

A Qualitative Study of the Self in New Age Spirituality Culture

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How does a modern person express spirituality? This study, which includes participant observations and semi-structured interviews of representative groups and individuals, examines a particular concept of self in the practice of an alternative quest (alternative to organized religion) for a culture of spirituality. My analysis will explain how participation in the alternative culture known as “New Age” aligns with an individual concept of self in the context of differing global traditions, religions, and beliefs. The central issue that I will address will be the dynamic of the concept of self in the context of the group in the alternative culture. I will also address the questions of discontent with mainstream society among the subjects of this study, and the forms of spirituality that participation in New Age practices provides.

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Introduction

It is not surprising that a New Age movement in spirituality has arisen in a time when previously isolated and separate world religions experience modern crises in meaning (Heelas, 1996; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Hanegraaff, 2000). In modern times, a scientific and rationalistic worldview and competing metaphysical perspectives have challenged traditional religions. Coupled with the effects of globalism, where all religions, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Judeo-Christian and various forms of paganism exist in closer proximity to each other than ever before, the challenge of modernity to traditional religion has resulted in a formation of groups of individuals who find their identity in a spirituality that has emerged from a synthesis of traditional religions and practices. Emile Durkheim argues that Enlightenment values such as equality, freedom, and the inviolable rights of the individual, which form the ideological basis of modern secular society, are additionally aspects of religion (Durkheim, 2008, p. 46). The modern secular person who lives by these values, and who seeks to ground them in a spiritual dimension, enters into a process of a redefinition of his/her sense of self. This person must find an identity which is more than the secular rationality of modernity, but severed from the practices, dogma, and traditions of organized religion.

An alternative form of spirituality should function as religion has always functioned: providing its practitioners with a sense of meaning, cohesion, and solidarity (Durkheim, 2008). Another purpose of religion has been to serve as a vehicle of self transcendence. Within any religious tradition are the signs, symbols, rituals, and other social and psychological mechanisms that allow initiates to further their spiritual, moral, and intellectual development. Religious systems prescribe beliefs and practices that correspond to the common sense notions of reality and prevalent worldviews of a society, and so are accepted as valid and meaningful.

Traditionally a person could enter into one of these systems in an authentic way, and they provided a meaningful spiritual experience. Today, in a scientific age, this can no longer be said of most forms of religion. Indeed, Durkheim asked, “if religion provided moral solidarity in the past, and if religion has been in a continuous state of decline, what will take its place in the future, and what of today?” (Durkheim, 2008, p. 1). The New Age seeker of spirituality attempts to answer Durkheim’s question and discover that which can take the place of religion.

Research Questions:

The questions which I will attempt to answer about the New Age spiritual quest are as follows: what dissatisfaction with mainstream society causes a person to seek alternatives to either secularism or traditional religion? How does the New Age spiritual alternative differ from traditional forms? How do group practices guide and shape the individual quest? What kind of common space is created through group practices? What concept of self does the individual New Ager form as a result of alternative spiritual practices?

The New Age self can be understood as a unique combination of beliefs and practices, chosen from various world religious and folk traditions, synthesized by each individual into a coherent and meaningful whole for her/himself. I will show through interviews how this process has occurred in my research subjects. I will also discuss some contradictions and problems that occur in this redefinition of self in the context of a group. I will use concepts such as 'cultural capital' (Small *et al.*, 2010, p. 18), and the 'ego' (Freud, 1989). By a theoretical extension of these terms into New Age milieu, I will attempt to explain some of the group dynamics that revolve around how the New Age self is presented within the group. This will require the introduction of two terms that I have designated as 'spiritual capital' and the 'spiritual ego'.

Why does anyone require a new belief system? Many people stay within the confines of more traditional forms of religion, while others become atheists or agnostics. Some theorists have proposed that religious fundamentalism is mainly a response to the special problems of modernity, such as anomie and other types of social dislocations (Emerson & Hartman, 2006, p. 130). This explanation has also been applied to New Age spirituality, that it is a compensation for a social need unaddressed in modern society. While this idea has some merit, it is too general to account for all of the New Age phenomena I have observed. In order to formulate a more complete explanation, I will consider how New Age forms of spirituality may be a response to a specific aspect of modern life: the perception by some individuals of what they consider to be a toxic mainstream society, and their resulting discomfort within it. They perceive an environmental crisis that precipitates the need to align oneself, or one's group, with an agenda of environmental protection and preservation. In short, New Age spirituality, which includes beliefs and practices emphasizing ecological sustainability, provides for its practitioners an alternative way to relate to the natural world. I will further argue that, because of its experimental nature, and its tendency to break with traditional forms of spirituality and the status quo, New Age spirituality is a form of cultural anarchy.

Methods

To answer the questions above I have conducted a grounded theory, qualitative research study of contemporary forms of spirituality culture. The groups and individuals I have chosen to observe and interview are generally representative of this culture. My study limits itself to only a small segment of modern alternative spirituality. The examples that I have selected for analysis include two shamanistic groups: a Native American Church Medicine group and a Western oriented sweat lodge group; two professional Tarot card (occult) practitioners; and two artists who are

New Age, with one being a Wiccan, the latter category being an increasingly popular form of modern pagan spirituality which has been in vogue, especially among young women, during the past fifteen to twenty years.

The ethnographic data I will present to define and characterize this phenomena are the result of participant observations I conducted of the two shamanistic groups during the summers from 2010 to 2012. The sweat lodge groups were composed of 8 to 20 people, with about two thirds male, while the medicine groups had an average of about 35 participants and were usually equal in terms of gender. I also conducted 7 recorded, semistructured interviews, each approximately one hour in length. Three of these were done with members of the sweat and medicine groups, 2 were with Tarot readers, one with an artist, and one with a Wiccan-artist. Interview data collected from my informants, who are identified below by pseudonyms, will be used to address several related issues and themes which emerged from both my observations and interviews.

My Entrance into the New Age

I will begin the analysis of my ethnographic data with an explanation of how I became involved with the groups in which I observed and participated. The particular factors which eventually led to my involvement with the medicine and sweat lodge groups precipitated out of a theoretical interest in shamanistic spirituality and New Age oriented beliefs and practices. In 2009 I was teaching psychology courses at a Pittsburgh university and working as a therapist/counselor. My field naturally led me to be interested in questions of personal identity, self-hood, and the ego in the context of modern times. I had also read Carlos Castaneda (“Teachings of Don Juan: a Yaqui Indian Sorcerer,” 1965; and a “Separate Reality” 1968), scientists such as Carl Sagan

("Cosmos," 1980) and Fritjof Capra ("The Tao of Physics," 1982), as well as books by Carl Jung and Alan Watts, and had become interested in the adoption of shamanistic culture as a path to spirituality by European-Americans. Of course, I had met a number of people with an interest in the latter; these authors are popular, as is the subject of Native American spiritual practices. However, at this time I had a friend who introduced me to a group which conducted Native American ceremonies under the guidance of a Native American shaman. This group immediately interested me because it gave me an opportunity to observe and experience some of the things that I had been reading about, without traveling outside of the Pittsburgh area. After joining in the ceremonies of this group, I also came into contact with the man who conducts sweat lodge ceremonies with another group, which also attracted individuals interested in a search for spirituality outside of the conventional western context. In time, my interest in the subject grew beyond the psychological issues of the search for and development of the individual self in the context of these "New Age" (as they are often labeled both popularly and by scholars: Heelas, 1996; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Hanegraaff, 2000; Shimazono, 1999; Hedlund-de Witt, 2011) groups and ideas, to include an interest in the sociology of such groups.

Since 2010 I have been attending both these events, mainly during the summers, from June through September. Through talking with other participants it became clear that a similar causal chain of events had also brought them to these ceremonies: reading the same books that I had read, having a similar interest in participating in shamanistic practices, and an invitation from a friend to an event. Basically the same process led me to participate in Tarot reading experiences. Reading about the occult generated an initial interest, followed by a friend's recommendation of a particular Tarot practitioner as being "good," whom I then went to see.

Because I was unable to interview all of the members of the medicine and sweat lodge groups, I cannot provide a comprehensive report of how they actually came to be in their respective groups. But it is likely that their getting in narrative is similar to my own (i.e. from reading certain spiritual books from which an interest was cultivated, and to put into practice some of the ideas that one had merely read about; and being subsequently alerted to the existence of these opportunities through being invited by a friend). The ceremonies are not advertised or announced in any public venue, but are strictly learned of through word of mouth—i.e. through networks of friends. I am able to provide in this study the actual sequence of steps that my interview subjects have taken on the way to finding their own particular spiritual beliefs and practices.

The members of these groups have their own explanations of how they got into their particular practices. A prominent discourse that persists within New Age groups, and that purports to explain why someone finds oneself in a ceremonial situation like the ones I am discussing in this study, has to do with their being invited. However, this invitation comes not merely from a personal contact, but rather it is understood by many in the group as well as the shaman, who has spoken about this matter explicitly, that one is there because they are 'supposed' to be there. In other words, one is in the ceremony due to some sort of supernatural intervention on one's behalf, that they have been somehow chosen to be there by some unseen process, because they need to be there. According to one of my informants, “there are no accidents, and you have to sort of look at well, 'why am I here?', and there will be a reason that you're needing to connect with in terms of your own growth” (from an interview with Charlie, a Tarot practitioner). Also operating within this social cosmology is the notion of a 'group-synchronicity' occurring, of a spiritual group having been preformed in some way, and destined to come

together at a particular moment in time, perhaps already having done so during a previous existence. Charlie's comments allude to these beliefs:

it's not random [a group coming together]. It's not something that just happens, they will choose, it's to a great extent we've all agreed to what we're going to work on that night, people who are going to come [...] we've agreed where we're going to sit already, and the person who's sitting across from us always has a message for us, and so you need to pay particular attention to what they're bringing into the group.

This notion, that members chooses the particular groups they enter into, and with whom they interact *subconsciously*—or perhaps super-consciously—ahead of time, implies indirectly that every person in the group is indispensable for each of the others. As Charlie argues, “they have contributed something to that group just by their energy being there.” This idea is relevant to the New Age notion of holism to which I will return to in more depth shortly.

One aspect of the concept of the New Age spiritual seeker in my study, therefore, is that she/he is separated from the mainstream, from conventional society, by being subject to, and chosen by supranatural forces that act on the subconscious level. The self, then, is not just the individual, but belongs to a spiritualized whole, an entity quite different from a religion or a nation or a family or a neighborhood community.

Created Spaces

The medicine and sweat lodge groups involve people who have deliberately sought to create new spaces in which to act out their collectively held beliefs and values, which in this case include forms of environmentalism that involve metaphysical and spiritual conceptions. In terms

of its racial composition the sweat lodge groups varied. Members were predominately white, perhaps due to regional factors: the ceremonies occurred in rural northwestern Pennsylvania. Occasionally African American, Latino, and/or native persons also attended. The shaman for the medicine ceremony was a Native American, and in these groups the attendees were usually half Native Americans and half white people. The sweat lodge groups were composed of from 8 to 20 people, with about two thirds male, while the medicine groups had an average of about 35 participants and were usually equal in terms of gender. The socio-economic background of participants for both groups is fairly horizontal, and is predominately middle class from what I could observe, though I have no firm data on this measure, other than from the three participants that I interviewed.

The ceremony at the sweat lodge consists of a sauna-like (for want of a better example) atmosphere, where hot stones are brought into the one-room lodge, and a fire is lit outside. The night's activities consist of joining hands for prayer, meditation, a sharing of thoughts and ideas, sharing food, singing, playing instruments—the shaman plays the harp. These activities are conducted in a ceremonial atmosphere.

The medicine lodge takes longer and is more structured. That shaman talks more and leads rounds of singing which follow each round of eating peyote cactus. The shaman leads meditation and directs the speaking of members of the group. After the night of fasting, a ceremonial meal of berries, corn, and buffalo meat is eaten together. There is a sharing of thoughts and concerns which resembles a modern therapy session.

The ceremonies provide a setting for social interactions—the shared ceremonial meals and the use of peyote, group singing and playing of ceremonial music, which taken as a whole are absent from mainstream life. The spaces created are thus meeting places for people who share

similar values and goals, which they may have held separately beforehand, for instance through reading the same spiritual books. But also these places further serve as spaces in which a collective identity (Melucci, 1995; Polletta et. al., 2001) is more completely formed, and is reinforced by collective practices. The powerful identity forming effects that new cultural spaces create between members of a social group can be observed in feminist marches for example, such as the World March for Women (WMW) which deliberately transgresses boundaries set up by the state in order to create new spaces in which identity formation can take place (Dufour & Giraud, 2007, pp. 1162).

Gary Alan Fine uses the term 'idioculture' to describe this sort of group phenomenon. He defines idioculture as “a group with a unique and distinctive culture that consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serves as the basis of further interaction” (Fine, 1987, p. 125). For example, I found among the people I observed and interviewed a strong ideological alignment in terms of environmental beliefs. All believed that efforts should be made to protect wild species, and to preserve natural habitats against what they unanimously agree are the damaging influences of human development and pollution. But in addition to the unifying effects of commonly held beliefs, shared practices occurring within these spaces further consolidated the group and its collective identity. In this way spiritual practices are shaping the New Age sense of self.

The physical space of the ceremonial meeting place, a space away from mainstream life and different from it in appearance and in the activities performed therein, thus integrates the individual self into the group identity. Ideas and convictions previously held, become shared

beliefs. The self thus comes to identify with a new, concrete entity, a new group of people, different from the environment in which the individual grew up in, works in, and lives daily life in, different from the conventional social experience. This involves a particular way of inhabiting space, and an embodiment of a particular set of values enacted in that space. This phenomenon may be thought of as a New Age or 'spiritual habitus' (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 72), which is a lived experience of this sort of self.

An interesting example of how this spiritual embodiment and set of values manifested in the ceremonial space and became resolved involves the way in which one of my group informants, Jack, managed himself while sitting during the medicine ceremony:

I wasn't sure if the chair I brought was actually going to help me sit. It was actually worse, having to sit on this clunky machine, like toxic chair I brought. It was like, I felt like a machine. I was like trapped in it [...] it shows you that even all the great technology and inventions that we create, they still don't, they're nothing like the natural way to sit. Like if you know how to sit properly, and your back's strong, that's better than anything. That's what I need to work on.

As a result of this experience Jack claimed to have had a realization about the importance of not relying too heavily upon technology for achieving one's life goals. Another informant (Michael) who belongs to the sweat and medicine groups, expressed a similar ideal. Speaking about the effects of technology, he argued that though “there are some good things about technology that humans bring [into the world], if it's harmful to the environment or to other people or to animals or to any life, then it shouldn't exist.”

Indeed there is the general perception among my study subjects that the outside world, aside from being a dangerous place that is wrought by violence and ignorance, is increasingly becoming polluted and damaged by among other things global warming, Marcellus shale

fracking, and genetic modification of organisms, all of which are resulting in dire circumstances such as “colony collapse syndrome,” in which mass numbers of bee hives are dying off in Europe and the Americas. The following comment by Jack is a typical example of this, in which he related to me some of the concerns he has about living in what he considers to be a toxic and sick mainstream world:

I'm still surrounded by technology everywhere I go, and like this constant struggle between primitive ancient life, and this post-modern sick society we live in. We live in this capitalistic driven society that has no sympathy for our sensitive nature you know. There's pollution everywhere. We're enveloped in it, all this toxicity, it's just taken over our lives.

Due to these perceptions, there is the general desire to escape into what are believed to be safe and clean sanctuaries, such as the ceremonial groups. Within these ceremonial spaces, members hold beliefs that they are being purified and protected by participating in particular rituals. For example, this is how Jack described the land upon which the ceremonies take place:

There are beautiful gardens there, and ah things are growing, there's no violence there. It made me feel good because it gave me hope that there's still people out there who are willing to live in harmony with the land, and there's good people out there, you know, that want to help, want to heal other people, and are willing to allow other people to go in there and heal themselves.

By comparing what he considers to be natural versus mainstream goals, he came to the resolve that:

The purpose [in life] for me is remaining in the nature world, going further into it, and hopefully finding people what want to do that too. And sharing experiences with those people, and just living a happy life like that. As opposed to trying to get rich and you know, have power over other people, getting famous. I don't really care about that anymore.

In addition to fleeing into safe havens, there are also New Age goals that demand a change in the ways in which people interact with their environment. For example, one of my artist informants, Sayid, alludes to the need for a change in how modern people understand their connection with the natural world. Sayid sees his spiritual quest as solitary, as a re-connecting with nature. His concept of self thus involves the practice of art and in a return to nature from the modern world. Speaking of society he contends that, “we have to change. That's not a question anymore.” He argues that the reason for our estrangement from the rest of nature is:

because we've forgotten how to speak to it, you know, in our daily life that language is even more lost [...] We've forgotten how to survive without being how we are, making all of these things.

He also suggested that being spiritual includes appreciating life, and appreciating nature, asking, “would you like your kids to ever see birds fly?” Placing it within the context of environmental goals, Sayid stated that being New Age means letting go of unsustainable things and farming cleanly: “People who are figuring out how to produce food in clean ways, and filter water, or people who are like farmers are even like New Age movement people.” For Sayid being New Age means discovering “what are new ways to live, what are new ways to think,” and that we as a species must be “moving forward into the future” so that we can confront “the different conflicts that the earth is facing now, and that we are facing as a species.”

Charlie’s comments about the meaning of the New Age align with Sayid's. He stated that it “is the shift from the manipulation of physical forces into an exploration of spiritual forces.”

He went on to define the New Age in terms of ecological goals, suggesting that:

A global warming planet is not compatible with the competitive capitalist system that we function under, and we are going to have to go much more to a group and global consciousness, and a sharing rather than a competitive pattern. All of that is energy that is part of what would be the New Age.

Participating in sweat lodge and medicine ceremonial practices has also led participants to want to bring their shared understandings into their daily lives. Values concerning ecological awareness are routinely emphasized within the medicine teachings, and can be internalized by members as part of their worldview, as Michael's comments would seem to indicate:

I would like to see this world become a healthier place, like a place that is more natural [...] I would like to be part of that change that, you know, [of] converting the world into a more natural environment.

To summarize, the people whom I observed and interviewed more or less agreed that the mainstream world is ecologically imperiled, and that changes need to happen which include shielding oneself from what are believed to be the toxic effects of pollution, as well as some other negative aspects of capitalism. These goals include the desire to escape into healthy environments, such as the ceremonial spaces mentioned above, in order to reestablish 'harmonious' connections with the natural world that have been lost or destroyed by modern ways of living. The concept of the self thus created in the ceremonial space is that of an individual who finds safety from the perils of modernity in the purifying aspects of the ceremonial group. The self that emerges from New Age beliefs turns from the everyday world to a longed-for purified nature.

Religion and Secularism

However, I will now provide a brief review of New Age culture in order to place this phenomenon in the proper historical context. In part the purpose of the following discussion is to reveal how this form of spirituality differs from organized religious belief and practice. In particular, this section addresses why New Age spirituality occurs as a response to modernity, to

science, and to environmental problems. This contrasts with the manner in which Western organized religions such as Christianity cope with science and modernity.

Although New Age spirituality can be considered a contemporary counter-cultural phenomenon, it is rooted in the political and cultural developments from an earlier era. The consequences of the 18th century Enlightenment, and the political upheavals of the 18th and 19th century, the rise of the secular state and the furthering of the scientific revolution, created new paradigms for society in the West (Markoff, 1996). Freed from the bonds of feudal obligations and laws, which kept the individual in a rigid place in the social structure, and the domination of a state religion, people became both adrift without the guidance of old authorities, and at the same time free to look for new and more satisfying sources for spiritual enlightenment. Interest grew in Orientalism in the West, (to be observed in the writings of philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, and Ralph Waldo Emerson), and there occurred a liberation of certain Western beliefs and practices which were until this time largely hidden. Practices involving the use of Tarot, astrology, divination, herbalism, and folk healing had been condemned by church and state as heretical, and were severely repressed, often punishable by death. But beginning in the early 19th century these practices became more widely known and disseminated into secular society. Influential books such as “Transcendental Magic” by the French mystic Eliphas Levi, and later on the magical writings of H. P. Blavatsky and Henry Olcott, popularized ideas and practices that were in earlier centuries highly esoteric, and largely contained within secret societies (Morrison, 2007, p.7). There also emerged in the later half of the 19th century occult organizations such as “The Golden Dawn Society,” the “Theosophical Society,” as well as other “spiritualist” groups which were in part developments out of such secret societies as the Freemasons and Rosicrucians (Starr, 2006, p. 88). Within modern spiritualism this occult

knowledge and behavior became openly public and widely practiced, thus taking its place within the domain of popular culture.

What has been called New Age spirituality is essentially a spiritual space that came to exist in the wake of the division that occurred between the secular and the religious. Mainstream religion remained a potent social force, but it no longer held a total monopoly on expressions of spirituality and metaphysics as in earlier periods. Within the spiritual vacuum of the secular world, split off as it was from religion, new forms of belief emerged, amenable towards the Enlightenment ideals of scientific rationalism and universalism. New Age spiritual culture then can be considered as one of the ideological offspring of the Enlightenment, infused as it is with notions of universal human rights, fraternity, and equality, in addition to its being scientifically oriented. Evidence of its Enlightenment heritage and cosmopolitanism can be observed in the mission statement of a prominent spiritual organization, the American Theosophical Society. From as early as 1915 it had printed on the back of each issue of its publication, *Theosophical Quarterly*, a message which speaks to the inclusiveness and intentions of New Age philosophy: “To all men and women of whatever caste, creed, race, or religious belief, who aim at the fostering of peace, gentleness and unselfish regard for one another, and the acquisition of such knowledge of men and nature as shall tend to the elevation and advancement of the human race, it sends most friendly greeting and freely offers its services” (Morrison, 2007, p. 12).

With reference to the importance of the self and its agency, there exist clear distinctions between New Age spirituality and traditional organized religion. For example, monotheistic religion is generally a situation in which the individual is subordinated to an external authority in the form of a church, priest, and/or god of some sort (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). By contrast New Age spirituality places an emphasis upon self-realization (Heelas, 2005; Hedlund-deWitt,

2011). Self-realization is a characteristic goal of humanism and secularism. Sociologist Matthew Wood explores this hypothesis by asking, to what degree does the secularization of modern society create the conditions for a shift from external to self authority within religions (Wood, 2009)? His study found that about 74% of the people involved in a 'holistic milieu' used to attend church but no longer do so. The assumption by many sociologists (he cites Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; and Dobbelaere, 2002) is that the shift from religion to other forms of spirituality is the result of a process of secularization, or what he explains is a general “de-churching” of modern society.

Max Weber argues that, in addition to producing new conceptions of a sovereign self, the post-Enlightenment legacy of intellectualization and rationalization, which informs a scientifically oriented way of life, has also emptied the world of its divine character, dispelling all of the mysteries and magical forces, and spiritual and ethical meanings once provided for by religion (Weber, 1958). For many the New Age movement offers the possibility for a spiritual re-enchantment of the modern world (Morrison, 2007, p. 3).

This culture wide phenomenon of de-churching also produces a characteristic shift towards self authority within traditional religious groups Wood argues (2009). For instance, one researcher Wood cites (Yip, 2004) looked at non-heterosexual Christians, and found that within their sense of a Christian identity were imbedded notions of self assertion, present in the form of contestations regarding sexuality (Wood, 2009, p. 243). There are also new individual-oriented versions of Christianity, in which “authority has—in measure—shifted from a theistic location to that which lies with the self” notes Heelas (1996, p. 164).

Wood finds that simply being de-socialized from one's church upbringing did not necessarily result in a re-socialization into a New Age form of spirituality. Rather, by remaining

involved with authorities in a religious field, de-churched individuals underwent only a partial secularization (Wood, 2009, p. 245). Consequently they remained in contact with a religious field that included many varieties of New Age spiritual authorities: shaman, occult group leaders, and teachers of yoga, tai chi, Reiki, etc. But these self-motivated participants did not always 'play by the rules' of any particular authority. In other words, these individuals continued to practice a quasi-religious spirituality, but were not bound by any one tradition's set of beliefs and practices. Rather the individual became immersed in what Wood calls a "religious field" which is a network of individuals involved with various practices, deriving from different religious and spiritual traditions (Wood, 2009, p. 241). This field contains within it a multiplicity of teachers in whom religious authority is invested. Since there is no over-arching or central authority as there is within monotheistic religions, individuals are permitted to align themselves with whatever beliefs and practices they find commensurable with their developing sense of self. A new idiosyncratic religion is assembled from among various sources which in themselves may have been historically incompatible. The diffusion of available forms, called by Wood "nonformative elements of the religious field," allows an individual to select and emphasize those beliefs and practices which harmonize with their personal goals, thus freeing them from the rules of any one system (Wood, 2009). Those who did not remain in contact with any of the authorities within a religious field, it is assumed, became more fully secularized, and would be less likely to be involved with New Age spirituality according to this hypothesis.

Becoming New Age/ Convergent Spiritual Paths

I have sought to extend these suggestive findings by using in-depth personal interviews. My interview data generally supports Matthew Wood's findings presented above. All of my

interview subjects were raised as members of a monotheistic religion, and had attended church as children, two of them (Claire and Jack) doing so into young adulthood. For example both of my Tarot informants were raised as Christians: one a Quaker (Claire), while the other had been exposed to Christian science (Charlie), prior to their conversions into atheism, which lasted for a brief period during their early twenties, and was then followed by their interests in New Age spirituality. My Wiccan informant, Kate, was raised as a Protestant Christian, however she has recently given up this religious faith. Speaking about her conversion period which occurred in early adolescence, Kate mentioned that “for a long time I was just angry at God.” She went on to discuss why, and explained what some of the particular catalysts were that effected her change in belief systems:

I remember like I was in 8th grade listening to the whole Greek mythology thing in English class and going, “no, you're Christian, you're not supposed to believe in this,” and kind of self-denying my actual belief system, and always being fascinated by the Greek gods, and what if it is actually true, and “no, it can't be true,” but actually believing in it.

For Kate the “non-formative religious field” described by Matthew Wood (2009) consisted of learning about pagan mythology through books and classroom experiences. By age 19, it would seem that she has not completely shed the religious values and identity she incorporated during her childhood, and it was clear that she still retained some aspects of her Christian belief system. The following statements exhibit her position of liminality with regard to her exiting the Christian religion, and entering into the Wiccan, and in which she is still in the process of forming her spiritual identity:

A lot of my beliefs are so basic Christian, quote unquote Christian beliefs where like I follow a similar moral basis [...] but there are other beliefs that I've had for years that I always, like I said, I denied them to myself, and then started kind of practicing [Wicca] but not really, and then found that it [Wiccan rituals] worked.

Kate's story exhibits what may be a common aspect of an alternative or New Age expression of spirituality, and one which highlights the synthetic processes described above: that being New Age involves a hybridization of more than one religious tradition, in this case for Kate both Christian and pagan beliefs and practices becoming combined:

for me, if I do ritualistic beliefs they're very earth based, I find myself attached to things like herbs and crystals, and I find that the thing I like a lot about Wicca is it's basically prayer. It's about sending energy towards whatever higher being, towards intentions saying, "I would really like this to happen. It's ok if it doesn't, but please help me out."

The artist Sayid was raised as a Catholic in Chile. However, after this early experience of monotheism, which he rejected in his early teen years, he went through a period of experimentation with alternative lifestyles. Similar to the paths taken by Charlie and Claire, it was at this time that Sayid experimented with atheism and agnosticism: "I became like a real skeptic," and this "skepticism led me in this path of really probing into things that I had heard about." This probing, he explained, was "kind of like testing things," and involved an exploration of "religion and magic." For example he discussed his involvement with astrology, and how he questioned its validity:

You draw a connection between celestial bodies and the movement of the stars to human behaviors and relationships and you're making a huge leap of faith right there! [...] But it's interesting to me how much is interpretation and suggestion versus reality.

Speaking further about astrology and what it means to him, Sayid said that "amazingly it works, in a strange way that it does give people meaning, and it does manage to sustain people's life and belief." Here he suggest that this belief system is useful for people, insofar as it provides them with useful meanings with which to interpret their life events, while seeming to continue his skepticism towards it. But then he attempts to answer for astrology's cosmological validity

within the context of a modern scientific perspective. For example Sayid discusses how astronomy grew out of the more ancient practice of astrology, and seems to maintain a certain respect for this belief system, explaining moreover how it is connected to nature:

The historical connection that astrology, you know that the science of looking at the stars before it was even a science [...] a philosophy of looking at the stars was a practice of deep contemplation of nature, none other than nature. The vast landscape of our surroundings, and then the infinite drapery above, and you, that's nature at it's best.

Ultimately this experimental phase led him to his art practices. He came to the U.S. to go to school, enrolling at Carnegie Mellon University. There he encountered three intersecting “worlds of importance,” he stated, “who were a certain kind of cross between art and science and mysticism.” Providing a discourse that is similar to Kate's, Sayid also seems to have passed through a liminal phase of experimenting with his spiritual sense of selfhood: “I found myself in the crossroads of worlds,” a place in which he was developing his alternative form of spirituality, that for him grew out of his art practice: “I guess the practice came first and then the belief.” At this time Sayid recalls that “I had got a sort of confirmation of my faith, my lost faith that I regained.” Sayid explained that after his period of skepticism (a skepticism that has lessened but that has not completely ended for him) which continued into his college years, he came back to the spiritually informed perspective he held during his childhood, but that had been lost while getting out of his Christian religion, and the atheism which followed. His early spiritual experiences involved being outside in nature, but also included drawing at a young age, “now I consider drawing a very important part of my spiritual practice.” What his “faith” amounts to currently, Sayid defined simply as “I mean just the belief in some kind of greater thing, you know, behind the physical world.”

The massage therapist who participated in the medicine and sweat lodge groups was raised as a Methodist Christian, and also moved through a period of agnosticism until settling into an animistic belief system based on indigenous shamanism. His transition also involved secular matters, that included a disillusionment with conventional societal goals of capital accumulation, feelings of anomie, that resulted in a change in his life's course in terms of career choice. He discarded his life as an accountant during his late twenties in order to enroll in massage therapy school, and to pursue an interest in herbalism and folk healing. This transformation had occurred near the time at which he had participated in a shamanistic medicinal ceremony in Peru.

Finally the computer programmer was raised as orthodox Jewish. Both his brother and sister have entered into serious religious study, and his brother is on track to become a rabbi. While Jack has largely moved away from a primarily monotheistic belief system, he now pursues interests in both shamanism and Western occult beliefs and practices, yet retains some feelings of allegiance with his Jewish heritage. He continues to celebrate Jewish holidays for instance, and is interested in discussing Jewish spiritual culture, though he contends that he does not believe in a patriarchal God of any sort, as it is depicted in the Jewish Torah or Christian Bible.

The New Age Self

At this point it is useful to provide some additional theories and conceptions of the self as they are understood within contemporary New Age culture. In their book “Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality,” sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead have advanced what they have termed the “subjective thesis,” as a way to conceptualize and characterize New Age spirituality (2005, pp. 9-10). They define “subjective thesis” as the

individual's turn away from a life lived in terms of external or objective roles, duties, and obligations, and from external forms of authority such as traditional religion, to a life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 2). This entails a shift in thinking of oneself as belonging to an established and 'given' order of things which is transmitted from the past “but flows forward into the future from a higher, transcendent, collective supra-self [which] orders people's primary sources of significance” (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005,p. 3). Within the subjective thesis perspective, self authority is emphasized over an external authority, such as those that exist in a feudal class system or religious caste, in which a higher authority is maintained that is greater than the individual. For example, within the modern capitalist state workers must discipline themselves to the priorities of their employers and making a profit, which is emphasized over self-worth and personal happiness. Within these external authoritarian social systems, virtuous notions of 'the good life' are often linked through a sacrificing of the self to this higher social order, for example as a soldier's sacrifice to military objectives, or a priests' to their religion. However, within a new spiritual paradigm, notions of the good life are shifted into an exploration of one's own states of consciousness, mind, emotions, passions, dreams, inner experiences, and feelings. Heelas and Woodhead argue that irreconcilable differences exist between what they are calling a 'life-as religion' and a 'subjective-life spirituality'. This is because each system sacralizes itself, and so the two are necessarily at odds with one another, as the demands of one curtail those of the other (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 5).

Part of the project of self exploration, which is endemic to New Age spirituality, involves an individual constructing his or her own particular set of beliefs and practices from among a pantheon of available religious options. This amalgamating process of self-spirituality is very

much evident in my Tarot informants. One may ask, how is what they are doing different from what Gypsy Tarot readers have done in the past, and may still do in traditional settings? In forming their spiritual identities my Tarot reading informants have drawn from a variety of religious perspectives: an Eastern perspective that is based in Taoism and Buddhism that includes notions of the self and the desire to diminish it; a Hindu perspective which involves notions of reincarnation, karma, and a holistic conception of the self; a Western perspective that includes Tarot reading, and late 19th to early 20th century occult beliefs and practices; a near eastern Judaic perspective involving the “Kabbala” sacred text; as well as that of modern science. All of these once separate metaphysical orientations have been synthesized by these individuals into a single and meaningful whole that is in accord with their modern sense of themselves.

The process of adopting an amalgamation of diverse beliefs and practices can be seen in the story of how the Tarot card readers created their spiritual niche. It began, they related, with hitchhiking, and outdoor experiences involving numerous biking trips across Europe during the early 1970s. These excursions led to their living in Italy for six months, and making jewelry as part of an art practice. This couple, then, were living an alternative lifestyle when their quest for spirituality began. At one point along their cultural exploration, the couple was exposed to Western spiritualism in which one of my informant's ideology of atheism was “shaken at its roots” because of something that happened during a Ouija board experience. A search for spirituality started, and after reading the “I 'Ching,” the Taoist “Book of Changes,” that involves practicing forms of meditation and divination, these informants eventually became interested in and started practicing the reading of Tarot cards. This process of discovery and experimentation with various religious practices and traditions demonstrates the eclecticism characteristic of New

Age spirituality. In this case working with the Tarot, which is an occult esoteric practice of Western origins, but practicing it from an Eastern perspective that utilizes Taoist forms of spirituality. During my discussion with these informants they made many references to scientific theories, for example studies of the brain, quantum physics, and something that they referred to as “Blackfoot Physics,” which is a perspective that combines Native American shamanistic beliefs with modern scientific views.

In order to provide the unacquainted reader with a sense of what this practice and belief system is all about, I will briefly describe the process of a Tarot reading. While this is a rather intricate system employing the use of archetypal and mythological symbols and their interpretation, for the purposes of this study I will provide only a simplified description of the practice. The Tarot is basically a deck of 72 cards, each of which having specific images, numbers, letters, and other sorts of symbols arranged in particular patterns. Each card represents some aspect of the human experience, for example love, war, futility, success, and the client is dealt a series of ten cards in what is known as a 'spread'. Each position within the ten card spread involves a certain phase or aspect of a person's life, such as childhood, adulthood, relationships, work, etc. The Tarot reader then discusses the meaning of each card with respect to its position within the spread, and attempts to relate this explanation to the person's past, present, and future life. There are theories of how this practice accomplishes its goals that involve notions of cause and effect, current energy states of the universe in the present moment, and elements of random chance, which makes it similar to other forms of divination such as reading the patterns in tea leaves. But the following statement describes in a very basic way how my Tarot informant Claire understands this practice as a form of divination: “it's just a way to read patterns in this meaningful way, and then translating meaning out of that.”

This informant bases her particular form of divinatory Tarot reading on the “I Ching,” a Taoist practice that involves tossing specially marked sticks, and deriving meaning from the way in which they fall in relation to one another. The pattern of the sticks, or in this case of the cards that are drawn, is interpreted in relation to the person's present life course. This practice also relates to the concept of “synchronicity” (Jung, 1971) a notion which argues that “there are no random events in this universe,” and “if you follow your meaningful coincidences you can start these dialogues and sort of begin a sacred conversation of sorts” (interview with Claire). My informant subscribes to elaborate theories involving quantum probabilities and psychological notions of projection to explain how divination works. Thus she combines the western-based Tarot with a Taoist form of divination, subsuming both under the umbrella of a synthesis of modern scientific particle theory and psychology. One could say that the concept of self under which she is operating involves abandoning her own mainstream culture for a globalism of folk traditions reinterpreted using the language of modern science. She is thus attempting a synthesis of diverse cultures within a modern context.

For the New Age individuals of this study, life is a tool for self knowledge and discovery, and not—as some rationalist, materialist perspectives would have it—merely a meaningless material incarnation, the result of random energetic processes that contain the unintended side effect of sentient life, which is biochemically driven to survive and 'pursue a life' that inherently has no meaning. Within the cosmological scheme of these informants, a priority is placed upon deriving a meaning for every aspect of one's existence:

So our readings are about getting people to begin to listen and observe life, to see self in it so that well, why is this happening? What is it showing me? What is it for? And we have to put those kind of questions on everything we experience, everything that stands out (interview with Charlie).

This passage illustrates a central New Age concept: a belief that nature is always interacting with a person, and helping them to self-actualize. Everything that happens has a meaning that interconnects with everything else. As Charlie declares: “that's the hardest one to get people to see, that everything ultimately, everything is working for you.” In a world that is characterized by social anomie, and an increasing disconnection of humans from the natural environment (Durkheim, 2007, p. 511), many people have a need to believe that they do in fact have a deeper connection with nature than seems immediately apparent, and that there is a pattern and hidden purpose to their life. Hence there may be a need for beliefs that involve a spiritual awakening and re-enchantment of one's relationship to a greater whole that is looking out for them. The sense of cosmological certainty that westerners once derived from their religious beliefs and values, in which they possessed a sense of knowing where they stood morally and socially, has weakened in the modernized world. As Paul Heelas argues, there has been a general decline in the observance of organized religions (Heelas, 1995) which, for many in the modern era, entails a loss of social stability. And having this moral and existential ground suddenly torn out from under them has placed many westerners into a condition of Cartesian doubt (Nietzsche, 1956). With the post-Enlightenment dissolution of the bond between church and state, which for millennia served in the West as a solid ground upon which to rest one's notions of self, the world suddenly became loose of its moorings. Some were liberated, while many demanded an immediate reversal of the new order, and a return to more traditional ways (Appleby, 1993, p. 217). But for others it was more complex than a simple chance for freedom, or a desire to go automatically back to an earlier time of safety and stability. They were also cast adrift, but free and searching for a meaningful understanding of their current places in the world. These were people who sought a new experience of the self. For them the goal involved not a

return to a condition of certainty and stability, to rest again within a comfortable social and spiritual matrix of support; but instead to become more than what they had been in earlier eras, in which expressions of spirituality were strictly bounded by traditional religious systems.

A Holistic Theory of the Self

My informants expressed an expanded notion of the self which can be interpreted as a form of holistic thinking. In practically all esoteric, occult, and gnostic spiritual systems, all of which inform New Age spirituality, there is the over-arching theme of a connection between the human order and cosmic order, which can be expressed by the phrase 'as above, so below.' This concept, also known as holism, can be defined as “an inclusive, meaning-centered, experience-focused paradigm that emphasizes the intrinsic connectedness in life” (Haynes, 2009, p. 55). The philosophy of holism seeks to undo the divide purportedly created by Cartesian dualism between mind and body, the individual and the group, and the artificial and the natural which is believed by theorists such as Simmel and Durkheim to have resulted in the social fragmentation and spiritual deadness characteristic of modernity (Simmel, 2002; Durkheim, 1979). The New Age mission of reconnecting divisions in the world also includes repairing the split which has occurred between the “egoic self” and the “true self” (Haynes, 2009, p. 55). A dualistic perspective characterizes the egoic self, which sees only a world of separate things, including oneself as separated from the rest of the natural world. The true self for a New Ager would then be a non-dualistic, post-Cartesian way of seeing that enables one to re-integrate their experience of existence back into a holistic worldview. Haynes further defines the egoic self, stating that “most meditation theorists view normal wakefulness as suboptimal because the mind is seen as largely outside voluntary control and as continuously creating a largely unrecognized stream of

thoughts, emotions, images, fantasies, and associations” (Haynes, 2009, p. 56). Haynes sees the waking ego as a variety of hypnotic trance and a constriction of awareness. Whereas for him the true self would be a more actualized self, one which is alerted to this condition, and that is engaged in practices that are designed to open up other pathways of consciousness and awareness. These altered states of self, produced via meditation, yoga, or any number of other esoteric practices, opens up a “transcendent dimension” of experience, bringing the individual into harmonious contact with an unseen world argues Haynes (Haynes, 2009, p. 57).

The Tarot practitioners have as their goal the achievement of the holistic self as described by Haynes. One of the most important aspects of their Tarot consulting practice is that of helping their clients to achieve self-realization, which they define as “becoming conscious.” It is their contention that most people in ordinary life are asleep. And so “we are trying to wake them up, to more of the realities of what is present, and particularly what is present in their mind.” Claire explained that:

People have to become more conscious, otherwise they don't know what they are doing. Plus from our perspective if you're not conscious, then you are not aware that you are projecting.

By “projecting” Claire means that humans project or 'co-create' their realities, which involves the idea that people are constantly 'manifesting' the quality of their life experiences. Her goal is to make people aware of what they are projecting and, “not that we [as humans] can experience the whole, but we have access to the whole,” i.e. we can 'wake up' to an experience of a larger reality which is more psychologically encompassing, and that involves establishing “the links between higher consciousness and ego consciousness” as a way to achieve wholeness. As for the method to attaining this state of holism, Claire informs me:

That's what spiritual, that's what religious teaching does in prayer; prayer and meditation are sort of tools to connect with higher consciousness, which then helps higher consciousness to deal with unconscious baggage.

The notion of connecting conscious with unconscious thought processes is derived from Freudian and Jungian psychology in which elements of the subconscious mind need to be raised into the level of awareness of the ego, in order to alleviate mental illness (Freud, 1989; Jung, 1971; Hunt, 2012). One of the most prominent holistic concepts to surface within the ceremonial and other New Age groups, is that of 'mother nature', also referred to as 'grandma' by the shaman of sweat lodge group. The cosmic personality of 'grandma' is used by the shaman and others to refer to what they conceive of as a totality of the physical and metaphysical universe, of the subconscious and the ego. Because this totality transcends the individual's direct experience, it is necessary for them to encapsulate it in a holistic concept. I have also heard participants use the terms 'great mystery' to impart the same meaning, or simply 'universe'. Others may use the term 'God' for the same purpose.

How this is relevant to New Age spiritual selfhood is that conceptions of 'the whole' are also incorporated into the developing sense of one's personal self. For example, speaking about himself in the third person, the shaman once exclaimed that “Big Dave knows, he is in touch with the whole, and is tapped into the energy that is the source of life in this universe, and helps little Dave to see and understand,” which in his belief system equates to living right by others and the rest of the local ecosystem, all of which is a part of grandma. In this example the shaman is referencing a holistic New Age notion derived from the Indian Vedic religious tradition. In the Hindu religion the 'atman', or individual self, is only a mask that the person wears in this life. Considered to be a 'veil of illusion', one's separate and particular existence is believed to conceal one's larger nature or 'Brahman', and so is to be diminished in order for one to realize their larger

self (Campbell, 1976, p. 13). “Brahman is atman, and atman is Brahman” is a phrase which underlies much of Eastern religious belief and philosophy. The Sanskrit word Brahman means “divine fire,” which equals the universe or whole, and atman is the “divine spark,” that represents the individual person (Campbell, 1976, p. 339). It translates as “I am god and god is I,” and so the purpose of one's life, within this cosmological perspective, is to realize their Brahman or Buddha nature, which exists in the person as a potential. This potential becomes actualized, not merely by belief. Rather, group participants believe that engaging in specific practices such as the sweat lodge, or in yoga which is Sanskrit for “to unite” (Campbell, 1976, p. 14), the ascetic practitioner not only unites their body with their mind, but their mind to itself, which can also be interpreted as the uniting of one's *self* to *itself*. 'Big Dave' is synonymous with the universal whole, while 'little Dave' is the individual atman, or lower case self, and is representative of the ego and its limitations. Tarot consultant Claire discloses her belief in this New Age-Hindu conception, as she explains to me her understanding of 'the self' in the following excerpt from our interview:

This circle at the center here [informant points to a diagram of the self] called 'soul' is part of, is more of the big self, capital 'S' self which is in many respects I think what goes on in most meditative practices, whatever they call it, higher consciousness or whatever. It's an element of the self with a capital S which would be the bigger self [...] and the soul enters into physical incarnations which is an ego self, a smaller self.

These examples illustrate the dual nature of the New Age self argued above. The larger notion of self, e.g. 'Big Dave', is equated to the whole, which in this case equals the New Age deity 'grandma'; while the lower case self is the individual person who aspires in everyday life to realize their capital 'S' self, which for people of this milieu provides the sense that they are fulfilling their spiritual life goals and imperatives involving self development.

Holistic Milieu and the New Age Self

Ways of locating the New Age self, and assessing its possibilities for movement and change within its socio-cultural milieu, can be identified through observing how New Age oriented individuals approach and utilize the various spiritual practices and beliefs that attract them. For example, from 2000 to 2003 Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead conducted an intensive qualitative study of the NAM in Kendal England that involved approximately 600 participants. What they found is that, upon “entering the milieu, one is immediately struck by the pervasive use of holistic language: 'harmony', 'flow', 'integration', 'interaction', 'being at one' and 'being centered' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 26).

I have encountered a similar terminology in my observations and interviews. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) also found that the holistic milieu generally works to cultivate and nurture unique subjectivities, that can be evidenced from the terms used to describe the types of the relationships that exist between the practitioners (who are the shaman, group leaders, or spiritual counselors) and the participants. These terms included: 'helping', 'guiding', 'supporting', 'working with', 'encouraging', 'enabling', 'facilitating', and 'steering' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 27). Contrast the holistic spiritual approach with the authoritarian relationship of an organized church and priesthood to a member of a congregation. In the latter an authority figure works out a solution in advance, and then hands it to the individual as an inflexible system to which one must adapt themselves for 'salvation' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 28). For instance, while speaking about the sorts of medicinal practices used in the Native American church medicine group ceremonies, Jack argued that:

The Native American ceremonies are really, I feel like they're open minded more, much more than closed minded. You can have these plants, you can eat them, ingest them, or

smoke them, and it gives us another reality that we can have, as opposed to just following the doctrines and the laws that someone else, of what someone else wrote; and not questioning it but accepting it. This [the medicine] makes us not only question it, but lets us formulate our own beliefs about our own lives.

As is evident in Jack's statement about his own agency within ceremonial practices, the New Age social milieu encourages individuals to trust themselves and their own life experiences, by "listening to what their bodies, feelings, intuitions, and 'inner knowledge' or personally authenticated meanings have to tell them" (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 28). In this way a holistic approach to spirituality is 'participant centered', and that ultimately the individual knows what is best for their particular life situation. The participant is encouraged to "have a conversation with themselves," and the role of the practitioner or shaman is to help insure that it is an honest one (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 28). Another of my informant's comments lend support to the contention that the New Age spiritual project is ultimately a participant centered phenomenon:

I have been a person who has looked for a path on my own, and never really sort of subscribed to anything anybody told me [and that it is] a kind of very intense personal journey to find my spiritual self (interview with Sayid).

Michael's spiritual practices highlight similar individual-centered and experiential ideals. While discussing the uses of the plant sacrament in the medicine and sweat lodge groups, he remarked that:

These different entheogens get you to that place where you really don't put much stock in belief anymore? Where you just start experiencing the divine instead of trying to believe what it is. So I had already gone through that process in my twenties of kind of discarding beliefs.

Michael's story resonates well with the 'subjective-life' spiritual perspective advanced by Heelas and Woodhead (2005), and also describes the importance of experiencing and participating rather than simply believing. Michael also expresses the concept of shedding the old self. In combination with the de-traditionalization of New Age practice and its strain of anti-authoritarianism, which is embodied by the imperative to defy one's teachers: "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!" (Heelas, 1996, p. 21), there is an emphasis on the dropping of beliefs, that "you should unlearn what you have learned" ("Yoda" from *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Lucasfilms, 1977). Elaborating on this point, Heelas defines beliefs as "a non-experiential way of knowing, which often prevents you from experiencing and thereby accepting what's so; a preconception, usually a misconception, that you once learned and which keeps you from seeing what's going on right now" (Heelas, 1996, p. 22). Shamanism is not really a belief system, "you just do it in order to know it. There are no beliefs, doctrines, dogmas, or creed to live by" (Kenneth Meadows quoted in Heelas, 1996, pp. 22-23).

Spiritual Anarchism

In this way New Age spirituality is a form of spiritual anarchism. Just as political anarchism entails a rejection of the state and its system of laws and other ways of ordering life, New Age spirituality consists of a rejection of the dogmas and laws which govern conventional religious expressions of spirituality. And just as anarchism can be conceived of as an experiment within the domain of the state, so too can New Age practice and belief be understood as an experimental form of spirituality that occurs within what Matthew Wood calls the "non-formative religious field" (Wood, 2009). New Age practices occur in a space within the dominant culture, between the mainstream secular and religious domains. And beyond simply

existing in this secular-spiritual refuge, it can act as an agent of transformation which alters the surrounding mainstream culture. For example many New Age beliefs and slogans have disseminated into the popular vernacular since the late 1960s and early 1970s, e.g. the phrase “mind over matter.” Orientally informed Western practices such as yoga, Tai chi, and the raw foods diet have also found their way into mainstream culture via New Age spirituality.

New Age spirituality is then something that rejects the more rigidified dogmas that are to be found among organized religions. It is rather a system of beliefs and practices which is constantly evolving and refining itself, and in different but parallel ways within separate individuals, much as in the way that a craft or other art form is perfected. It does not consist of a static, one size fits all formula of how to act or believe. It is peculiar to the individual practitioner. Each person constructs their particular set of spiritual beliefs and practices from among the plethora of available ones. One's spiritual identity is believed to be in continual flux, expanding to encompass new knowledge, and to enhance a practice such as yoga or Tarot meditation; and contracting insofar as certain beliefs or attitudes may become less useful to the individual practitioner over time. In other words, what may once have been a useful 'truth' may be outgrown.

Trial and Error Experimentation

New Age ideas are not static. Because each individual acts as his/her own authority, change can occur in the New Age milieu more rapidly than in rigid and authoritarian systems of belief. The self that develops in a New Age way therefore tends to be an experimental and dynamic phenomenon. This is how Claire explains the process of her spirituality. During a long period of trying out various groups and practices, Claire eventually came to the realization of

“not this,” which she explained is a process whereby “you come to something, you explore it, and you either add to it, or decide that this is not—you now know what it's all about, and you don't want it [anymore].” As they refined their practice, i.e. as they refined their senses of self, they eventually outgrew some New Age practices and perspectives which were once both useful and meaningful for them:

I was at a group one time, and it was a group that I had chosen to go to, with a sort of so called spiritual group, I realized somewhat in the middle it wasn't anything about what I wanted to do [...] my initial response was, “well I want to get up and leave, you know I don't think I want to be here.” But then I think, “well why am I here?” [...] you know, I mean I might be here like to hear an experience that I don't want to be here anymore, you know like what the Buddhist's call 'not-this', I've had enough of this; or I'm here to sort of inject, which is what I did in that particular situation, something of myself, something new, something that I bring into the group that then has an effect [upon it] (Interview with Claire).

At the same time that the New Age seeker of spirituality exercises freedom that results in an on-going dynamic of ideas and beliefs, this same individual also interacts both with mainstream society and with other group members. An area where change and group dynamics occurs in the New Age movement is in conflict resolution. On occasion during the medicine and/or sweat ceremonies a person's politics may surface. Typically these outbursts relate to an environmental issue, such as the occurrence of Marcellus shale fracking for instance, or the Monsanto Corporation's actions relating to the use of herbicides, pesticides, or the current proliferation of GMO foods. One or more people vent their anger, frustration, and sadness in response to what group members typically regard as “toxic mainstream societal practices.” But the idea of using force or physical actions to try and stop them is viewed by the group as an improper response. Group members consider that a passive resignation of oneself to the bad things in mainstream society, and resultant peaceful non-resistance, is a more sophisticated

response than resorting violence. Group passivity in politics has resulted in a retreat from the public arena in which such issues may be debated and resisted, and into a private communion with nature. From the New Age perspective, the purpose of ceremonies is not to physically engage the destructive forces which are responsible for warfare or environmental problems, but to rather influence these phenomena in a more subtle manner, from the inside out. It is the understanding of many, if not all groups who call themselves New Age, that meditational and prayer energy generated both collectively and individually, is able to affect the target in a non-combative way, without violence, anger, or malice of any sort, through the power of intention. It is believed that sending out positive intentions by way of meditation or prayer for world peace or environmental justice is a more effective way to solve problems than to resist them with force. Analogous ritual goals exist within transcendental meditation movement for world peace, and are also consonant with the intentions of the Buddhist “Vesak Ceremony” for world harmony (Heelas, 1996, p. 75).

The ideals of passivity and non-resistance were often expressed in conversations among ceremony participants. In one such conversation which I heard, group members were speaking of worsening environmental problems, such as climate change, and their shared belief that a cataclysm or “apocalypse” will result in a time of severe drought and widespread suffering among people. One group member, Jacob, stated that in response to the crisis which he believes modern civilization faces, “many will be out there with guns, using violence and force in order to survive.” But those of us who are in “harmony with the earth” will come to exist in “paradises,” which he called “Avalons.” He furthermore exclaimed that these “reptile thinkers,” or violence oriented people, will not even recognize these Edenic oases of survival, but “will walk right by them with their greedy machine guns.” Summarizing the belief which this member has

expressed, by holding certain spiritually oriented connections with nature (attitudes of 'peace', 'love', and 'harmony') one will be brought to a sanctuary of survival, presumably by divine means, through being chosen by mother earth or 'grandma'. In other words, the peaceful and harmonious person and/or group is judged by the earth as being suitable to live by 'her' ways in accord with 'her' wishes. The New Age belief of being selected to live in peace and prosperity, is similar to the Judaic belief of being the “chosen people of God” who will be brought to a “place of milk and honey,” and to Christian apocalyptic revelations.

Charlie, the Tarot reader, also exhibited passivity towards violence. He said, “what if I told you that there is nothing you could do to hurt anyone?” He went on to argue that events which occur in a person's life are all necessary, and are the result of their “karma.” In other words, everything that happens to a person or group is a necessary part of their learning and development, and is a process which is geared towards the evolution of their “soul towards a spiritual completion.” The notion here is that one's current life is to be valued, not with respect to a single existence, but with respect to a bigger picture of the self that involves many lifetimes, and that has goals which transcend the individual's current life. So, we all die inevitably, one way or the other, and the manner in which we both live and die is ultimately a reflection of this larger self project. Therefore there is nothing we can do, right or wrong, that could damage this process, because every act is a necessary part of it. Acts that are viewed as violent and wrong are actually helping the person in the long run, and so are not hurting them, but assisting them in their self-realization.

Every experience is required for learning, Charlie suggests. He views life as “one big school.” Putting labels such as “negative” or “positive,” “good or evil” onto something is only an egocentric delusion, what Charlie argues is a symptom of “polarity.” But, and here is the key

aspect of the moral dilemma that Charlie faces, the eternal soul in the view of this informant, is also beyond polarity, beyond these sorts of moral value judgments that humans typically make. Viewed objectively, Charlie argues, even something as terrible as the holocaust, and something as monstrous as Nazism, is from this eternal holistic perspective only one part in a chain of development for a person or group. So Hitler, he suggests, is not a monster, and Nazism is not evil, but are in fact necessary as a means by which all of the people involved in these events learn, grow, and achieve transcendence; and that a polarized way of viewing those phenomenon are the result of a separating and delusional ego.

He brought up a popular image of 9/11, that of a person falling from a building. Most people view this as a tragic event, something which is inconceivable and terrifying. But Charlie interpreted this image in another way. He suggested that the person who jumped from the tower was moving from a condition of polarity, as a separate and morally polarized self, into a condition of non-polarity. "He leaped into eternity," argued Charlie, even suggesting that what is depicted by the image itself is something very beautiful. This aesthetic notion of beauty for Charlie manifested itself in the person as his "state of grace," which can be observed he argued in the manner by which the body is seen falling in the sky.

But then how is this "view from eternity" to be reconciled with Charlie's concerns for the environment? If everything that happens is perfectly acceptable as a part of a person's necessary growth, and by extension, other lifeforms on the planet, then it should not matter what happens in the environment. Yet Charlie shows concern regarding global warming and other environmental problems (mentioned above). I assume that Charlie would respond to this inconsistency by arguing that he himself is not yet a perfected being, and is subject to polarizing thought and belief as much as anyone else.

Group Disharmonies

In this section I would like to examine some of the problems that arise in the group setting. What happens if an unexpected course of events unfolds during a sweat ceremony, or if someone does something that is not acceptable? For example, on one occasion a participant brought a young toddler into the lodge. The baby was crying, and many experienced this as a distraction, or a disruption of the ceremony. But I heard the shaman say “let's see what this medicine is doing,” which meant that it served no purpose to get upset about it, or in trying to resist what was happening. Rather, 'go with what's occurring, and see where it takes you'. At one point during the sweat a concerned participant said something to the effect that “to subject a child to the rigors of the lodge is irresponsible, and that the mother should take the toddler out of the lodge right now.” The mother said nothing, but the shaman, after a brief period of silence, suggested that “well, she knows her child, and that is not your place to say what she should do. If there's really a problem, she'll be the one to decide that.”

The reaction of the group to the baby's crying is typical of our current society's general separation of age groups, and the exclusion of children from adult activities. Members of the sweat group reacted the way that an audience would if a baby were present at a concert, or a lecture, or a play. And due to the inconvenience and impropriety of the interruption at these venues (or concern about the child's welfare which existed in the present situation), the mother and baby would be quickly escorted out (if they had even been allowed in in the first place). It would be the same at a restaurant (other than a fast foods place, and even there the clientele might object), but also at church. Crying babies at services are often bundled out by parents, and if not, the priest may gently but firmly request that the parent and child wait outside, or an usher will even escort the offending pair out. Children are allowed in services if they are quiet, but a

baby cannot be asked to be quiet. Even older children are often sent to "Sunday school" during some Christian services, where they are isolated from adult worship.

However, the medicine ceremony is an alternative group, gathered together in order to share a spiritual experience with one another, and they react to a crying baby just as people would anywhere else outside of the group. But then the shaman speaks up, and he says: 'the mother knows best if the baby is being harmed or not. Let her decide what to do.' He meant the baby crying was part of the 'medicine', and can be experienced in various ways. The way that it was framed during the ceremony by the shaman, gently, was that some people's egos were getting in the way of their experience, and became problematic, not the baby's behavior in itself. So what is the shaman saying here? He is saying: 'this is not a performance or a leisure time activity or a religious service. This is a communal quest for spiritual enlightenment that is a part of us, all of us, whether you are a child or an adult. The crying child will not interrupt your observation of anything, because there is nothing to observe. There is only your quest for spiritual wholeness, and a crying baby cannot harm that because it is a part of that. So learn to live with it. We are inclusive here.'

Another contradiction endemic to the New Age self involves how certain ideas and behaviors can have reverse impacts upon those who hold them. For example, one goal of participating in New Age spiritual practices is to simply become more spiritual. To refine one's sense of self in this way is to become an expert at spirituality, at least in theory. However, both I and others in the groups that I observed have noticed that as one achieves a more comprehensive knowledge of spiritual beliefs, and as they begin to master some of the corresponding practices, there is a tendency or desire to demonstrate this knowledge and expertise. It becomes displayed

or performed within the group, through either being verbally expressed in member's discussions, or acted out within the context of a ceremony.

Expertise becomes 'spiritual capital', which raises the status of the individual who possesses it, creating what has been called by some members a 'spiritual ego'. This person may act out their knowledge, which is perceived by others as “showing off.” Flaunting superior knowledge and experience is noticeable and becomes a problem for other group members because it contradicts one of the goals of the ceremony. The egotistical person is perceived as having developed an air of self importance, which violates the New Age tenet of maintaining a humble persona. The self that is constructed by engaging in spiritual practices thus becomes a reified personality, though much of New Age spirituality involves the theme of diminishing the ego and the self. This element of New Age belief has been drawn from the Buddhist doctrine of 'No-Self', which urges cultivating in the individual a condition of selflessness, and holds that the self is an illusion that must be overcome (McDermott, 1980, p. 166; Becker, 1993, p.8).

Spiritual Capital

Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010) define cultural capital as knowledge or prestige acquired through social experience, and in some instances styles or tastes associated with class membership. It is important to note, as my example below will indicate, that such styles are often unconsciously expressed and observed. The usual manner in which these concepts are understood is in terms of class, with cultural capital typically being associated with “high status cultural signals,” which are values and behavioral styles favored by mainstream institutions such as education and the labor market (Small *et al.*, 2010, p. 18). It is theorized

that children of upper and middle class parents will inherit these values by learning how to speak, dress, and act in ways that are desired by these institutions, and will consequently have better chances of success in these social milieu, which ultimately equates to capitalist wealth and success. I have found that this concept can also be used to effectively interpret some of the phenomena occurring within the ceremonial groups that I have observed.

However, the way that cultural capital operates in this ceremonial society is a little different from its mainstream counterpart. Rather than economic or material status being the measure of cultural capital, in the sweat and medicine groups it is determined by one's status as an elder or veteran. In a way that is similar to how a traditional society operates, older members enjoy higher status among the group, with the idea being that one who is older also possesses more experience, and so should be listened to and deserves extra respect from younger members. But there is also the unspoken, and perhaps largely unacknowledged phenomenon of 'spiritual capital' at work within these groups. This quality usually relates to one having a higher than normal social standing in the group. This individual may be a veteran member, though it can be a young person and often is. Beyond its being acknowledged by deferential treatment and higher than average levels of respect accorded certain group members, which can be observed in the actions of others towards them, there is no formal way of determining just how one receives or earns this capital. It is not merely a question of one's seniority or period of membership within the group, because even among individuals who have been members for equal amounts of time, there can be differentials in their group standing.

One way of describing this type of status is to liken it to the notion of in-group acceptance. Having a high spiritual capital is like being 'cool', though in the present case being cool does not mean using slang, smoking cigarettes, or driving a flashy car, but rather to

demonstrate one's spiritual knowledge or ability. Individuals in this category will often take advantage of an opportunity during small group discussions to show off their knowledge of yoga, meditation, astrology, or mysticism for example. Another way of achieving high status within the medicine group that I have noticed is through being a good singer. At various points during the ceremony members take turns offering a 'medicine song'. This is one way in which members are able to distinguish themselves in an otherwise homogenous social setting. Singing a song that is traditional, and that possesses historical value, shows the others, and the shaman, that the singer knows something about the ceremonial culture. Also people who sing well, and who improvise or innovate songs which are amenable to the occasion are also acknowledged as skillful, spiritually cool, hip, and in the know. Sometimes it seems to me as if people are competing for attention, and trying to outdo one another with these performances. One member (Michael) remarked that:

when you first try this stuff [medicine ceremony] there's all kinds of feelings of, you know, like who's better, or who can do this (laughs), who can get into this spiritual space better than the other person.

This behavior may be similar to what Robin Kelley defines as “the dozens” in which young males will participate in a competition, to try and outdo the other by slinging creative insults towards their mothers (Kelley, 1997, p. 32). And the medicine singing certainly seems to mirror the informal one-up-man-ship that occurs between rappers and hip-hop singers who engage in this sort of competitive singing. Through talking to some members, I have realized that they are aware of this pressure, to have to measure up to others within the group, in terms of how well they sing. Many have even mentioned their need to do some research and practice in order to learn and perfect new songs for the ceremonies.

Another example of cultural capital operating in these groups is in style of dress. Of course in the mainstream world expensive suits and dresses are employed to demonstrate high levels of wealth and status. However, in the medicine group clothing which shows status is more likely to take the form of native dress, or some kind of New Age style which has the likelihood of being perceived as 'authentic', hip, or cool. This can vary from ceremonial gowns, to deerskin shirts and pants, or certain forms of tattoos and piercings. This phenomena is something that Michael has noticed with some members, and which he perceives as an expression of their egotism:

Some of the people, and I won't mention any names, but I think they've been around it enough that they take on an air about them, where they do seem to have more of an ego about what they're doing, and maybe part of it is what they're wearing.

Michael and other members had picked up on these signals, which may be deliberate attempts by some members to garner added levels of respect from their peers. I have also noticed within the ceremonial group, and within the New Age milieu in general, is that people who are newcomers to the milieu initially tend to be very open and receptive to the ideas and practices. They conscientiously accept the teachings and work towards ego reduction, which entails adopting a stance of humility. However, once they have been around it for a while, and have achieved veteran status within the group, they may unconsciously develop and begin to express a 'spiritual ego' which can be even more tyrannical, judgmental, and self-interested than the ordinary, spiritually uninformed ego. It is ironic that the very thing that purportedly enables one to become more spiritual results in their engaging in some very obviously anti-spiritual behavior.

But if it is true that the New Age self is a unique synthesis of various spiritual beliefs and practices as stated above, this leaves room for individual expressions which include displays of

ego spirituality. Yet this may also open one up to criticism and self doubt. Because this self is being drawn from so large a pantheon of available beliefs and practices, no one person can possibly assimilate it all. This necessarily leaves spiritual gaps, or possibilities that remain unexplored in the individual, which may result in one being unsure of what they are doing, for no other reason than they are the first to be doing it in their particular way. And because each person must have a different combination of beliefs and practices, no two selves are the same. There necessarily exists a heterogeneity in terms of New Age habituses which may result in, as is the case in other religions, misunderstandings and disagreements between individuals over which beliefs and values are meaningful or valid. Moreover, due to the fact that individuals are at various levels of development in terms of their spiritual knowledge and skill in practices, there may be disparate views about what are useful, or even necessary beliefs and practices. There may even be competition in terms of whose beliefs are better, or whose understanding of beliefs is the more accurate, as one of my informants, Michael, has commented on.

Conclusion

New Age spirituality is a phenomenon that has arisen in response to modern secular society, which leaves some individuals dissatisfied with the rationalism and materialism of the modern world, and the freedom of the post-Enlightenment world which released individuals from forced membership in organized religions. Seekers of spirituality are thus free to look to places other than traditional established religions for spiritual enlightenment and sustenance.

New Age participants in sweat lodge and Native American medicine ceremonies which I observed, and some of whose participants I interviewed, look for spirituality in a synthesis composed of religious and spiritual customs and practices from various cultures and traditions.

The sense of self which their quest forms, therefore, is composed of a rejection of the mainstream society into which they were born, and the adoption of traditions foreign to them. They do not, however, adopt these traditions entirely, nor do they attempt entry into societies and cultures alien to them. Rather they borrow from a variety of places to construct a new set of beliefs and practices with which they identify.

The people whom I observed and interviewed held beliefs characterized by a lack of authority or dogma outside of themselves. In that sense their spiritual selves can be called anarchistic. On the other hand, the subjects of my study did not feel alone or isolated in their beliefs or practices. Their participation in group ceremonies played a central part in their perception of who they are. Participation in a group spiritual activity, rather than simple conviction and belief, is crucial to the New Age image of self. Beyond membership in a like-minded group, the subjects of my observations also felt part of a universal wholeness, which, they believe, guides their actions and chooses them to belong to this alternative spiritual milieu. The universal wholeness, they believe, will protect them from harm that the world outside the group can inflict. Their belief in the protective agency of their spiritual world accompanies a stance of passivity in regard to political and social action. While group members share environmentalist and pacifist convictions, they reject conventional political and social activism.

The New Age groups which I observed have leadership and guidance from senior members, but no authority figures. The group as a whole, however, does function as an authority in the sense that an informal hierarchy has become established over time in the group, in which certain individuals are more admired and respected than others. These individuals have acquired “spiritual capital” which consists of experience and knowledge of the ceremonies, and the ability to communicate both to the group.

In summary, the formation of a New Age concept of self in the subjects of my study has its origins in a critique of mainstream society, and a dissatisfaction with its economic and political structure. As an alternative both to secularism and to organized religion, the New Age individual constructs an eclectic set of spiritual beliefs and practices. This new collection of beliefs and practices is guided not by dogma or external authority, but by individual judgment. The individual, however, also believes that his/her judgment is guided by a universal spirit which both inspires and protects those who acknowledge it. It is critical to the New Age individual that his/her spirituality is not only a belief system, but also forms the basis of practices and ceremonies that inform beliefs and lead to further transformations and changes of self.

The New Age self, therefore, is anarchistic in that it does not recognize any authority in determining belief but itself, and also collectivist, in that it belongs to a group and is guided by non-material forces such as one's karma. It is also dynamic in that it acknowledges and welcomes change as a result of participation in group spiritual practice, and participates in a spiritual universal wholeness, e.g. in the desire to have an enchanted experience of nature which makes room for a metaphysics involving personal connections, imagination, and playfulness.

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