The New Age movement as a whole, as well as the Pagan and Wiccan movements both should be classified under the heading of the World-Accommodating New Religion because as a whole, all groups consider religion to be a private affair. Notwithstanding their social interaction within the group the religion makes no demands on the person's public interactions. As Wallis states, "Although it may invigorate the individual for life in the world, it has relatively few

implications for how that life should be lived, except that it should be lived in a more religiously inspired fashion.”(65) This allows people involved in the religions to also be involved with the public world which does not create the gulf between the private and public world that is seen in more World Rejecting and higher tension groups such as ISKON. This also allows for greater freedom to move between groups, such as we will see in the New Age practitioners that I interviewed. Another trait of the world-accommodating religion is the protest against ‘traditional’ religions: “These are seen to have abandoned a living spirituality, to have eschewed experience for an empty formalism. . .restor[ing] an experiential element to the spiritual life and thereby replac[ing] lost certainties in a world where religious institutions have become increasingly relativized.”(66) This is very pertinent especially to those who practice ‘traditional’ Wicca or any more formalized system of Paganism, thus choosing for themselves a moral code and a system of religious symbols that overlays the secular world view. For those who are more eclectic, their symbolic system has even more diversity because they are consciously experimenting with spiritual systems and creating new certainties for themselves.

The individuals involved in the spiritual searches of this kind are deeply committed to what they believe holds truth for them, and find it absolutely necessary to be able to search, try and ultimately integrate these different ideas into their practices. It is not even the spiritual conversion that John D. Barbour in his book *Versions of De-conversion* speak of. He states; “A religious conversion is a profound change in belief and action in relation to what a person conceives of as ultimate reality.”(1) In Barbour’s experience, religious conversion goes through stages of doubt, moral criticism which then leads to loss of commitment. He also sees a certain bitterness that is residual to these religious conversions, as if the person involved is upset by the

knowledge that the religious ideas are no longer fulfilling them spiritually. Within Paganism, Wicca and the New Age this emotion of cynicism was not a problem, at least with the people whom I interviewed. What was discovered in their process of de-conversion, and reconversion was that it was a natural and inevitable process. Although Barbour's approach might be applicable to the dramatic changes in ideas of those involved in those who are for the first time converting from a more established religion to a NRM, in the cases I have studied, within these NRM's it is a process of 'outgrowing' certain ideas or practices. The main ideas and goals will always remain the same in the person involved, but segment will grow and certain parts will be discarded as the individual changes throughout her/her lifetime, thus truly accommodating the world in which the participant lives.

## **Chapter Two: Changing Ideas**

### **De-programming to de-conversion**

It has now been established that the low tension, world affirming NRM's that are under study accept the idea of movement within the rubric of personal spirituality. What I would now like to illustrate are some practical examples of how this process of leave-taking is used to establish both community and personal identity.

The lack of moral crisis involved in switching affiliations, coupled with the absence of social boundaries which necessitate evolution are the two main reasons why the term 'apostasy' is not applicable in New Age and Pagan NRMs. The second is that the term apostasy has been co-opted within the popular anti-cult literature who insist that those who leave their faith are angry and bitter about their experiences within the group. There exists a large segment of literature which consists of testimony from those who have left higher commitment groups and have made the choice to leave, or have been 'rescued' and subsequently 'de-programmed'.

Returning to Barbour and Versions of De-conversion he note that, "most stories of de-conversion from cults are written soon after the loss of faith and express an outpouring of anger, grief, guilt, and moral outrage."(175)

One illustration of this is the book by Josh Freed called Moonwebs which regales the reader with the personal experiences of how a friend of his was 'brainwashed' by the Unification Church, and had to be first rescued by kidnapping and then forcibly shown the error of his ways. This real-life drama, which eventually got made into a movie, took place in the seventies, at a time when the Unification church were still at a very high popularity and consequently had a very

high-tension relationship with the rest of society. It is interesting to note that, as Barbour points out, such "'oppositional apostasy' such as this can create bitter conflicts that actually reinforce a cult's self understanding as a persecuted minority and thus may play a significant role in affecting the cult's eventual fate."(176) The reason apostasy of this sort is unheard of in low tension groups such as New Age and Pagan is simply because it is not an option. Part of the group's low tension status is because there is no way that they can exist as outside of the rest of society existed in the social structure of the Unification Church but must remain a part of the secular world.

The web-master of the web page "The Sorcery Society" goes by the alias of Midnight Magi<sup>1</sup>. Through the contents of the site, which demonstrate a depth of knowledge that is quite remarkable, shows that she is involved in many different traditions. There are different sections within the site on herbalism, magic (both Wiccan and Celtic), crystals, gems, alchemy, Spiritualism, and New Age. Not only do these sections give brief instructions on practical uses and methods for use, it gives much information about the creator's own ideas. In an email that Midnight Magi wrote to me, after I had written to her, asking her questions about her site, and about her religious ideas, she responded,

It wasn't easy or hard to switch over, because there was no switch over really. I was never one thing or another in my studies, I just studied all and the bit's I like I keep and the bits I don't like I take-out. That way I am left with my own magical system that is personalized for my needs, wants, beliefs, etc. . . I call myself an Occultist/Qabalist, currently, this is because it's the closest thing I can tell people to help them understand

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<sup>1</sup> [www.geocities.com/midnight\\_magi/](http://www.geocities.com/midnight_magi/)

what it is I practice and study. In a few years that will most probably change as I grow.

(Personal correspondence, Feb 2, 2001)

There are no problems indicated that this experimentation with a process of affiliation or disaffiliation between ideas might be problematic or even questionable. It is simply a matter of spiritual evolution.

For many people that ability to move between practices is unquestionably important. Without this kind of freedom, those in the position of Midnight Magi would not be able to fully explore the ideas that interest them. This is made easier by the fact that switching ideas, or in her words, practice and study are made possible by the attitude that is taken towards the disaffiliation process. This is not the full de-conversion process as discussed by Barbour, as it does not require the anxiety over the decision that one tradition is not fulfilling one's spirituality.

This is especially true in the cases of solitary practitioners wherein it is allegiance to ideas and not people that are being altered. Unlike in the more high-tension groups (such as the Unification Church, ISKON, or Falun Gong) there are fewer people who will be able, or even wish to be fully socially isolated from the rest of society. Because they are choosing a world-affirming religion (or NRM) there is not social infrastructure to maintain any kind of distance from secular society. Therefore questioning faith does not occur in anything but the social situation that the person lives in anyway. That is, except in the cases of those who live in communes or who are lucky enough to have a self sufficient community, there is no way of having life that is devoid of contact with those who do not share the individuals personal religion. Either there must be a mental process of accepting or adjusting current religious and spiritual ideas to adapt to the environment, or the environment must remain free of any source

that could challenge faith.

In other words, in highly regulated religions, there is always someone else to contact who can validate your beliefs:

If commitment is basically a process by which individuals come to see group ideals and goals as self-expressive, then defection or de-conversion is essentially a process by which individual self-expression come to be divorced and detached from group ideals. The pursuit of private or extra-group interests involves a reordering of priorities that introduces marked conflict with collective purposes. . . . The process of detachment is more likely to arise when insulating boundaries are removed and individualistic expression is not tempered or regulated by organizational constraints. (Wright, 26)

But in the case of Midnight Magi, this is her private interest and it is also her religious pursuit. Insulating boundaries are self regulated and personal, allowing for the greatest possible freedom while still maintaining the feeling of being part of a larger religious group.

Unless the people involved in low commitment, low tension kinds of religions create for themselves a self-sustaining environment that allows them to be selective about other people with whom they come into contact, they must remain part of the outside world. Personal religious beliefs, while they certainly influence the way people live their lives, is not impediment to living in North American society.

The web page called "Sorcery Society" has a wonderful article about "dealing with normals" which is their term for non Wiccans. "One of the rather unique problems of people who spend many hours practising and studying Majick (sic) is dealing with other people



concerning your interests.”(Midnight Magi<sup>2</sup>) The prevalent attitude which departs from the high tension us-against-them attitude of the book Moonwebs is that “normals” do not understand, do not want to understand and should be treated respectfully and with patience and humour.

When dealing with those labelled ‘Religious fanatics’, those who will try and proselytize you and want you to join their group, and the best way to deal with them is to say “Minding my own business and wondering why you aren’t doing the same.”(Midnight Magi) This document stresses turning the conversation away from you and onto the other person so they will quickly loose interest in talking about religion in general, yours in particular. This attitude illustrates that it is possible to stand firm in your beliefs without needing to defend or even define personal spirituality. Understanding how to deflect the ridicule shows that there has always been interaction between people within this particular kind of NRM and those who are not. There is not idea that practising ‘Majick’ is something to be hiddien, or be ashamed or doing. If anything, the knowledge of one’s own personal religion gives Midnight Magi a superior attitude in dealing with ‘religious fanatics’:

These people live a life based on fear and paranoia. . . They see everything in black and white, we and they. One way of dealing with these types of people is to tell them that you are studying early Jewish philosophy (since that’s where the Kabbalah and a few other forms of magick have come from). Then, immediately tell them that they can help you. Ask them if they study the Bible. When they say yes, respond, “Good I need to talk to someone who is fluent in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.” When they hem and haw and finally admit that they know little any of those languages, just look at them with surprise

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<sup>2</sup> The Sorcery Society web-page is located at: [www.geocities.com/midnight\\_magi/](http://www.geocities.com/midnight_magi/)

on your face and tell them you hope that someday they will really begin to study the Bible.

Then walk away. (Midnight Magi)

Such practised responses belie that the tension still exists between those who practice traditional religions, and those who create their own.

Returning to the concept of Midnight Magi as someone who has gone through the conversion process and has voluntarily left some ideas behind to pursue other, we can note that this person is obviously not one to be closed minded about listening of others ideas. Nor is there any mention of attempting to convert or change the mind of anyone else. The whole point, for this type of person, is to allow people to choose their own path, to allow others to grow in complete freedom (even if it means listening to Christians out to convert a heathen) as long as they are allowed to do the same. This coincides with Barbour's comments that de-programming calls into question the Western idea of "freedom, integrity, and responsibility." (185) These low tension NRM's take this kind of liberty for granted, and they have made the assumption that it is their right to do what they want with their spirituality, regardless of how it may look when examined by someone else.

### **Community and spirituality**

During a rather boring lecture in my highschool religion class I clearly remember the teacher stating that the term 'religion' meant 'a gathering of people'. What he was referring to, was that saying "I have my own religion, a religion of one, me" was inappropriate, simply because there was only one person involved. In context, what this really meant was that when the student who declared the aforementioned quote was being de-legitimized for not wanting to

attend mass that week, and his excuse was flimsy and without basis. Projecting back, I could have quoted to the teacher that according to William James, whose definition of religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is; "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*"(42).

Perhaps if said student had James to quote he wouldn't have had to attend the two hours of mass. However, this leads to an important question in the field of NRM studies; that is, when your religion really is of one person, can it be legitimately considered a religion? Should it be classified under the even more mysterious rubric of 'spirituality'? Also, if this is the case, where are you going to get your support? Who is going to believe that you can have a religion of one?

Parts of the New age, Wiccan and Pagan movements are very concerned with this religion of one. That is, they have made religion something that is very possible to be so individualized that you might be the only person who holds beliefs in the particular pattern and structure considered to be one's own. Nor does the expectation that community will be formed based only on shared belief. Not to say that many people do not explore spiritual ideas in groups of with a friend or partner, just that it is acceptable to say 'this is what I believe, and I need nothing and no one else to agree'. This idea has been accepted and justified to the extent that specific books and on-line courses are devoted to individual or 'solitary' spirituality.

Scott Cunningham has written two books about creating your own Wiccan tradition, *A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* was published in 1990 and was followed by a sequel. Both encourage an guide solitary Wiccan's to build their own rituals and generally helped to legitimize the idea that working on ones own was within the bounds of traditional Wicca. Cunningham is

always very open to innovation both within the traditional beliefs and within the rituals thus allowing a great deal of personal liberty to those who were both solitary and who work within a group.

Within those who believe in the myth of a continuous Pagan/Wiccan tradition from ancient times there is a romanticized ideal of practitioners who were forced to work in solitude because they would have been jeopardized if they were found out. This strengthens all claims to legitimate religious status for solitary practitioners because it allows a tradition within the NRM to be formed without specific historical data.

In 1998 I did extensive interviewing with people who were involved with the Wiccan community in Montreal for a paper entitled "Ritual Creation Among Women in Neo-Paganism" (unpublished). One of my main informants was a woman, Mavis Weatherby who involved herself peripherally with the community but for the most part remained a solitary practitioner. One of my favourite quotes from her that interview regards her views on the 'dubious beginnings' of the neo-Pagan movement, and also introduces one of the ideological differences hidden within the Pagan and Wiccan movement.

The more I learn about the 'dubious beginnings' the more dubious they are. The fact that so much of the myths that people cite today come from 'evidence' that was gotten from 'witches' in the witch craze in Europe. Its it's like well, let's see, we're going to kill you if you don't tell us this, so you'd better tell us this anyway. . .which I think is why I'm dealing in my own life, less and less with the myths, and more with belief as a metaphor. I mean there are a lot of things in the myths that I really don't agree with, I really don't. For example the way, to this day, the characteristics that they give women are 'nurturing,

the beauty of the night'. It's like, no, these are the things that women have been attributed by the patriarchal order. Like finding power in the night is all fine and good, but it also means that you're out of everyone's face. That's why you have *moon* Goddesses and *sun* Gods, because the gods are the ones that everyone sees. I don't believe in that. . . The information that we have is very dubious, which is why I think everything's a metaphor. (Mavis Weatherby, 4.01.98)

I have always thought that this sentiment clearly captures the frustration that many people (although I highlight women in particular here, I have also discussed this issue with men) have with the Wiccan community as it stands today. Many of the rituals that are used in Wicca are from the Gardenerian school, or his successor, Alexander, who was a pupil of Gardner's and followed his rituals. Both of these traditions are clearly heterosexual and strongly support male and female gender roles. The sentiment supported by Mavis is fairly marginal, although has gained support from homosexual practitioners who find the metaphors limiting, and concentrate more on the aspect of divinity being non-sexual and universal. This schism in practice and faith has led to changes in the movement and has been the cause of three people that I know of within the Wiccan community deciding to practice solitarily.

I asked Mavis why she thought that people would be more likely to join a community rather than work on their own given these differences:

There are a lot of reason why people 'join up' as it were. Some people just want to do things that will bother their parents. Some people have been playing Dungeons and Dragons for twenty-five years and think this is a natural offset of that. But then again, I think that for a lot of people (and this is going to sound ultimately flaky) but its sort of a

place to go, and I mean the neo-Pagan community, if there is one and that sort of concept, is a place to go for people who do not fit into anything else. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. In some ways that's good. . . .some people are attracted to the antiauthoritarian aspect of it. And find that very exciting more than any other aspect. Or, they want to wear daggers, they think it makes them cool. Any religion that has such an emphasis on dressing up and looking silly, cause that's the whole point and there's nothing wrong with that. But you're going to get a lot of weirdos. (Mavis Weatherby, 1.04.98)

Her focus on the community as a place for people, regardless of their divergent interests to go, when they fit in no where else is interesting because it touches on the ability of people to form communities based on overarching interests rather than specific ones. Her mention of 'weirdos' highlights the extreme cross section of people who will show up at the meetings of the Montreal Pagan and Wiccan community. From those who are interested mostly in the social aspect (they tend to be the ones who are rather overly friendly towards travelling researchers) to those who are part of the core group that operates and runs the meetings. After attending several meetings over the course of three years, and speaking to those who run the meetings, I would say that there is approximately a fifty-percent return rate. Out of the fifty or sixty people who attend one meeting, about twenty to thirty of them were people I have never seen before (or again) at rituals or meetings. Mavis remains a practitioner today although she has even further removed herself from the community.

The reason that Wiccan and Pagan groups have a more outwardly coherent practice and spiritual focus than those who classify themselves as New Age is that whereas Wiccan's and

Pagan's can identify a historical point of reference and generally a group of people who are their spiritual predecessors, there really is no defined form of New Age now or ever. Much of what is considered to fall under the heading of 'New Age' practices is widely practised in western culture unconsciously as it has pervaded the dominant culture.

I met with a couple who label themselves as 'New Agers', Valerie and Michael have both been involved in the New Age movement for many years. They are a middle class, middle-aged couple who study and live within the New Age milieu in a small city in Ontario. It is not incongruous for them to use many different ideas at once to make an overarching system that is right for them, and them alone. They both participate in 'Dances of Universal Peace' which is a movement that was started by Samuel L. Lewis in the 1960's to promote "peace through the arts". On the web-site, "The International Network for Dances of Universal Peace" there are links and addresses of the hosts for dances all around the world, most of whom meet monthly. The group takes much of its influence from Sufi dancing and Buddhist meditation techniques. The original dances that were created by Lewis are still used, but there are also new ones created by members. Valerie also participates in a study group that studies the Urantia book. Both of these movements rely on the independence of the individual to attend the meetings, but other than that, there is no devotion than that what is shown in the meetings and the adherents discretion as to how they want to integrate that into their daily lives.

The Urantia book has been available since the late 1950's in various languages and since then has attracted a small but dedicated following. There is an official Urantia web-site and the following statement was taken from it's 'brief introduction' to the book:

The book's message is that all human beings are one family, the sons and daughters of

one God, the Universal Father. It instructs on the genesis, history, and destiny of mankind and on our relationship with God. It also presents a unique and compelling portrayal of the life and teaching of Jesus, opening new vistas of time and eternity, and revealing new concepts of Man's every-ascending adventure of finding the Universal Father in our friendly and carefully administered universe.(www.urantia.org)

Although I do not wish to delve into the importance of the Internet as a method of communication between networking NRMs quite yet, I would like to point out how very accessible the Urantia web-site makes the book even for people who have no interest in reading or buying the book. In this computer driven age, many NRMs have adopted this technique as a way of getting their message access to a wider audience. The entire Urantia book is accessible through the web-site, people need no longer even purchase the book itself to access its wisdom. The Urantia foundation has also made it a priority to have the book translated into as many different languages as possible, with the goal stated within the web-site that by 2030 the book will have been translated into even more languages so that at least eighty-four percent of the world's population will have access to the book. The Urantia foundation also donates books to libraries and people without means of purchasing it on their own.

Over the years Valerie and Michael have participated in many groups which have spanned many different ideas and included many different people. They have grown through these experiences, and do not regret even the beliefs that they do not espouse any longer. Each part of the development as a spiritual being they have gone through is a natural progression and a new experience. Some of the experiences have been positive, some negative. Overall, they say, it balances out and throughout this, they have been meeting people with similar interests,



befriending them, and creating a community. Their friends and companions are not exclusive to these groups, however they do find that it gives them a sense of purpose and achievement to live according to New Age beliefs.

Something that is taken for granted in many books about the New Age and NRM studies is the idea of created community. When Bromley discusses in *Falling From the Faith*, the idea of affiliation and disaffiliation as a process that is continual, he assumes that there is an affiliation of not only minds, but also community.

Studies of affiliation and disaffiliation have begun to inform one another, and re-conceptualizing membership as a process will properly underscore the dynamic quality of social relation. . . The transformation of religious identity and affiliation to an almost exclusively individual commitment and the high rate of individual preference change reflect the diminished role of religion in creating and sustaining cultural and social integration (11).

Hence, community is no longer a matter of forced integration within a preset community, it is a matter of choice. This is not a finite choice either, as changes can be made repeatedly, when necessary. Throughout life it is an observable fact that ones social needs change over time, and due to that fact some friends will fall away while others are gained. So extending that to a spritual and religious quest it is only inevitable that affiliation to one idea or to a group that espouses these ideas will lead to the making of friends. Leaving or disaffiliation with one religion or spiritually based group does not immediately mean the loss of all contacts associated with the group because they might also be part of another society that has other ideas in which you are also involved and in which you remain a member.

## **Apostasy, Leave-taking or just Growing?**

From what I have observed in my studies of New Age, Wiccan and Pagan groups in Montreal, Quebec and Kingston, Ontario, and from interviewing many different people who are or have been involved in these types of groups for an extended period of time, the way you 'exit' from a group is to simply not show up. This is a course of action that is not always appropriate or even possible in some movements, especially higher commitment, or communal groups. There exists more difficulties in more controlled groups because of the stricter social controls which dictate action. If disaffiliation is considered, as Wright does in the two articles I wish to focus on next, it is a much larger affair, and generally require one to sneak off in the night, or disappear suddenly. In Wright's article "Re-conceptualizing Cult Coercion and Withdrawal: A Comparative Analysis of Divorce and Apostasy" compares the joining and leaving of religious groups to a love affair or a marriage. He considers the feelings of people failure, disillusionment and confusion to be analogous to those same feelings that he finds in people who are leaving NRMs. He also compares the marital dyad to the totalistic commitment in these high-commitment NRMs and therefore using the same terminology and ideologies associated is appropriate. Wright studies groups with much higher commitment groups then studied in this paper but it is a very useful comparison.

In this paper he reintroduces the idea that he began in his book *Leaving Cults: The Dynamics of Defection*. In this book he states that there are three different manners in which people leave a religion; those are covert, overt and declarative. These people that he studied were involved in religions he terms as 'world-transformative' that is desirous of bringing about widespread social change through their group ideologies which although would be a radical

change from current secular ideology would not involve anything but non-violent transformation. They are also by definition communal religions which require separation between believers and non believers for the sake of purity. Apostates from the Unification Church, the Hare Krishna and the Children of God are the subject of his study, and it is interesting to note the differences in exit strategies that these groups require in comparison to the New Age and Pagan groups..

The declarative approach in which, "The defector will most likely give a brief explanation of the rationale for leave-taking, state it emphatically and with a tone of finality, and then depart"(Wright, 72). This was the least popular in low commitment groups, as in New Age and Pagan groups there may be no one to hear the declaration. I knew a woman, who in the time I knew her practised astrology, numerology, ecstatic dance, breath work (rhythmic breathing that puts one into a trance state), karate, meditation and Lightwork, as far as she will go towards declaration is a private word with the leader of the group that she does not feel that it is the right thing for her to do any longer and she has no intention of returning. This seems to be more popular than a formal declaration. In these groups that are individually focussed, the leave-taker would not feel that it is their responsibility to explain to any else their dissatisfaction with the group.

In both of Wright's works, he assumes there is a group there to acknowledge apostate status. If this is not the case, then there would be no need for any declaration of intent to anyone other than oneself, which is not something any other person will hear. But, if there is a group, of any sort, be it a permanent group that a person has been a part of for a long time or not, only individual preference and emotion would determine whether a reason would be provided. In the only case I have ever heard concerning the Montreal Wiccan group associated with Concordia

University, December of 1999 that a person publicly got up and addressed the group saying “You all suck, I’m going home.” Even then the group was not horrified, only slightly taken aback by the forcefulness of the declaration. From the recollections of the interviewee, it seems like the announcement was taken as odd, for those who are used to such fluid movement in and out of the group.

The overt approach as defined by Wright would be to stand up in front of the group and say ‘I am having problems I would like addressed, or I will be forced to leave’. “Overt withdrawal seems to find some justification in the fact that the individual sincerely endeavours to settle the conflict by counselling with the leaders or other select member. . . .But when a compromise or an agreement cannot be reached, the individual is able to use the impasse as a further step in the legitimization sequent catapulting one toward the act of disaffiliation”(Wright, 70). In the case of the NRMs of this study, I think that this act may be one that is made internally. Because the person involved has no obligation to anyone but themselves there is no need for consultation with other members, even though that is definitely an option.

Perhaps the person considering to leave a New Age or Pagan group would be more of a covert leave-taker. Because there is no one to hide from, and because there is no need for secrecy, there they would only be considered covert because they have not had to make their intentions clear. In all cases studied by Wright, it is important to remember that those who were leaving the groups in question were socially isolated from the secular world, which would regard their rejoining of their society as one of failure of the group they have left to meet expectations. In the case of New Age and Pagan groups, the society has not been informed of either joining or leaving said group.

A New Age spiritual group I studied in Kingston Ontario from 1996-1998 was in existence for three years. The meetings took place in the living room of one of the members, for the first two year, I am told about fifteen to twenty people attended. People were invited by friends and there was a notice in a New Age bookstore. After that, the group expanded and could no longer fit into the living room and so changed to a larger venue. Overall the idea was to explore different modes of spirituality, the *Kryon* books and Jane Robert's *Seth* books were popular, as was the practice of channelling, performed by one of the women who acted as a facilitator, and meditations occurred every week. Once a woman who was travelling in the area, and whom many had gone to see speak publicly the previous week was invited, and she led the meditation that week. This was not an exclusive group, and I know that many people involved went to various meditation groups and different workshops in addition to their weekly participation.

In those years many people came and went, sometimes they would be around for several months, make a few friends, and then their interests would change. Only a few were affiliated for the entire time the groups was in existence. People came and went, and my appearance was accepted without comment as I am a friend of someone who was more involved. Ideas were diverse and people would leave when they had taken what they felt they could. There was not penalty, or outcast system for this. When you left you were not shunned if someone saw you on the street, or if you publicly stated you had a differing opinion. The group did not stick to one idea or focus, there were always different ideas floating around and what was spoken of in the group was always changing. The group accepted that is was not an offence to them or their beliefs if a person wished to leave. Of course over time people did leave the group, and some of

them had no further communication that I know of with other members, but that may have been because they had no friends within the group, rather than actively cutting off all communication.

The other New Age notion that I believe highly influences the comings and goings of these types of groups is that something is done for as long as it 'feels right'. When something no longer 'feels right' for the individual, they move on. Wright's ideas of apostasy do not fit into this framework.

The term 'apostasy' simply cannot fit into the categories of NRM that I am studying. The main reason is that attending is like cultivating an acquaintance or a friend, and people may not find a complete friend group in one NRM group. The New Age group that I have described does not constitute an entire community and the term 'apostasy' refers to the leaving of a cohesive community from which you must leave permanently and after which you would have no further contact. Valerie and Michael are closer to what would be considered a group that one could conceivably become estranged from, because they are influential to each other in more ways than spiritually. It is very important to the people in such types of spiritual endeavours to be able to leave and try something else so they can experience the personal spiritual growth and create their own religious community.

### **Workshops; creating a virtual community**

How can you covertly, overtly or declaratively leave a group that disbands itself? Even the term 'leave-taking' does not apply when every one in the group is doing the same. The phenomenon of workshops as the mainstay of forming the New Age communities is one of the main reasons why ideas about apostasy cannot apply to these groups. A workshop is typically a

weekend or day, sometimes extending to a week or more, where the focus is on a particular spiritual concept person or idea. For that space of time a community is formed around that person or idea or even the physical space. Ideas are shared in a manner that is open and free partially because it is assumed that all people involved will be receptive to the ideas shared, but virtue of their being there. For those hours of involvement people are expected to behave in a certain manner that is in keeping with the ideals shared by the group. Since this community does not exist on a permanent basis, when people can get together freely and easily share ideas, this space, even if temporary bonds people together and when they are disbanded creates a virtual community.

The New Age groups in particular, perhaps even more than the Pagan groups where regular physical contact is more common, believe that there is an overarching ideal or energy that binds all people together. As the New Age channeller John Payne speaking for the ascended Master, Omni states, "You are always in the presence of the light, even if you do not experience it that way at times. Loneliness is an inner experience, work on your deeper issues of feeling different or left out, and your issues of loneliness will solve themselves."<sup>3</sup> By gathering temporarily with others in similar situations, these feelings of isolation are addressed. That means that when groups of people come together in this context, it is the will of the Universe for them to meet, share, learn and experience as much as possible from them.

The overarching community, or what can be termed as 'meta community' is an ideal form of all ideas surrounding what a currently non-existing in the physical world community of the

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<sup>3</sup>"In the Presence of Light, Changing Feelings of Isolation", 21 Mar. 1999 <[www.Spiritweb.org/spirit/presence-light-omni.html](http://www.Spiritweb.org/spirit/presence-light-omni.html)>

New Age could be. The difference between the virtual and meta communities can be defined as follows. The Virtual community is the transient community based on workshops, on-line communication, courses, meetings held in real life or over the inter-net, but with a definite focus on the subject of the New Age and the betterment of personal spirituality. The Meta community, is the language that is used by those people who are participants in the different types of workshops, that would not necessarily mean interaction between different practitioners, but is the common language by which they can form their personal spiritual communities.

The Virtual community is split into two different sections, those being who are at the meeting, workshop or on-line course, and those who you know and are your friends. The Meta language employed by those practitioners allows those people who are members of different Virtual communities to interact. Sometimes the people who run the workshops will travel physically to different and distant location to facilitate workshops, allowing greater access to the extended Virtual and physical groups that allow a greater diversity of spiritual beliefs to proliferate.

On the web-site *Spiritweb.org*, there is a listing that is compiled by date and location advertising various workshops in different cities around the world. People can choose workshops with such titles as 'Message From Your Angels', 'Working with Dreams and Symbols', 'Why Weight' (a class for people who wanted to learn to use crystal therapy to lose weight), belly dancing classes and many others with New Age or Pagan interests. Some of the topics are highly theoretical, and assume a wide and vast New Age education that pushes the Meta community far away from what would be considered accessible to anyone outside the New Age movement.



Also on *Spiritweb.org* they host online classes that people can take. The courses are run by the various people who post articles and messages on the web-site on a regular basis, and one must be a member to join. The courses offered have titles such as, 'Manifesting Success', and 'Discovering Your Soul's Desire.' Some are offered as weekly email and have related chat rooms with scheduled discussions, others are run in the chat room only. Either way, it allows even easier access to the information that is the basis for the meta-community and it does not rely on the person's physical geographical location to attend, learn and meet new people.

To illustrate the vastness of the meta-network that people can get involved with, let us consider the article on *Spiritweb.org* entitled "Working with the Moon in Global Meditations" by Leigh Tremaine. In this article she expounds upon the benefits of meditation during the full and new moons as a method of connection to other people in meditation and also to help reconnect oneself with the higher energies. "Today many lightworkers like up in meditation at the time of the New Moons and the Full Moons, in service for the healing of our Planet, direction light to people, places, and situations, or simply making it available to help restore choice and new healing options in the collective consciousness"(Tremaine). The idea is that by meditating, the lightworkers are linking together their consciousness and raising their energy , which will help the earth to raise it's energy to benefit everyone on earth. The 'collective consciousness' is the sum total of everyone's spirit on the earth, plus the energy of the earth itself. And raising the energy of the earth and everyone one it, they can facilitate a change toward a more peaceful planet.

The work shop phenomena does not exist to the same extent in the Pagan and Wiccan community. They do conduct workshops, but for the most part it is on technical aspects of the

religion. Workshops include such tasks as candle making, creating rituals, learning to use herbs and other hands-on aspects of the religion that are easier to be taught in person than by book. In the Wiccan community in particular there is a large assortment of open Ritual groups and people seem to be more likely to come together on regular occasions as there is more of a standardized calendar for Pagans and Wiccans to use as a source for meeting and learning.

Mary, another informant of mine, has been part of the New Age scene for as long as Veronica and Michael. Mary was involved in a New Age spiritual group in the early 1980's and remains friends with some of the people she met at that time. Neither she nor her friends could remember too many details about the group when I interviewed them on December 15 of 1999, as most of their memories of it were surrounding the negative experiences that surrounded the group disbanding and the leader moving away. Mary has been involved in other spiritual groups since that time and has attended many different types of courses. She has attained her level three in the 'Healing Touch' course and has read the Jane Robert's series, Casteneda series, Lynn V, Andrews, Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, the *Kryon* books and others that were not mentioned specifically in the interviews. She is middle aged with three children who are now grown.

I asked Mary why she thought that people went to so many different groups and how it affected their spirituality. Her belief is that people now are tied into 'the remote control culture' and they do not want to sustain interest in one idea for long enough to get any knowledge out of it other than on a superficial level. So, although she supports using different ideas and mixing different traditions, she also believes that true insight takes many years and much contemplation or else you will not gain knowledge from anything, merely jump around only gaining a little

knowledge of a lot of things. She also views the workshop phenomenon with suspicion, although she will participate in a select few.

In her experience she has found that many people abuse the workshop experience now, and use it to brag or boast about what they have done, who they know and how they know them. In other words the creation of social hierarchy is apparent, even within the Virtual community. This is obviously contrary to the ideal relationship that people in the New Age want to have with each other, but perhaps it is merely an acknowledgement that the changes that they wish to achieve have not yet occurred. Although she was once part of the New Age community, now she limits herself to being part of the meta-community, reading books and exploring the online resources because she has a hard time relating to people who consider themselves "New Agers". The New Age movement is not her primary source of social interaction, and she has grim things to say about some of the people who make up the physical community in her town.

She told me an anecdote about how several months previous she had been feeling that she should be more involved in the New Age community in her area and that she probably should take a look around and find out what had been going on and if she wanted to volunteer or participate in any of the workshops that were being offered. So she went to the local New Age/Pagan bookstore and took a look at the message board; "Then I remembered why I hadn't been doing anything involved with the community for so long. There was *nothing* I was interested in, and no people who I wanted to meet"(Personal communication, 12.28.2000). Her tone was that of disgust and annoyance. Mary represents a group of people who are truly in the New Age experience for the spiritual journey and not as a means of socializing. For people like there is another means of gathering and networking information, the Internet.

## **Chapter Three: Spirituality on the Internet**

### **The Internet community: Message Boards**

For as long as the Internet has been available for public use it has been used as a method of communication between people who would never before have met. The sense of isolation and loneliness that many solitary or geographically isolated New Age practitioners and Pagans have felt over the years has been increasingly met by the use of the Internet. The community that has chosen to use the Internet as their mode of expression is one that has grown exponentially over the past few years due to increasing availability of computer. 'Surfing the Internet' is no longer a solitary pursuit, but a means of connecting to millions of other people, many of whom share some or many of your ideas. As I noted earlier, many of the Internet sites have a message board or chat room.

To further this, there are many different types of web-sites, some of which have already been mentioned, but also including sites focussed on teen-aged practitioners, personal services such as *Pagan Profiles*. These sites encourage contact through message posting and storing pictures and personal information that can be accessed by other users so they can meet on-line or in the flesh and share information. Because these types of religions, more Pagan than New Age, are tied into subcultures, these forums allow for a virtual meeting room in which not only religious ideas are shared, but also life-style oriented discussions can be held. Like the *Sorcery Society* discussed earlier, there are web-sites affiliated with these groups that serve as a library of religious and spiritual information of the type most sought after by those who frequent the site. Web-sites of similar type are linked together voluntarily by web-rings and specific search tools,

such as the *Avatar* search engine, which looks through specifically oriented pages for information useful to New Age and Pagan practitioners.

It is impossible to get any kind of demographic sense from looking at web-pages, as most people consider the Internet a place where the constraints of demography are null and void. It is ideas that count, regardless of sex, age or location. That is, a study that was interested in the ages, genders and physical locations of NRM practitioners would have to be conducted either in person at NRM meetings to get such information. This would allow a researcher to poll the practitioners who were there, but would not represent those who are solitary practitioners. A poll could be done over the Internet but it would rely on the honesty and patience of the researcher to get to know and determine some manner in which records could be kept. It is almost impossible to accurately guess the ages, genders or locations of those people in chat rooms, most of whom find it rude and the sure sign of a 'newbie' to ask "a/s/l?"

The Internet allows for a low investment method of meeting people. That is, a person can go to a specific site, look at the types of messages that have been left by other people, read as many or as few of the categories as they desire, and then respond to those messages they feel are interesting. If a dialogue is pursued then a personal relationship between people who obviously share the common interests tends to follow. To study this, I tried two different approaches; first directly and also covertly. First, I would search for web-sites that fit the criteria as either a New Age, Pagan or Wiccan site with an active discussion forum, then listen/read and engage in conversation. Although this method of fieldwork has the disadvantage of not being able to witness physical reaction, it is a drawback shared by those whom I am studying. The anonymity serves as an equalizing agent between both members of the community as well as those who are

outsiders.

In some conversations I was very open about what I was studying, and for what purpose. In other instances I would effectively go 'undercover' and ask pertinent questions without specific reason being given. Some web-sites in which I did this were the *Pagan Profiles*, *Spiritweb*, the MIRC (Multi-user Internet Relay Chat, an older text based instant messenger) channels; *Spirit*, *Pagan* and *Wiccan*. Also searching the ICQ<sup>1</sup> network there are many different 'web communities' surrounding topics like 'Pagan', 'Wicca', 'New Age', 'Lightworkers', all with their own personal listings and some with affiliated web pages. ICQ also gives individuals who are members a descriptive home page in which they can share as much or as little information as they want.

One of the most interesting encounters I had was with the *Utne Reader* web-site, which is hosted by the magazine of the same name. The magazine promotes a strong environmental and spiritual consciousness that is in line with many of the New Age ideas, but is not a specifically New Age magazine. On *Utne* the postings are made using a system called 'motet' which is a program that allows people to write and then submit their 'letter' which is posted on the web-site in order of submission. Positions are arranged into different topics, which are assigned a number according to order of inception and then postings are given a number in chronological order. This allows postings to be found easily. To find the cult topic, which is 297, and you were looking for the fourth posting, the reference would be 297.4, subsequent postings would be 297.5, 297.6 etc. Some people prefer this to the 'chat' format which does not tend to sustain long

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<sup>1</sup>ICQ is an abbreviation of 'I Seek You', and is another instant message service, but more visual than MIRC which is text based only.

discussion as easily. I was apprehensive about people responding to this topic as I felt that because it is a very personal topic they may not wish to share their feelings on it with total strangers. However, my apprehension was unfounded due to the fact that this is what the Internet is all about; the meeting of strangers online, most of whom will never be met in person.

The *Utne Reader* web-site, which is a site hosted by the magazine of the same name, promotes a strong environmental and spiritual consciousness that is in line with many of the New Age ideas but is not a New Age magazine per se. On *Utne reader* the postings are made using a system called 'motet' which is a program that allows people to write their comments and then submit their thoughts which is posted on the web-site in order of submission. Postings are arranged into different topics, which are assigned a number according to order of inception and then postings are given a second number in chronological order. This allows postings to be found and followed easily. To find the 'cult' topic, under which I posted, the number is 297. If you were looking for the fourth message in that list the reference number would be 297.4. All of the messages on *Utne* are referenced in this manner, and it is how the postings taken from *Utne* will be cited. Some people prefer this to the 'chat' format, which does not sustain long discussions as easily. I was apprehensive about people responding to my questions as I felt that because it is a very personal topic they might not wish to share their feelings on it with total strangers. However my apprehension was unfounded.

First I wrote a simple introduction to myself and my purpose in the 'Introduce Yourself' forum, addressing it to all interested and asking for any people who might be interested in sharing any ideas that they had on the subject of affiliation and disaffiliation in NRMs. Since there seemed to be ample interest in the messages that were written in response, I proceeded to

ask questions. I got many responses that ranged from personal experiences to simple conjectures. One of the postings in the topic entitled 'Cults' was posted many weeks before I started posting but is pertinent. Following a long discussion about the definition of 'cult' and the usage of the word 'cult' in particular versus the more politically correct 'New Religious Movement', 'Stormchild' submitted the following; "I think people get confused is that Wicca (and paganism) is not defined by any book or set of books . . . One of my running jokes is that if you ask ten pagans for a definition of paganism you'll probably get twelve or more different answers"(297.164).

Soon after that I posted my message in the same forum. In it I asked the following two questions: "If a group is more communal how much more, or less difficult does it make it to leave? I know a lot of people in the New Age movement and they seem to go from one thing to another all the time, how?" (297.11). I hoped that this would pique enough interest that I might get a few responses on the topic since even in this format, people tend to be very fickle and not sustain long discussions.

The first response I received was from a person who goes by the alias of 'Lucas'. He first noted that, "This must be a difficult subject since, as it seems to me, that there must be innumerable reasons for leaving/switching. I mean fairly often, people who join such 'cults' in the first place have already rejected the major religious paradigms that they were brought up in or that society generally offers"(297.178). It was a very interesting first response because it addressed the issue of the choice that is made first the *join* these NRM's, regardless of which one, and leave the religion of youth. He then goes on to say, "So, they're not new at rejecting 'religion' . . . that is they may 'grow out of a 'New Age' group" the same way they "grew out" of



being Baptist"(297.178). Lucas' point is that once you have rejected one community you learn the process of leaving, and then how to join other groups. To be successful at being the kind of person who can and would be involved in the types of NRM's that do require a lot of identity changing, the person needs the skills to do so. And these skills are acquired through the practice of the primary leave-taking of the first group - in his example, the changing from Baptist to New Age. Presumably they would improve these skills with each time there is a decision made to try another group, which would lead to the seemly effortless switches seen in some members of the New Age and Pagan groups.

In a much later posting, "Connie' describes searching for her own spirituality instead of attempting to find anyone specific religion that might fulfil her needs. First, she gives me some background about her. The daughter of a Southern Baptist minister who opted out of religion all together for about twelve years when she started to feel a need to gain her own spiritual understanding. She has been working on this for five years. "I have studied many religions and have integrated many practices, such as meditation (currently practising my own interpretation), compassion, awareness/mindfulness, and Unconditional love. I have come up with my own terminology to describe my Understanding . . . Connection. It is an integration of body/heart/mind/spirit"(297.203).

Connie goes on to explain why she felt frustrated with the church's interpretation of her spiritual problems, and her inability to take what they said as truth without question. Connie is a very good example of a New Age woman who can clearly articulate her desire to find a spiritual path that addresses her needs. She also exemplifies the desire to search through religions, exploring and rejecting information without negative connotations to either. Her relationship

with other people on the site shows the common bond that is found within the framework of *Utne* reader and the community that can be formed through this medium.

The next two posted messages are, although short, indicative of the kind of meta-community that has been formed through this message board. The next one after Connie's message is by Stephan Pietrowski, and is simply, "Connie, you & I have a similar frame =;-]"(207.204). Frame meaning, framework, frame of mind or spiritual framework of ideas. So two people have never name met in real life can connection some level because the forum has allowed them to share their feelings without fear.

The next posting is by 'Court Foole' who states, "You, Stephen have managed to keep your perceptions more open, though"(297.205). This is interesting for two reasons: first, Stephen and Court Foole obviously know each other well enough t that one feels they can make a judgement call on the other. The second, Court Foole feels that he knows that he knows Connie well enough to pass judgement on her as well. Shortly there after, Ron posts, "An odd statement Kevin, Connie is one of the most open and tolerant people in this conference"(297.207) So, Ron knows Court Foole/Kevin and also knows Connie (perhaps not Stephen) how? Perhaps just by reading the postings. People are willing to give up a surprising amount of personal information over the internet, at least enough that one person can attest to the nature of another. In this instance showing solidarity or friendship is as possible within the on-line community as it would have been if all members of the conversation were in the same room.

In response to Connie's posting I replied; "Thank you for sharing that with us, I find it very interesting . . . I have noticed that many people change their religion when the community does not support their individual needs. However, perhaps it is erroneous to believe that in this

diverse society one group will be able to meet every need. As people learn about the kinds of needs they have (spiritual and other needs too) their requirements for religion/spirituality changes"(297.208). After this point in the forum, it devolves into silliness for a while as we discuss creating our own cult, which cult we would join if we were to do so and why. Amazingly enough I started to feel like even as an outsider, I was becoming part of the community.

### **The Internet Community: Real Time Chat Rooms**

Quite fortunately modern chat rooms are updated versions of old Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) which was a predecessor of the Motet system and needed both maintenance and practice to use. Early systems were nothing like the new colourful Javascripts that have pictures, icons and sounds. Due to their unglamorous interface system, the people who used them were serious computer users. Even so they had avid following and more stable communities. This has changed due to increased availability of access and greater ease of use and expression within the chatting format. Most of the web-pages previously mentioned have either a chat-room on their page or a devoted Multi-user Internet Relay Chat (MIRC) channel. There is also now ICQ (I-see-you) and other instant message services. These also help people to form communities by giving them a greater change to express and share ideas in a non-mediated forum.

Through ICQ I discovered *Spiritual Haven* which is a chat-room devoted to spirituality in general. Because I did not wish to conduct any kind of formal interview, impossible in this setting with people popping in and out, and the informality of the venue, I asked general questions like "has anyone ever had to leave a group of any kind?" Most people assumed that I

was asking because I was presently considering leaving a group, which I did not deny. The answers I got were; Working alone has it's benefits. And, it is possible to still keep in touch with people you were friends within the group even after you have left the group. One person by the alias 'Novus' told me that when they were a Mormon they had felt pressure to stay but had eventually left anyway. I noticed that in this group there really was no sense of community. There were a few people who knew each other well and would give each other virtual hugs or flowers (<hugz>, @--,---) when they would first enter the room, but for the most part people seemed to be arriving for the first time, or just to see what was going on.

The web-site *A Mystical Grove*, is a site that, in it's own words; "Has been developed to be the ultimate Earth Spirituality location on the World Wide Web. This endeavour has been created by and caters to all Wiccans, Pagans, Witches, Shamans, Celts, and all others that find a connection with Nature and / or SpellCasting" (Dragonhawk, [www.Amysticalgrove.com](http://www.Amysticalgrove.com)). There are differently focussed chat rooms within the site, Wiccan and Pagan room, Teen Chat, Shaman, and The Witches Spell Room. The Wiccan and Pagan room was both the most popular and the most general, so I started my chatting there. Seventeen users were in the room the first time that I went in and this fluctuated between ten and twenty for the hour that I was present. The talk was light hearted for the most part, and did not always revolve around talk of Wicca or Paganism, or belief of any kind. Other times I visited the room the talk was more focussed and they did talk about practising magic although it was more because people who were new would ask questions and the more experienced people would answer.

The conclusions that I gathered from this is that like any other social circle, the participants felt that by being part of a group discussion on a web page - essentially a 'place' that

is devoted to spiritual ideas, the fact that they were not discussing them constantly was not important. This can be paralleled to a sewing circle that meets in a church. The place gives a sense of social belonging, the activities and conversation can be incidental.

The Teen chat room was much more conducive to asking specific questions, and I spoke to one person, 'Adonis' at length. I asked him general questions ranging from 'Would you identify yourself as someone who is part of a particular religion?' to 'Do you care what other people think of your practice?' Overall the idea that seems to be espoused by people who frequent this chat room is that, they are all people in their teens who are experimenting with ideas. All knew they wanted to be on a spiritual path that was unique and they did not care one way or the other what people thought. I asked the room if they thought it was acceptable to be eclectic in their beliefs and practices. Their response was an emphatic 'yes' that "I expect some people to respect me for practising what I believe, some to fight me and others not to care"(Adonis).

**"I have no problem with Wicca, it's the Wiccans I can't stand" (4nongoths, [www.angelfire.com/fl2/4nongoths](http://www.angelfire.com/fl2/4nongoths))**

Although I stated earlier that people tended not to be 'declarative' as Wright says about their decision to leave such low-tension groups, and that apostate testimony of the Josh Freed type does not exist within low tension NRMs there is something similar that has begun to emerge. The difference is not frustration with the group itself, it is founded on a irritation with the other people within the group. A More appropriate term then 'declarative' would be to say that the following examples are *offensive* in the sense that they wish to publicly guard and protect

the version of the NRM that they deem is pure or more realistic.

One example of this is the web-page entitled *Why Wiccan's Suck* written by an embittered person who once affiliated with Wicca but then detached herself from any group because she could not stand the people. The author of this site goes by the alias 4nongoths and declined to identify gender. In the site it states; "There are two types of Wiccans . . . Those who are serious about the religion and the irritating fluffy bunny "rebels" who give the religion a bad name. If this site offends you, there's a good chance you're one of the latter"(4nongoths). The author's agenda made throughout the site is that people need to do things in order to redeem themselves and their religious choices. First though, they must relax and stop taking themselves so seriously.

4nongoths is quote adamant about being constantly affronted by Wiccans who are very serious about their religion and express themselves loudly and forcefully. Being overly zealous about one's chosen religion is portrayed as immaturity and is overall reminiscent of Mavis' comment about people who wear daggers to look cool.

4nongoths states that the next step towards redemption of Wiccans is that they must do some real work and really explore and learn about what being Wiccan really means and to stop assuming that simply claiming you are something or reading a few books is their key to conversion. "Do you have a surplus of rose petals and red candles? Get a clue. There is a reason you don't have a boyfriend, and it sure ain't the quality of your spells. Try dying your hair back to its natural colour. Lower your nose. Stop preaching. Try smiling for once (smirking doesn't count)"(4nongoths). The author is directing this at a very specific audience and assumes that if the site offends the reader, they need to read it most.

This personal web-site contains many opinions that apparently are totally shocking to

most of the viewers of the site. Much effort is given to explaining what it is specifically that bothers the author about the current state of Wicca. However, there are still many entries in the guest-book/feedback page that are from offended and defensive readers.

The web-master's premise is that because people like Scott Cunningham have encouraged people to create their own tradition, Wicca is now a highly diluted religion, and most people who affiliate themselves with it are in fact just doing it to shock their parents.

Another area that enrages 4nongoths on *Why Wiccan's Suck* is their sense of history.

Wicca is about fifty years old (which means it hadn't even been invented until after Salem's trials). While it's nice to believe that Wicca is based on a secret religion that's somehow been hidden from the civilised world for thousands of years, elder Wiccans and historians alike have long been questioning the validity of Gardner's "ancient" sources.

(For more on the origins of your own effing religion, see the links page. Or are you content to believe what your Ravenwolf-reading friends tell you about history?)

It is unquestionably true that many of the people (especially younger) who are just beginning to study Wicca do have these opinions of the religion. It is also true that they are historically misinformed and idealistically motivated. But, again referring back to what Mavis sates, these people are looking at myths and constructing a reality around them, instead of understanding and accepting the historical facts as we understand them now. I do not think that those people who believe in the myths of people like Ravenwolf or Maraget Murray (insert footnote) constitutes a majority of the people in the religion, but it remains a definite presence. The opinions expressed within this web-site probably represent an amalgamation of things people have said, and general opinions of the writer. It also gives another angle to why someone would disaffiliate themselves

from Wicca.

This is a newer segment of the NRM population who are reacting to the growing popularity of the religion. They feel that the faith has been compromised by those who are only interested in finding their own way, not preserving the 'traditional' or 'real' forms of the faith.

Linda Landstreet, who is the web-master of the *Wild Ideas* site, which covers a large number of ideas, mostly linked to Paganism and eco-consciousness. In the section entitled 'Temple' she discusses her views on Paganism and Wicca. In response to a question about Wicca that supports the ideas of 4nongoths in particular she replies;

By pushing the do-your-own-thing definition of Wiccan, Cunningham contributed substantially to the dilution and degradation of Craft tradition. Right now, it seems like three quarters of the so-called Wiccans in America think that "Wicca" is simply a euphemism for "make up your own religion as you go along." That's not wholly due to Cunningham's work but he was certainly a major contributor. I don't mind his books on magic and spellcraft, but whenever he attempted to deal with Wicca as a religion, he consistently seems to miss the point.

His books present an extremely toned-down, Disneyfied version of the Craft which is completely lacking in any recognition of the dark side of nature, life or the human psyche. He went so far overboard in trying to make the Craft respectable that he made it insipid, boring and in my opinion, dangerously unbalanced." (Landstreet, [www. wildideas.net](http://www.wildideas.net))

It is true that the explanation of Wicca for the most part do not focus on anything negative, dark or evil. Which is not to say that they ignore it completely. Landstreet notes that this form of



Wicca is incomplete because it does not give its adherents the tools to face the real world, which is not all positive and nice. Nor does it give people the tools to effectively even explore their own nature because they consistently deny the validity of their negative experiences.

What Landstreet advocates within her site is a return to a more 'traditional' form of Wicca. That is, one that is more formalized. Within the *Wild Ideas* web-site she gives a short autobiography that tells the tale of her experimenting with her faith, wherein she goes from 'traditional' Wicca, to an 'eclectic group', to practising as a solitary Wiccan, and then rejoining her 'traditional' group again. Landstreet best represents out of all the people discussed in this thesis what Barbour considers to be a 'conversion' because she has truly brought herself to a new level of faith. After a period of questioning and experimentation she devotes herself to a religion, in full knowledge of its benefits and drawbacks.

Interestingly enough, though the author of *Why Wiccan's Suck* upon disaffiliation states that the best way to gain experience is through experimentation and practice on one's own. "Real magic is a personal experience, with no better way to learn than through hacking around at it until something feels right"(4nongoths). Which begs the question of why different, really, are those who consider themselves 'eclectic' versus those who are 'traditional' or those who disaffiliate themselves altogether? What is being seen are three separate subgroups of people within this rubric of Wiccan, two of which could be called 'Wiccan' but one of which prefers to go unnamed, and eclectic Wiccans. Sometimes the eclectic Wiccan's go by the name Pagan to avoid the other two.

Although not explored here, due to the limits of the Internet and the chat room interviews, it would be interesting to study how age and the 'teen-clique' process affects the mentality of

those within the groups.

The Internet has always been a place of utopic vision, and this is extremely important to those who feel that their ideas have been marginalised already in society. They wish to form a community online that is ideal, and especially does not discriminate in the areas that they feel are already judged in the physical world. Whether this in fact occurs is another matter completely and not subject to discussion here, however it is suffice to say that attempts to form a Utopia online have been at least as successful as those formed in the real world.

Like the meta-community, Utopia is literally no-place, it exists only in the minds of those who believe in it. On the web-page of *The Delta Earth Network* which is a New Age site devoted to the furtherance of this ideal they state;

For us, Utopia is a target, an aspiration, a dream, a promised land; and every footstep along that journey is something we hope to cherish. Perhaps the day will come when we are so deep into the asymptote of progress that the world has become as joyful as it can be made via human intervention, and I often wonder what such an existence would be like. I believe that together we can embark on a journey to find out. [www.deltaeearth.net](http://www.deltaeearth.net).

Therefore studying the process of affiliation and disaffiliation over the Internet allows a freer flow of ideas and access to more personal information more quickly than can be accessed in face to face interviews with strangers. The Internet also allows more people to form stable and informative relationships within the spiritual framework they feel are important. Their process of affiliation and disaffiliation are easier to comprehend in terms of this easy flow of information because information is moving so quickly it is difficult to maintain one solid identity within their constantly evolving world of the Internet.

The evolution of the Internet chat-room from BBS to ICQ in less than ten years is one example of how as technology and means of communication grow and expand in availability and depth, as will individual needs to explore all options available before choosing one's religious course.

## **Conclusions**

"Subjective reality is fluid, dynamic, and malleable. Individuals change their views and attitudes as they grow older, and exposed to new ideas, affiliate with different people, join new social groups, change jobs, or experience geographical or social class mobility"(Wright, 7). I have proposed a new way of looking at the affiliation and disaffiliation process for people who are involved in groups that remain at low tension with society, and that are world-accommodating. They of course, do not apply to religious that are in high tension with society or even that are better organized and maintain a stricter grasp over the content that is created in the name of their religion than the New Age and Pagan groups within this study. These theories may apply to other types of groups that are not religious, such as counter culture, or subculture groups. It especially applies to these non-religious groups that have a large youth following or that contain many member who are technologically literate and feel that computers are a legitimate resource to share information across vast distances.

The conclusions that I have drawn can be summarized into five major points. They are:

1. Duration of involvement does not necessarily correspond to spiritual importance.
- 2.The importance of the legitimizing personal religious experience.
3. Affiliation and disaffiliation are a learning process.
- 4.Creation of a meta-community has influenced the idea of utopia and broken the need for personal contact within personal spiritualism.
- 5.The Internet can be used to gain entrance and live as a part of the virtual community.

First, duration of involvement does not always denote how important or spiritually meaningful an experience can be. Intensity of the experience may compensate for a short duration, for example in the case of workshops or in the case of people like Midnight Magi who insist that experimentation is a necessity to their spiritual development. It could be that, as Mary stated people are unwilling to spend more than the shortest duration on any given subject and only gain a shallow view of the vast possibilities within any given religion or spiritual notion. Nevertheless on a personal level, those involved do not see it this way at all. Instead, they see it as a personal challenge to build a religion and community that meets their changing needs. Attending a workshop may change a personal view that has consequences on the rest of a person's life. And workshops and other short-term communal activities also provide an important venue for people to meet each other and network. This allows people to create a physical community with each other if they so choose. Certainly there are many other activities that people only do for a short while, such as university or college, and no one would even consider that a lifetime involvement is necessary to gain something by it. Religion, and especially personal religion, is a constantly evolving concept. As personal spirituality grows, it should be considered a natural progression to change affiliations, especially if they remain within the confines of a greater ideology.

Secondly, regardless of societal views, a religion that consists of only one person must be deemed legitimate. Those people who choose to design a religion on their own must be recognized as sincerely taking part in a program of spiritual development that is suitable for their own needs. Solitary Wiccan's and Pagan's all consider themselves to be working within their

religious tradition, despite dubious historical truths. The mythology that is currently being used to support this does have some basis in history, and there is certainly enough verified history that will support a solitary mystical or occult tradition that did in fact exist in secrecy. Given that the beginnings of most religions that are now deemed 'legitimate' are lost in the annals of history, it begs the question of why it is important to know exactly who created what, and how successive individuals have interpreted the past. Despite not everyone agreeing with what any type of spiritual practice should be titled, it is thought of as a personal challenge to go on with the exploration and evolution on a solitary level. *Why Wiccan' Suck* would be one extreme example of this desire to work both within a 'tradition' while maintaining personal freedom to express problems with the religion as it is currently interpreted.

Those who work within the New Age framework do not need to defend their rights to practice individually as much as those involved with Paganism because of the nature of the New Age, which is highly focussed on the individual, and personal spiritual growth. Studying processes of NRM affiliation and disaffiliation must take into account these factors so as not to confuse de-conversion with disaffiliation.

Thirdly, the process of leaving or joining a religion is one that is learned. Not only do people learn the logistics of leaving an idea or religion, but they also learn what they want to call their own as religious seekers. This process teaches what each individual requires from their chosen religion, and though it is a process of trial and error, this does not de-legitimize what is learned. Nor does it decrease the integrity of the original idea or specific cultural or spiritual notion that is being appropriated by the religion or the individual. It might appear religion is thereby turned into a commodity for the casual religious shopper, however this does not make the

experiences and insight gained by the process invalid. Lynda Landsteet is one example I have given of someone who has experimented with her religions. In her writings, she makes it very clear that each attempt at a different religion was authentic and in each case she was genuinely disappointed with the results, but she learned what she wanted in the end, and now is involved in a religion that suits her needs. Mary is another person who has experimented with her religious status and now is involved in the solitary activities that suit her needs, after discarding and shifting for many years.

Fourthly, the virtual community and the meta-communities are powerful ideals that have brought many people together and given the New Age movement and the Pagan/Wiccan movement an ability to be cohesive while maintaining personal differences. Because both traditions believe in a world consciousness and there is a premium on feeling 'connected' they have encouraged an ability to forego the physical community and made working in geographical or physical isolation both acceptable and encouraged. This has been a process by which those who feel physically or religiously isolated in their secular lives either because of geography or hostile environment can have a religiously based community that supports their spiritual ideals. Relying on the feeling that one is connected to others on a spiritual level, and given that New Age and Pagan/Wiccan NRM's both believe that there are benevolent and caring forces that are present on levels other than the physical allows this isolation to be mediated.

This also ties into the idea of Utopia, which is the eventual goal of the New Age movement. Like the meta-community Utopia is literally no-place, it exists only in the minds of those who believe in it. Pagan's and Wiccan's do not share the goal of Utopia as a tenant in their religion. But they do share in the idea that spiritually we are connected to each other and must

live together peacefully. In that sense they are Utopian, but their ideals are not the basis for their meta-community. Their meta-community exists to support each other and share information as they strive to live a fulfilling life that is religiously motivated.

The fifth and final point is the importance that the new technology of the computer and the Internet cannot be stressed enough. This has allowed so much communication between people who would have been isolated and uninformed about the possibilities that their religious lives could contain that it is difficult to measure its impact. The emergence of the Internet has also meant the decreasing importance of spiritual leaders. It used to be the job of the spiritual leader to teach by book or example and inform group members. Now there is no need for people to be part of one or another leader's following exclusively because leaders within the New Age and Pagan/Wiccan groups do not claim to be responsible for the whole truth. Nor do they assume that those receiving the information will not be leaving at the end of the seminar, or for that matter, they will mostly likely never meet the vast majority of those who will read and believe in what they have to say.

This fact alone means that any act of the leaders is unimportant to the members of the religion. Combine this with the knowledge that eclectic Wiccan's and Pagan's and most of those involved in the New Age will be critically examining whatever any leader has to say on any topic to see if it 'feels right'. Adherents to these NRM's feel no obligation to accept any information, regardless of the source. This removes the onus of restricting people's movements between ideas from the source of the idea, or religious leader, and thus religious leaders within these NRM's have been abrogated from the responsibility of restricting movement or influencing the process of affiliation or disaffiliation.



Thus it is up to every individual to decide what they wish to regard as truth of any kind, and religion or spiritual truths in particular. Whether or not it is shared by anyone else, or if a person believes in an idea of their entire life or for only a part of it, the basic fact of the matter remains: people will believe what they want to believe because it suits them. A strong physical community is not going to make them stay, nor is a guarantee that the religion is traditional or historically accurate. Individuals become members of New Age and of Pagan and Wiccan groups because they feel it is important to view the world in a particular religious manner. It is evident that those who join these groups do not want their ideas restrained by any notion that it is important to remain loyal to any particular idea. Nor do they view affiliation to any one person or group to be essential.

Especially now when the phenomenon of NRM's has been gaining strength in North America for over a generation, people do not feel the kinds of pressure to conform to the ideal and religions of their parent or even the society around them. Theories about affiliation and disaffiliation processes that are created to address only small numbers of people that are associated with smaller and more socially isolated NRM's are not applicable to the religious groups that are becoming even more popular and socially acceptable as they grow. The societies in which these religions flourish is very permissive of individual exploration and people are going to assert their individual freedoms to choose with whom they will affiliate.

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