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## Imagining a Virtual Religious Community: Neo-Pagans and the Internet

[Gregory Price Grieve](#)  
*History of Religions, The Divinity School*  
*University of Chicago*

### Introduction: Neo-Paganism and the Internet

Anyone who has spent time exploring the Internet cannot help but notice the prevalence of Neo-Paganism. This paper answers the seeming paradox of why neo-Paganism, a self-proclaimed nature religion, pervades cyberspace. What defines the social space opened up by the Internet is lack of 'presence,' the face-to-face interaction of oral communication which is generally considered necessary for the formation of authentic communities, religious or otherwise (c.f. Benjamin 1968: 217-251; Eliade 1954: 141-147; Eliade 1957: 111-113, 141-147, 164; Eliade 1978: 162; Levi-Strauss 1970: 286-298; Levinas 1985: 85-92; Ong 1967). Yet, in Benedict Anderson's terms, other media besides speech enable human beings to imagine communities which transgress the horizons of face-to-face interaction — "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even those) are imagined" (1983: 15). What is unique about neo-Pagan practitioners is that they are able to imagine a religious community which is not dependent on presence. Instead of presence their Internet communities are sustained by the notion of a religious 'energy' which is created and circulated by 'personal rituals.' It is their shared 'feeling of energy' which binds them together in cyberspace, and enables them to imagine a virtual religious community.

Neo-Pagans 're-enchant' the disenchanted landscape of modernity through a religious strategy whose *myths* are patterned on an imagined pre-Christian European religion, but whose *practices* revolve around the production of an affective sentiment which neo-Pagan nomenclature labels 'energy.' The 'feeling of energy' created by personal rituals is a religious strategy which employs a ritualized imagination. The ritualized imagination is the sanctifi-

cation not of the content of specific creative acts, but of the act of creation itself. Hence, the religious strategies that surround neo-Paganism concentrate neither on written unifying myths, nor on a set of oral traditions, nor even on a ritual complex. Instead, what binds neo-Pagans together on the Internet, and how they overcome its lack of presence, is through the experience of the perceived sentiment that accompanies creativity itself.

Methodologically, my research on the Internet religious groups and neo-Paganism was collected as a 'virtual ethnographer.' I observed four religious Usenet newsgroups — alt.pagan, soc.religion.bahai, soc.religion.christian and soc.religion.eastern — on the Internet between October 1, 1993 and April 1, 1994. I concentrated on 'alt.pagan,' which exists "for the discussion of paganism and Witchcraft in their various forms and traditions; for sharing ideas and ritual and completed liturgy" and "for sharing within a larger community than one might find at home." (FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions document)<sup>1</sup> Beyond observing religious newsgroups on the Internet, I also compared the ethnographic data from alt.pagan with interactions I had with neo-Pagans at the 1993 World Parliament of Religions, especially with members of Circle — a 'Shamanic Wiccan Church' headquartered near Madison, Wisconsin; and Covenant of The Goddess — a Wiccan Coven headquartered in Berkeley, California.

### *Describing Neo-Paganism*

#### **The Basic Tenets of Neo-Paganism**

Neo-Paganism is a this-worldly anti-authoritarian nature-oriented modern urban protest religion, which is generally polytheistic (or conditionally monotheistic), and privileges the experience of personal ritual over belief. Neo-Pagan practices derive from Wicca (or modern Witchcraft), but are not identical with it. Wicca was the first of the neo-Pagan religions, but neo-Paganism also includes such groups as neo-Shamanism, neo-Druidism, Norse neo-Paganism, Dianic eco-feminism, the Church of All Worlds, Discordianism, and Radical Faeries. Another division is between those who practice as 'solitaires,' and those who practice in covens or other groups. On alt.pagan this broke down to 71 percent solitaire, 26 percent in covens, and 3 percent non-practicing. While there is no unified

belief system among these groups and solitaires, five dominant threads<sup>2</sup> characterize most of neo-Paganism: (1) *non-Abrahamism*, (2) *polytheism*, (3) *reverence for the Earth*, (4) *feminism*, and (5) *privileging of ritual over belief*

(2) The main thread running through almost all practitioners of neo-Paganism is that they define themselves both as other-than-Abrahamic, and other-than-Eastern religions. As Margot Adler writes in *Drawing Down the Moon*, a book which many neo-Pagans consider a fair and accurate account of their religion, "The Pagan movement does not include the Eastern religious groups. It includes neither Satanists nor Christians." As one of the users<sup>3</sup> of alt.pagan put it: "Paganism is a non-Christian nature-oriented polytheism."<sup>4</sup> In fact, while the word Pagan comes from the Latin *paganus*, which means "country dweller," historically in Western discourse Paganism has come to mean any non-Abrahamic religion (those not of the Book). It is this fact that the neo-Pagans often point to when explaining what paganism means. For example, when asked what brought them to neo-Paganism, one user of the newsgroup responded: "complete disgust with what I knew of Christianity." Later in the survey she went on to add that she thinks that neo-Paganism is occurring:

Because, like all other entities, Christianity is dying. It has outlived its usefulness, and no longer relates to today — it must change or die, and apparently, the powers that be within the religion can't see that. Paganism of any variety is in many ways diametrically opposed to Christianity, which, while not all good, is most likely better than all bad. Paganism is more tolerant, more accepting of difference, and therefore less demanding on the followers to give up their lives and follow any set path.

(1) A second tenet is polytheism. Most neo-pagans perceive Abrahamic religion's monotheism as religious imperialism and spiritual totalitarianism. As one practitioner put it: "Neo-Paganism is in the same category as Buddhism, Taoism, or Shintoism, as opposed to the Standard Western Religion JCI [Jesus Christ Incorporated], which believes in One Big Guy on top (a deocentric

cosmology, rather than our 'networked one)." Most neo-Pagans would agree on polytheism (or a modified monotheism) as a central principle. For example, one user defined neo-Paganism as "a group of related belief systems, often polytheistic or pantheistic, seeing divinity in nature, some of whose believers practice magick, which takes part of its inspiration from ancient pagan beliefs and practices." The 'traditional' Wicca belief is of a single Supreme Being who is personified by a God of the Hunt and a Goddess of Fertility. These two primary gods often find form in many other gods. As the FAQ states: "Neo-Pagans believe in a great many goddesses and gods. However, not all neo-Pagans believe in the same ones, or even in any at all." Further, as one poster<sup>5</sup> sums up the newsgroup's basic attitude toward 'Xians:' "I do *not* believe all religions are one. The cosmology of JCI *completely* disagrees with the cosmology of Buddhism, or with my flavor of Paganism."

(3) A third characteristic is ecology, or reverence for the Earth in face of what Weber would gloss as the disenchantment of the modern world (Weber 1958: 221). Adler writes in *Drawing Down the Moon*: "The Pagan revival seems to be a survival response to the common urban and suburban experience of our culture as 'impersonal,' 'neutral' or 'dead' (1986:25). As one user writes: "I think the rise in contemporary Paganism is a result of the violence with which we treat the planet and the lack of most mainstream religions to address it." Wiccans view their religion as "a life-affirming, Earth and nature-oriented religion that sees all of life as sacred and interconnected, honors the natural world as the embodiment of Divinity" (COG 1993).<sup>6</sup> Obviously, because these posters are using the Internet, their reverence for the Earth does not contain an implicit reaction against technology. In fact, pagans often argue that Paganism is more scientific in its views than Abrahamic religions. For example, in a response to a 1985 survey by Adler, one neo-Pagan answered: "Scientific, sensible, reasonable people are drawn to computers; it makes sense that they would be drawn to a scientific, reasonable, sensible religion" (1986: 448).

(4) A fourth characteristic is Feminism. Neo-Paganism is dominantly a women's religion. Some covens are Dianic, which means that they "choose not to work with male energy in their ritual, magic or universe. They feel that they need spiritual and psychic space

filled with only women's energy" (FAQ). Beyond this most pagans feel that women are beginning to reject the idea that "the higher power, is, and can only be, male." They may have sought out neo-Paganism because of a lack of faith in male-centered Christianity.

(5) The fifth and final general characteristic is the privileging of practice over belief, or experience over dogma. This privileging leads to the practice of magic or ritual. Many neo-Pagans see ritual based in the imagined practices of pre-Christian nature religions as the tool for ending disenchantment. As one High Priestess of an active coven writes: "Neo-Paganism is the revival of ancient ways brought on by hundreds of years of deliberate misinterpretations and politically-based spirituality." Magic and ritual for the neo-Pagans are neither superstition nor even supernatural. Again and again I was told it had nothing to do with any transcendence. Ritual and magic are simply "a sequence of actions taken to achieve a specific result." "Ritual is a somewhat set grouping of words, movements, and tools brought together to create a certain effect of mind and spirit."

## The Historical Myth of Neo-Paganism

The 'myth' of the history of neo-Paganism is as follows:<sup>7</sup> Witchcraft dates back to pre-Christian Paleolithic times — to the worship of the Goddess of fertility and the God of the hunt. According to this myth one can see remnants of 'the Old Religion' in cave paintings and figurines of goddesses that predate written history by many thousands of years. This early religion was pandemic to all Europe. The names changed from place to place but the basic deities were the same. The elite quickly converted to Christianity but the 'folk,' the country dwellers (e.g., the pagans), continued to worship the old ways until quite recently. Vestiges of the Old Religion remain today in Europe. People built churches on the sacred sites of the Old Religion, still worship Black Madonas (remnants of the Goddess), and changed names of festivals but not the dates. During 'the Burning Times,' the period of Pagan persecution, the conquerors propagandized the god of the Old Religion into the Christian devil, and the goddess into the Virgin Mary. The Old Religion was forced underground, its meaning distorted by its enemies. Yet a few kept the Old Religion alive. In 1951, with the reneal of the English

Witchcraft Laws, the Old Religion resurfaced. At this point the many branches of Wicca, as well as other neo-Pagan groups, split off in many directions.<sup>8</sup>

The problem with this myth-history, in all its variations, is that it has been refuted. *It simply is not historically accurate.* Yet this hasn't seemed to slow neo-Paganism's expansion. It is not that the adherents refuse to accept, or are ignorant of, the falsity of the myth. It is rather, as Adler writes, that:

Until about [1975] most of the Wicca took almost all elements of the myth literally. Few do today.... [Yet] one cannot really understand the revival of Witchcraft today without first becoming familiar with some of the sources that formed the Wiccan Myth and gave birth to the Revival (1986: 46).

This is the basic attitude on alt.pagan. As the FAQ reads: "Wicca itself is a new religion, drawing strongly on the practices of Ceremonial magic. While there are claims that Wicca goes back into the mists of prehistory, honest examination of the practices and history of Wicca will make it clear that Wicca is new." As a 33-year-old solitaire from Boone, North Carolina responds: "Neo-Paganism is the current paganistic revival — it is certainly NOT the supposed 'unbroken tradition' that some folks claim it to be. I don't believe for a minute that there was any significant survival of any non-Christian religions anywhere in most of the old world."

### *Explaining Neo-Paganism*

Beyond an anti-authoritarian, polytheistic, nature-oriented and vague moral stance, neo-Paganism is extremely hard to define. For example, one user of alt.pagan from England wrote: "Try comparing Discordianism (the ultimate 'joke' religion taken to extremes, Hail Eris!) and Gardnerian Wicca (which tends to be very formal in the extreme)." As a neo-Pagan ex-seminarian puts it: "We are religious anarchists." Scripture does not unify them because neo-Pagans have no holy scripture. While an individual practitioner may keep a journal, often called a 'book of shadows,' or individual sects may have a central text, neo-Paganism as a whole has no

revealed text, nor any other common sacred text. Furthermore, neo-Paganism began not with a 'charismatic leader' in Weber's sense of the term (Weber 1993: 46-47). Gerald Gardner, who comes closest to this ideal, in no way fits the description put forth by Weber. Neo-Paganism fails to qualify as an 'ethical religion,' again in Weber's sense of the term (Weber 1993: 43-44). Morally, many, but not all, neo-Pagans subscribe to the Wiccan Code of Rede: "An it harm none, do what ye will," which is often accompanied by the three-fold law, which is the belief that any 'energy' sent out will come back threefold (COG 1993). Yet, 'evil' is not a theological issue for neo-Paganism. Neo-pagans consider guilt the opiate of the masses, a way by which organized religions manipulate the individual.

Instead of any of these issues, neo-Pagans are bound together by their utilization of a radical form of 'personal religion.' A personal religion is not concerned with matters of belief or formulaic ceremonies. Instead the strategy of personal religion attempts to give meaning to the world through the strategic employment of religious practice and discourse which ritualizes a specific 'feeling.' Personal religion is a term coined by William James, and while there is no direct relationship between James and neo-Paganism, I borrow the term 'personal religion' as a typological notion because it describes the neo-Pagan religious strategy so well. Yet, instead of seeing the category of personal religion through James' eyes as an ontological essence, I understand it as a strategy that emerged in Europe and America in the late 19th century to counter the loss of meaning brought about by modern urban disenchantment.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, one should understand neo-Paganism as a field of social strategies that generate 'meaning,' and re-enchant the modern landscape (in a Weberian sense), through a radical form of personal ritual (Weber 1958: 221).

From the actors' point of view a personal religion, according to James, is based on "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" (1983: 31). In a similar vein, the FAQ states:

One of the major advantages of neo-Paganism is that it is defined by you, and that is what makes it so empowering.

Nobody can tell you that you aren't a true neo-Pagan, because you decide what's right for you. There are no dogmas in neo-Paganism, simply because there couldn't be any expert who knows better than you what feels right for you.

Similarly, a user of alt.pagan stated in the survey: "Paganism is more of a 'define your own' religion, and doesn't come pre-packaged and pre-cooked in the manner of Christianity." General neo-Pagan revulsion to proselytizing also supports the notion of a personal religion. "Paganism, neo- or otherwise, is not a proselytizing religion. There is no 'great commission,' and no deity is telling pagans to get out and spread the word."

Neo-Paganism has no grand narrative. To again abuse William James' typology, it is a 'piecemeal supernaturalism' rather than 'universalistic supernaturalism' (1983: 520). For example, in a post from the thread "Dogmatics Strike Again," where a non-neo-Pagan posted a message that stated that neo-Paganism was not an authentic religion because it did not worship historical deities, a user summarized the neo-Pagan 'personal religion' belief-system as follows:

I accept what I believe as a system of beliefs that works for ME. Not for you, or for anyone else. I don't want you following my belief system. I don't mind you borrowing from it, but it's mine. I worked hard to build it and it's still evolving, so even if you tried you couldn't follow my system ... I don't care about the diversity of Pagan beliefs in antiquity ... I don't try to find common factors or beliefs, though if I notice some, then great. It is not important that similarities or differences exist to me. I go look for something that I have a need for. When I find something that fits, regardless of where it came from, then I am happy. And I will stop looking for that thing, unless something else pops up and is a better fit ... I DON'T STUDY RELIGION. I LIVE IT ... I like my religious ideas. They fit me. And they work for me.

For both neo-Pagans and for James *real* religion is religion without the 'middle man.' The FAQ states that "the fact that we are re-creating religion for ourselves after centuries of suppression makes us very eclectic and very concerned with the 'rightness' of a particular thing for the individual." This is also why personal religions tend to be polytheistic. As James writes: "Each attitude being a syllable in human nature's total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely. So a 'god of battles' must be allowed to be the God for one kind of person, as god of peace and heaven and home, the kind for another" (1983: 487). In the same vein, according to James this personal experience or feeling is more fundamental to religiosity than what he calls the secondary acts. By secondary acts he means theology, ecclesiasticism and religious philosophy. "Churches, when once established, live second-hand upon tradition; but founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine" (James 1983, 30). Similarly, neo-Paganism attempts to uncover this 'authentic personal religious experience' by being anti-authoritarian and non-dogmatic. Neo-Pagans especially distance themselves from such authoritarian groups as Fundamentalism and Hare Krishna. As one user writes: "most Pagans have a disgust with traditional, organized religions ... every person has to make up their own rules and practices of beliefs."

### Personal Religion as Ritualization of Imagination

I will now move beyond the notion of personal religion as a descriptive category, and expose its operative logic. The neo-Pagan ritualization of the experience that accompanies creative acts leads to the 'ritualized imagination.' The ritualized imagination is the *otherising*, not of the content of the imagination, but of the process of imagining itself. Hence, from an outside perspective, a personal religion is one whose identifying idea is neither a narrative complex, nor a set of formulaic rituals. Rather a personal religion is a strategic complex of practices and discourses that ritualizes creative sentiment. I would hold that this religious experience is not an innate human capacity. A personal religion neither subjectively taps into a universal level of religiosity, nor is it intrinsic to the human psyche. Instead, personal religion's privileging of senti-

ment must be interpreted as *in* and *about* social life rather than as referring to some internal state or supernatural level of being. In other words, if personal religion truly arose only between an individual and his or her chosen deity, there would be no need for its adherents to discuss it. There would be no community.

The social field that binds these individual 'religious anarchists' into a religious community are imaginative acts. As one user writes: "[Imagination] is everything. Once you have the basics of your personal Pagan religion, it is necessary to adapt and create a modern spirituality that is based in these beliefs." Another user adds: "I'd say imagination plays a substantial role in paganism ... Since the various goddesses and gods are basically personifications of natural forces, imagination must be used to make them 'real.'" And even more to the point, the imagination "is what magick *is*." The neo-Pagan faith in the imagination is not endemic to the other Internet religious newsgroups, which hold radically different views on spirituality. For example, a Baha'i writes on soc.religion.bahai: "Spirituality is the relationship between the individual soul and God." On soc.religion.eastern a non-linguistic, even aphaphatic understanding tends to prevail. Users consider spirituality as an "infinite happiness that transcends the senses." On soc.religion.christian most users tend to hold views such as: "My spirituality revolves around my relationship with Christ."

### Ritualized Imagination Manifested as 'Energy'

'Energy' — *the religious sentiment that accompanies the 'creative impulse'* — constitutes neo-Paganism's central focus. Energy is not indicated by signs or symbols but, in their own words, by "an explosive, non-abstract, gut-level" sentiment that has both a religious and a magical side. The religious side is its power of "re-integrating individuals and groups into the cosmos, and to tie in the activities of daily life with their ever-present, often forgotten significance (Adler 1986: 162). The magical side is its power to 'bend,' if not reality itself, at least one's conception of reality. As the FAQ reads: "Witch is a very old word meaning 'magic-maker,' from a root which meant 'bending' or 'shaping.' For many of us, the word Witch is a powerful reclaiming of the inherent human power to make changes around us." In neo-Paganism practice these two

aspects of 'energy' are both mutually constituting, and often conflated.

Neo-Pagans perceive 'energy' as being generated by ritual, not belief. They understand ritual as a creative act that leads to "an awakened, attentive, attuned sense of being" (Adler 1979: 156). For instance, Robert Anton Wilson, the co-founder of the neo-Pagan sect of Discordianism, describes a ritual in one of his novels as the creation of "the astral/ electrical/prajna / orgone / psionic/ bioplasmic/odyle energy, or the Power of the Imagination" (Wilson 1981: 167). For neo-Pagans, embodying this *energy* means to "participate in the gods," that "thou art God(dess)" (Lewis 1971: 205). Hence, according to neo-Pagans, 'energy' is not something that can be *explained*, it is something that has to be *experienced*. As Adler writes in *Drawing Down the Moon*: "What does this energy feel like? How can the priestess tell when the energy has peaked? How do those in the circle *let the energy go*? The answer to these questions ... can be learned only by experience, and it is precisely such experience that constitutes the 'higher secrets' of the Craft" (Adler 1986: 166).

Energy, the affective sentiment perceived to be generated by creative acts, binds together the neo-Pagan community. It gives a common order to a particular group of human actors' and thereby channels a field of discourse and practice along parallel lines. As a high priestess of a Wiccan Coven writes: "Spirituality is the necessary power each human needs to grasp in order to bring a chaotic world to meaning." This ordering is not done by reflecting an authoritative narrative. "Everything in Craft, no matter how useful, no matter how pleasing, even the Great Metaphor of the Goddess, is still only metaphor" (Adler 1979:172. Citing Kelly.) For instance, "one can worship the Goddess without believing in Her" (*Ibid.*: 173). "The ritual is first; the myth is second" (Adler 1979: Citing Kelly). As Leo Martello, author of *Witchcraft: The Old Religion* writes: "I make no claim as a witch to 'supernatural powers,' but I totally believe in the *super* powers that reside in the *natural*" (Martello 1973: 12). As a user of alt.pagan wrote, ritual and magic are "a sequence of actions taken to achieve a specific result." Yet, these results differ from those of other ways of getting results because of the privileging of the imagination (c.f. Adler 1986: 7-9),

which can be defined as 'will,' 'concentration' or 'heightened attention.' Hence, neo-Pagans perceive that the power of magic resides in "the power of the mind itself" and that "the mind, then, is the greatest instrument of magic" (Valiente 1973: 13).

For neo-Pagans ritual is a means to "reawaken imaginative faculties, to increase concentration, attention and self-confidence, and to facilitate a student's ability to enter altered states of consciousness at will" (Adler 1986: 157). Moreover, just as neo-Pagans define magic in a pragmatic way, they perceive the trappings that surround it — the chants, spells, dancing, burning candles, the smoke and smell of incense — as a means to awaken the 'deep mind' and "to arouse high emotions, re-enforce concentration, and facilitate entry into an altered state" (Adler 1986: 157). Thus, the actual religious content or sources are immaterial. What matters is the sentiment of the practitioner (COG 1993).

Neo-Pagans see the 'essence' of all religion and magic working this way. According to them "these techniques function in the same way for a Witch or ceremonial magician as for a Native American shaman or a Catholic Priest" (COG 1993). Yet, while neo-Pagans view all religions as similar because their function is to generate 'energy,' they consider neo-Paganism as being different from other institutionalized forms because the traditional religions "have crystallized into dogma" and have therefore lost their 'energy.' Contrary to these dogmatic religions, as one user explained, a neo-Pagan "cannot be said to worship his god, he lives him, experiences him." For neo-Pagans 'experiencing' means to embody 'energy,' an energy that they perceive to be the ultimate meaning of the world.

### The Three Moments of a Neo-Pagan Ritual

At this point it is necessary to describe a typical (real-time /real-space) neo-Pagan ritual so that I can compare it with a virtual one. Ritual for neo-Pagans is the practice of generating, directing and circulating 'energy.' As Adler writes: "A Witches' circle generally serves as a reservoir to hold group energy, which is then directed ... 'felt' and exchanged" (Adler 1986: 176). She goes on to state: "All Craft groups talk about this 'raising of energy' or 'raising the cone of power' (*Ibid.*: 165). Yet, while we can define 'energy' as the sanctified feeling that accompanies imaginative acts, this does not

tell us how neo-Pagans achieve, generate and circulate it. Since neo-Pagans keep their methods secret, this information is hard to come by. I am relying on a description which Adler calls "the best published explanation," from a 1972 article in *The Witches Trine* by Adrian Kelly, which I supplement with a 'recipe' for a ritual by Ed Fitch, a man interviewed by Adler (1986: 470).

Kelly's ritual took place on August 1, 1968 and was performed by the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn (NROOGD).<sup>10</sup> According to the 1972 article the first few times NROOGD performed a ritual they noticed no unusual changes in their perceptions or emotions. As Kelly writes: "As we sat about the room, looking at scripts Glenna asked, 'I assume there must be some point to all this, but what is it?' 'If I understand Gardener right,' [Kelly] said, 'the point is to raise the energy, [Gardener] talks about, and everything that goes on in the ritual is directed towards that.'" After a few 'failed' rituals the group decided to try again, but this time on a true sabbat and in a grove of redwood trees. This time the group, numbering over forty, experienced a change.

As Glenna began the opening conjuration of the ritual, a feeling fell over the circle through the castings and the charging of the four directions, through the invocation of the Goddess, it grew, and as Albion and Loik and Joaquin Murietta hammered out a dancing rhythm of their drums, as we whirled in a double sunwise ring, the energy swelled into waves of unseen lightness, flooding our circle, washing about our shoulders, breaking over our heads (Kelly 1974: 12).

How do the agents perceive this energy to be generated and directed? For neo-Pagans ritual consists of three steps, Invocation, Will and Closing.<sup>11</sup>

Invocation is an arousal of 'energy' generated by ritualization. It is the generation of sanctified religious sentiment through ritual practices that set themselves off from normal practices. Fitch describes an introductory ritual as follows (Adler 1986: 470). A circle is marked on the floor, surrounding those who will participate in the ceremony. An altar is set up at the center of the circle. At the

center of the altar an image of the Goddess and an incense burner are placed. Behind the image is placed a wand fashioned from a willow branch. Five candles are set upon the altar.

When all the people are prepared they assemble in the circle. The woman acting as the priestess directs a man to act as priest. He lights the candles and incense. The priestess then says: *"The Goddess extends everywhere./Through out the many strange, magical/ And beautiful worlds./To all places of wilderness, enchantment and freedom."* The priestess then places the candles at the North end of the Circle and pauses to look outwards saying: *"The Lady is awesome./The powers of death bow before Her."* The person closest to the East takes a candle from the altar and places it at that quarter, saying: *"Our Goddess is a Lady of Joy/The Winds are Her servants."* The person closest to the South takes a candle from the altar and places it at that quarter saying: *"Our Goddess is a Goddess of Love./At Her blessings and desire/ The sun brings forth life anew."* The person closest to the West takes a candle from the altar and places it at that quarter saying: *"The seas are the domains of our Serene Lady./The Mysteries of the depths are Hers alone."* The Priest now takes the wand, and starting at the North end of the Circle, draws it along the entire circle clockwise back to the North point saying: *"The circle is sealed, and all herein/are totally completely apart from the outside world/That we may glorify the Lady whom we adore./Bless Be! All repeat: Bless Be!"* The priest now holds the wand out in salute towards the North for a moment and then hands it to the priestess, who also holds it out in salute. She motions to the group to repeat the following lines after her: *"As above, so below .. as the universe, so the soul/as without, so within./Blessed and gracious one, on this day, do we consecrate to you/our bodies/our minds/ and our spirits/Blessed Be!"*

While Fitch's ritual gives the 'text' for the ritual, for a description of actual practice we must turn to the NROOGD ritual. The NROOGD invocation occurs as follows:

The Coven, holding hands, and alternating male and female as closely as possible, dances sunwise, at first slowly, then gradually faster, singing a spell made up for the specific purpose the energy is to be used for; perhaps with music, perhaps silently. When the Goddess is the

one who has been invoked, the Priestess stands in the center of the circle, in the persona of the Goddess, holding the appropriate tool. When she feels the energy reach its peak she calls out or signals a command to drop, which all in the circle do, letting go the of the energy which the Priestess then directs onward toward its intended goal (Kelly 1974: 33).

The second moment — will — is the focusing of the energy towards a goal. This is done by concentrating upon an image in one's mind. As a user of alt.pagan writes: "imagination/visualization is used extensively in ritual." For neo-Pagans it is the focusing of energy upon an image that makes something 'real.' For instance, when asked if the Goddess is real, Kelly, the author of the 1972 article, replied that She is real "because human energy goes into making Her real ... She does not exist independently of mankind, but She is most thoroughly independent of anyone person or group."

The last step — the closing of the circle — deflates any lingering energy. According to Fitch, when a meeting ends, all will stand and silently meditate for a moment. The priestess will then take the wand and tap each candle out, starting at the North and going clockwise about the circle, while saying: *"Our rite draws to its end/O Lovely and gracious Goddess,/Be with each of us as we depart./The circle is broken!"* This last step is important because it demarcates the process of sanctification from the profane occurrences of everyday life.

### *Understanding Why There Are Neo-Pagans On The Internet*

Neo-Paganism is a social 'fiction.' Yet, to quote Benedict Anderson: "communities [ought] to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1983: 15). Many alt.pagan users imagine that it is indeed a virtual community. For example one user writes: "I'd say it's a type of community where people can turn for a sort of fellowship with others of a like mind." In contrast, the other religious newsgroups surveyed felt that the Internet was merely supplemental to their 'real' com-



munity interaction. For example, "The 'net is a very small part of any religious faith, feeling or practice. It's a peripheral supplement. A religious community, to me, means a residential center, such as a monastery or a Zen center."

One can divide into two categories the reasons alt.pagan has formed a community on the most high-tech of media. The first set of categories is environmental, and is common to all social groups which have access to the Internet. These environmental categories which stem from the nature of the Internet are necessary but not essential to the formation of a neo-Pagan community on the 'net. The second set of categories is specific to neo-Paganism. While many religious groups use the Internet, only neo-Paganism is able to imagine a community. Hence, this second set of categories is essential for the formation of imagining a community in cyberspace.

### Environmental Categories:

Environmental categories stem from the nature of the Internet and affect all social groups which use the media. There are two main environmental categories: critical mass and longing for community.

(1) *Critical Mass*: On the broadest level, the Internet creates 'critical mass.' It brings together geographically dispersed individuals with similar interests and allows them to maintain a sustained conversation. This 'critical mass' is common to many newsgroups. None of the alt.pagan users surveyed seem to doubt this phenomenon. "Since there are so few [neo-Pagans], and they are so widely scattered, it gives us access to some community" and yet, on alt.pagan those answering my survey who saw the newsgroup only as "purely a format to transfer information" were in the minority. However, the majority of users from other religious newsgroups saw 'critical mass' as the newsgroup's *only* function. These other religious groups depend on presence for 'real' community. As one respondent from soc.religion.eastern posits: "[the newsgroup] is not a 'religious community,' it is a forum on religions ... I think 'religious community' implies a unified set of objectives, beliefs and practices of the religion. The unifying points here are not of religion, but just about religion. There is no substitute for

sacred spaces and face-to-face interaction with teachers and students."

(2) *Longing for Community*: Another drive is the longing for community. Beyond merely generating 'critical mass,' alt.pagan is founded, at least in part, on a longing for community that has been one of the driving forces of the modern world, and especially of modern protest religions such as neo-Paganism (c.f. Riesenbrodt 1993). The more the world has become disenchanted and institutionalized, the more people seek shelter in shared emotions and camaraderie. This camaraderie is often imagined as a return to a traditional cooperative stable community of the past. It is debatable whether these 'communities' (intimate, purely cooperative social groups according to Tönnies 1957), ever existed except as the nostalgic ideal of 19th-century social scientists.<sup>12</sup> Conflict occurs as much within communities as between them (c.f. Sahlins 1985). Still, even if these *Gemeinschaften* were only myths, in the modern age their very myth has been a major driving force for social action. For many neo-Pagans this drive for community manifests itself in imagined 'tribal communities.' Many neo-Pagans see themselves as modern-day noble savages, as embodying the 'other.' "Witchcraft and paganism are the European equivalents to Native American spirituality. Pagan practices and beliefs are extremely close to most of those found among the religions of the indigenous peoples of the land" (Arthen 1990b).

### Imagining a Virtual Religious Community

The sanctified imagination allows neo-Pagans to form a religious community in cyberspace. Alt.pagan uses imagination in two ways. First the content of imaginations is utilized. The present nascent stage of the Internet requires much imagination. As one user put it: "Alt.pagan is a Virtual Reality space ... it's what you make of it." Second, imagination's sentiment is utilized. Without presence this sentiment is what binds together the users of alt.pagan.

(1) *The Cosmological Need for Imagination*. One main concern for maintaining a community on the Internet is the 'signal to noise' ratio.<sup>13</sup> Besides alt.pagan, the other religious news groups surveyed had almost no noise because they are moderated. Users form a moderated newsgroup by electing a person or persons to act as

moderators. A moderator decides which posts are appropriate for the newsgroup. Hence, while an unmoderated newsgroup's postings go directly to the computer bulletin board, in moderated newsgroups all posts must be cleared by, and fed through, the moderator. For example on soc.religion.bahai, one user wrote, "the conventions and rules are based upon the Baha'i principle of consultation. They came into existence around 150 years ago as part of revealed religious law." Keeping with the anarchistic values of personal religion, of the alt.pagans who voiced an opinion nearly ninety percent did not want moderation. As one user put it, "being a little bit moderated is like being a little bit pregnant." And, "a moderator basically owns the newsgroup."

Because alt.pagan is not moderated, its cosmologizing is more imaginative and more anarchistic than the other groups. Most newsgroup users feel that alt.pagan is "not governed so much as self-regulating." As long as you "don't try to convert people" and "try to stay on subject" all will run smoothly. Yet, like any group there are subtle conventions. For example, one poster writes: "Very\* bloody-minded (you \*better\* be able to defend your absurd point of view you just posted, and be able to use acceptable arguments, and it \*better\* not contradict what we know through science ... Also no Newage crap, or unsubstantiable claims/arguments."

When I was observing the 1083 posts and 237 threads from March 23, 1994 to March 31, 1994, the ratio of 'noise' to 'signal,' was 22 percent to 78 percent. One user compared the current level to trying to have a conversation in a train station, another to trying to talk at a rock concert. On alt.pagan irrelevant posts consisted of such things as a widely-crossposted (a post sent to many newsgroups at once) pyramid scheme on "how to make money fast," and even more tiring, the spewing monologues of a certain John Winston.<sup>14</sup> Frequent attempts by Christians and Moslems to convert the users of alt.pagan also contributes to the noise.

How alt.pagan 'defends' itself against 'converters,' 'spewers' and 'New Agers' is, according to one user, first through "email or, if necessary, by judicious use of killfiles." By email what is meant is that people send personal electronic mail messages to the trespassers in an attempt to get them to stop posting on alt.pagan. If this

fails, killfiles come into action.<sup>15</sup> Yet, killfiling too many threads breaks down the sense of community. So three other methods of defense often are employed. These three methods of 'creative cosmologicalization' use up about nine percent of the messages posted. The first is group discussion (6%), a 'virtual town square meeting' where problems are worked out. For example, an alt.pagan user writes: "John Winston was posting the same stuff for quite a while in talk.religion.newage. Everyone over there finally got so sick of him and flamed him so much that either he got the message or they voted to have a moderator." The second method is soft policing, or serious play (2%). This is best exemplified by the "electronic snowballs" that are hurled at opponents. For example, one user posts, "THAT DOES IT! YOU ARE IN FOR IT NOW!!! - -- )))))))000000 \*smack\*/ \*snork\*." "Our God's the Sun God! Ra Ra Ra!" The third is protective flaming of trespassers (1%), which, as explained by one user, is "basically yelling at them and making fun of them until they get sick of it."

A subsequent use of cosmologicalization comes into effect with the frequent discussions to define neo-Paganism. These discussions take up sixty-four percent of the signal and consist of metasemantics (34%), defining practice (26%), and persecution (4%). Metasemantics consists of figuring out exactly what neo-Paganism is. For example, a typical post reads: "As far as I know, Paganism is an attempt to return to the pre-Christian religions. However, most pagans I have met hold a belief in a Goddess figure as paramount." Defining practice consists of such posts as: "The reason I find Archie's definition unhelpful \*for me\* is that it doesn't really serve the purpose. Once you've used magic(k) to describe all forced conformance of World with Will, you don't have a word left to describe 'whatever it is that spells do.'" Persecution consists of such posts as: "Help, I live in South Dakota and the Media here had a big article in the Sunday paper, four pages, saying that the symbol of the pentagram is used by witches and Satanists alike to call upon evil spirits. They have named our esbats and Sabbats and say that if you hear anyone speaking of these they are Satanists."

The topics of discussion on the other newsgroups differ radically from those on alt.pagan. Soc.religion.bahai and Soc.religion.christian tended to focus on defining practice, espe-

cially 'myth/creed' as known through revealed texts. Soc.religion.eastern also tends to focus on practice, but is about even in its discussion between rites and creed. None of the other newsgroups feel nearly the same need to do metasemantics. Instead, they rely on the legitimacy of definition from the authority of institutions whose main communication is outside the 'net. I would argue that metasemantics is more a part of neo-Paganism as a whole than its extension onto the 'net. For example, a neo-Pagan publication "Circle Network News Fall 1993"<sup>16</sup> spent a fourth of its thirty-two pages defining neo-Paganism.

(2) Energy as 'binding' sentiment. Besides creative governing, to build a community on the Internet one must also have a second *affective* sentiment of belonging (Anderson 1983: 14-16). Because energy's sanctification builds *communitas* (Turner 1974: 274-275) without presence, alt.pagan is able to imagine a virtual religious community. In other words, while the other newsgroups actually *govern* better than alt.pagan — their moderation keeps the noise level down to almost zero — still, because of their notion of religiosity, they are handicapped in their affective formation of *communitas*. They do not 'feel' like a community.

### A Virtual Ritual: "a timeless placeless place."

On alt.pagan, the greatest example of *communitas*-generating activity is virtual ritual. Virtual ritual, like the NROOGD pagan ritual described above, is a means by which practitioners generate and circulate energy. The perception of this sanctified energy is in turn used on alt.pagan to bind together individuals, and thus imagine a community. I will describe a virtual ritual that began on Tuesday, September 21, 1993 and lasted until Sunday, October 10, 1993. This ritual's thread was titled "The Mabon Virtual Circle Gathers," and was modeled after 'real' coven gatherings such as that performed by NROOGD in 1968. The virtual ritual's stated purpose was "to create a protective circle in which to explore," to construct a virtual liminal space through which to generate *communitas*. The virtual ritual consisted of 26 posts varying in length from 11 to 225 lines, with the an average length being 52. When printed out it consisted of 40 typed pages.

The virtual ritual was created through the users of alt.pagan

emailing their suggestions to Crone Heather (the ritual specialist for the event). Crone Heather then compiled these suggestions into a large post which created a frame for the ritual. The frame was a description of a virtual forest and the members of the circle. This frame was then added to by direct posting from other users. As the ritual progressed it drifted away from its original frame and the direct posts became the dominant form of communication. Crone Heather then posted another large post to close the ritual. This large post was again added to by direct posting. What must be stressed is that Crone Heather's frame and the other member's direct posts did not create a 'unique uniform moment.' Alt.pagan is not based in a presence in which a particular place and time meld. Instead, the ritual was perceived differently by each user depending on their relation to each other on the 'net. Because of the nature of the Internet, depending both on geographic location and on the technical sophistication of an access site there is a difference in 'netlag.' A message can take from minutes to days to reach other users. And because there is no central point on the 'net, there is no one version which can be labeled as the privileged perspective. Hence, there is no one authentic version of this 'event.' The version given below was supplied by a user in Texas.

Now that I have explained the structure of the ritual and its particularities necessitated by the medium of the 'net, I will interpret the ritual along the same lines as the NROOGD ritual described above.

(1) *Invocation*: The first state of focusing upon an image consists of two parts. First is the invocation of the circle and the second is the follow-up. The invocation of the circle had each participant imagine their virtual self in a wooded forest grove. The post reads: "The sun begins to set on the Ritual Grove, touching the trunks of the stately Madrones with Gold." A Golden Eagle circles above the grove and then lands with a loud crack turning into Crone Heather, whose "eyes look around the Circle holding images of her friends in her Mind." She invokes twenty-one different people from Geezer Casspa, who "has chosen to grace the ritual today in the form of a large orange newt" to "Mark, a six foot, male, slim, dark brown hair to top of collar," and from "Mary Lee in the guise of a great blue heron" to Kieran "his Virtual Ritual garb a brown and green motley

robe with black." Once the circle has been gathered, Crone Heather "looks deeply into the shadows of the ritual grove, sending warm greetings to the timid ones who lurk there bidding them join the Circle if and when they feel ready."

The invocation of the circle proceeds, like the NROOGD ritual, with the blessing of the four directions. It begins as "a crisp breeze winds its way through the circle." Crone Heather then "turns toward the South and bows her head to the warm fecund spirits of the South," and chants "Hail Guardians of the South. We welcome you to our Circle today." Crone Heather then lights a candle on the Southern Rim of the Circle. Mark steps forward and says: "A Shinto priest, when asked about their dogma and theology, replied, 'we have no dogma, we have no theology. We just dance.' Dance well and joyfully." "Margot solemnly faces West. She is dressed simply in a woven robe of wine colored wool." She holds in her right hand a goblet carved from crystal and in her left she holds a Greek mask that hides her face. She holds the goblet to the West and says: "The water in this goblet came from the sacred spring that is guarded by the old woman with no name. She asked me what I would give in return and I promised her friendship." Margot then chants the Mystery from the Leabhar Gabala Eirann. Geezer Casspa then invokes the North.

Crone Heather then intones: "the Circle is Cast, we are in a timeless placeless place. We create this Circle of Protection. As a Perfect Heaven of safety. As a safe place to explore. Let the wild Rumpus Begin! The Crone looks straight at you and murmurs. 'If ye wish to join us here ye may do so by exploring the mystery of the Follow-up.'" During the follow-up people who did not see the original post, but who saw the invocation, join the circle. They consist of such people as Ceci, who shows up with "wine, cakes and hazelnuts." And a mysterious figure whose car overheated somewhere in cyberspace. And Cornerstone, "who stumbles into the circle burdened by the weight of schoolbooks and paperwork." And a "slender panther who leaps down without a sound and moves toward you."

(2) *Will*: The second moment is the focusing of the energy in the invocation towards a goal. Since this was only the second virtual ritual the community had held, it was used to generate a

communitas-generating liminality in which the participants felt free to, in their own words, "romp." This communitas is expressed through 'serious play' where each member of the Circle who feels like it offers something to group. This serious play begins with "Conan the Postdoc who extends his senses to become one with the virtual forest, to impede the progress of any who have feelings of ill will to the ritual." After Conan the Postdoc the next to step forward, is Mister Magic, who says "in an exaggerated version of a lecturer's voice: My friends and fellow Pagans, it is my contention that you do not need tools to do magic. All you need is yourself and your will." Next "Weasel stretches to his full furry height and begins a Dance." The dance invokes trees which burst forth around the circle. Crone Heather then steps forth, breaks open a pomegranate and gives a piece to each member. Then Badger steps forth and plants a sapling at each of the cardinal directions, and then walks to the center of the circle and chants: "Great Spirits among us! May these seedlings grow to mighty trees, and may they sow their seeds into a magical forest." Judith then steps forward and "offers a large earthenware bowl, eggplant purple with red Carolina clay showing at the base," which is full of seeds to the circle. Then Moon\*wylf\* leads everyone in a dance. Chris then steps forward and pours a cup of ale for the God and Goddess.

And then Obsidian stumbles into the circle and starts dying. The Mood suddenly changes. Obsidian — a student at the University of Kaiserslautern in Germany in real life — states that in his virtual one that he has "decided that my life ends when the circle ends." His life had lost all meaning, was now boring and disenchanted because a woman had left him. The people in the circle then step in to help. First to step forward is Mark, who says: "Is your teacher [i.e. the woman] so poor, or are you such a poor student, that her mere absence is cause for you to give everything up, like a child crying ... Open your eyes, take out the filters in your head, and see where you are, and who is here. Are we so boring? Is this so boring? Mark with the energy of the circle, produces an egg. 'This egg holds within itself new life for you.' he reaches out, and \*smashes\* the egg on Obsidian's head." Then Meesh steps forth and says "Feel your soul rooting into the earth and sky. You are not lost-you are home." Crone Heather then turns her "penetrating gaze to the Young man

in Pain" and says "It sounds like you are in a crisis. ... Look at me! I am old and have suffered much pain, but I have chosen to live and been glad for the choice." Crone Heather then turns back to the circle and says: "let us send some healing Energy to our brother Obsidian and hope that he finds the help he needs to move back into the light."

(3) The closing of the Circle consisted of a thanking to the four directions, which was done with little pomp. A postscript to the ritual consisted of two posts that arrived after the circle was closed but which seem to me exemplars of *communitas*. First is one that reads: "Suni is taking the energy she feels from the circle and turning it inwards, to heal maybe to help ease [Obsidian's] sadness. At first it is not helping, but then enters Obsidian and his agony seems so much greater than hers that she weeps for him. She decides to send out some energy she has gathered for herself out to him ... the ritual has ended, but joy goes on." And a week after his original post the student from the University of Kaiserslautern writes: "Obsidian blushes like a child. A teardrop appears in his right eye. It looks like the [energy] egg has given him new force ... It's like he forgot his sorrows."

### Conclusion

Undeniably, a community exists between a possibly suicidal person in Germany, 'Mark' who lives in Texas, and 'Crone Heather' from California — not to mention the thirty or so other members of the virtual ritual just described. Their community, which exists where a community ought not, problematizes the academy's traditional notions of community. What is missing from 'this placeless place, and timeless time' is not emotional attachment but *presence*, that which human scientists tend to privilege as what is essential for an authentic community. This privileging of presence is also held by the other newsgroups on the Internet. For example, one user from *soc.religion.bahai* writes about Usenet: "It is just words, no spirit, no emotion." And "there's no face-to-face contact." Contrary to this, as one user of *alt.pagan* wrote: "Alt.pagan extends community to allow individuals to share their imaginations with those outside of their (physically) immediate circle of friends and acquaintances."

The users of *alt.pagan* utilize the 'energy' of a personal religion to imagine a virtual religious community. What *binds* together the myriad of 'personal religions' which make up *alt.pagan* is not presence. Instead these individual practitioners are able to form a virtual community because of the affective sentiment which is perceived by them to be produced by the ritualized imagination. The ritualized imagination — *the sanctification not of the content of specific creative acts, but of the act of creation itself* — phenomenologically produces 'energy.' 'Energy' is an ideal religious strategy for the middle class urban segments of society who have become disenchanted with mainstream consumerism, traditional religious faith, scientific reductionism, and who are skeptical of alternatives such as fundamentalism and political ideologies which are seen as overtly authoritarian. Neo-Paganism is a religion for its 'cultured despisers.' The notion of energy is a strategy by which modern urbanites can experience a telos-generating absolute without actually 'believing' in anything.

Beyond accessibility and historical accident, this 'modern day nature religion' flourishes in virtual space because neo-Pagans are able to employ strategies of ritual over the internet. This ability to ritualize in cyberspace depends on their religious strategies, which are contingent not on 'presence,' but rather on the affective sentiment of 'energy.' Neo-Paganism only makes sense when studied in relation to this humanly generated religious sentiment. One can not understand neo-Paganism if one attempts to reduce it to its linguistic elements. One cannot simply read the neo-Pagan myth, in Geertz's terms, over the native's shoulder (Geertz 1973: 452-453), because in this instance the 'natives' do not even believe their own myth. Only by moving beyond this linguistic reduction, beyond the notions that human acts are the reflections of narration and that people are simply symbol users, can we come to understand that society is created and manipulated on non-linguistic as well as linguistic levels. Only by concentrating on the non-linguistic 'fiction' of 'energy' can one understand how neo-Pagans identify themselves, how they differentiate themselves from other groups and how these 'modern day nature worshippers' are able to imagine a virtual religious community.

## Notes:

1. "Frequently Asked Questions for alt.pagan," Susan Harwood Kaczmarczik, Br'an Arthur Davis-Howe, T.O. Radzykewycz, Ailsa N.T. Murphy, Celila Henningsson. First version completed 25 January 1993. Hereafter sited as the FAQ. Frequently Asked Questions available by anonymous FTP from <ftp.cc.utexas.edu> (128.83.186.19), in the directory /pub/amadeus.

2. In a Usenet newsgroup if someone responds to a post, a "thread" or conversation develops.

3. A "user" is any person who reads or posts a message on a newsgroup.

4. Information in this paper was collected through personal correspondence and through a series of questionnaires. Because there is still a prejudice against neo-Paganism I will either change names of the respondents or leave them anonymous.

5. A "poster" is any person who writes a message on the newsgroup. A "poster" is differentiated from a "lurker," who is a person who only reads the newsgroup.

6. *Covenant of the Goddess: Information Packet for the Parliament of the World's Religions*. Berkeley 1993. Hereafter referred to as COG.

7. I use myth *not* in a pejorative sense to describe ignorant lies or falsehoods but as "a story that is sacred to and shared by a group who find their most important meanings in it." Doniger 1988: 27. This idea of the neo-Pagan Myth is put forth by Adler 1986.

8. Many will mention Margaret Murray's book *Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, which popularized the idea that Wicca is the revival of a Pre-Christian religion. Some will point to G. Leland, and his descriptions of a surviving Dianic religion in Italy (Leland 1892). Many will mention Gerald B. Gardner, a retired British civil servant who supposedly was initiated into a surviving Coven in 1939. He published these experiences, after the repeal of the Witchcraft act in 1951, as *Witchcraft Today* and *The Meaning of Witchcraft*. (Gardner 1955; Gardner 1959). Others speak about Doreen Valiente, Justine Glass, Patricia Crowther, Janet and Stewart Farrar, Raymond Buckland, Bonewits. Others point to scholarship, the matriarchal theories of Engels, the British folklorists and even Eliade's *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*.

9. The 'myth' that all religiosity is based upon a perceived sentiment that accompanies creative acts is the product of a double historical misrecognition. The first act of misrecognition occurs between neo-Pagans and the Theosophist movement. Theosophy was in full force in the late 19th century and its practices crystallized into the strategy 'personal religions.' The second act of historical misrecognition occurs between the Theosophists and ancient India. While the theosophists believed that they were translating ancient Eastern wisdom into Western practices, in fact they were reinscribing a form of religiosity which emerged in Europe during the Romantic period. Hence, the 'energy' of personal religion can be traced back to Romantic writers such as Schlegel who carved out a niche for 'religion' based on aesthetics, rather than the rationalism and ethics privileged by the Enlightenment.

10. NROOGD had its beginnings in 1967 and was "an assemblage of natural anarchists, bootstrap witches and alienated intelligentsia" (Kelly 1972). They took their name from the original nineteenth-century Order of the Golden Dawn, but added New Reformed Orthodox "because we aren't the old one" (Kelly 1974). NROOGD saw itself as an entirely self-created tradition; it claimed no lineage. In 1976 they had public sabbat festivals to which as many as two hundred people attended. Fourteen covens functioned in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1967 to 1977, at which time the organization dissolved.

11. "Almost every magical-religious ritual known performs the following acts: emotion is aroused, increased, built to a peak. A *target* is imaged and a goal made clear. The emotional energy is focused, aimed and fired at this goal. Then there is a follow-through, this encourages any lingering energy to flow away and provides a safe let down" (Bonewits 1979: 175).

12. The origins of this modern myth are apparent in Ferdinand Julius Tönnies' dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) (Tönnies 1957). Community, for Tönnies, embodies natural will and is maintained by face-to-face interaction and a sense of solidarity governed by traditional rules. Society, however, is a more complex entity reflecting rational will and characterized by indirect and impersonal interhuman relations motivated by self-interest. Tönnies believed that many of the

problems with modern society stemmed from this loss of *Gemeinschaft* (c.f. Homans 1989).

13. The 'signal to noise' ratio is the relation between communication that is loosely connected to the topic of the newsgroup and posts that are completely irrelevant to the topic.

14. John Winston embodies a phenomenon on the 'net known as a 'spewer.' A spewer is someone who assumes their particular concern is of such importance that everyone else should be forced to read it, and therefore continually posts the same information.

15. A is a Unix program through which particular threads, or a particular person's posting can be deleted from an individual's newsgroup readings. This practice is frowned upon, but is used extensively on postings that stray far from the intended purpose of a newsgroup. For example, if one wanted to killfile the thread "Does God love You," one could have this thread automatically erased from one's account for thirty days.

16. *Circle Network News* 1993. Mt. Horeb. Wisconsin. 15 (3).  
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