

The Epistemology of Esoteric Culture: Spiritual Claim-Making within the American Neopagan Community

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Non-institutionalised religious communities within western esotericism, such as New Age or Neopagan subcultures, are dynamic marketplaces for knowledge construction that may appear to be chaotic and governed only by the rule of caveat emptor. However, a close examination reveals authorisation processes developing along similar lines as those followed by scientific empiricism during the seventeenth century. Claims of esoteric knowledge are developed from psychism experiences, and are authenticated by examining the claimant's social standing, the narrative structure of the claim and the interests of the claimant and the judge. Such claims are authorised by incorporation into collective action, publications, workshops and spiritual practices if the claim solves a problem within the overall belief structure from which the claim is derived.

Edward Tiryakian once noted that “a social order is organized around the knowledge of reality which is shared and accepted by a majority of its members” (1974:3). As Julia Iwersen asserts elsewhere in this publication, the knowledge base for the esoteric community has been constructed around both the principle of monism and “the moment of intuition, [when] a person experiences truth.” Timothy Leary alluded to this construction process among American esotericists in his observation that “ritual is to the internal sciences what experiment is to the external sciences” (cited in Wilson 1975). Leary was clearly conceptualising a very different form of ritual than its traditional form as a regular pattern of actions that symbolises an existing meaning world (see Abercrombie et al 1994); instead he saw ritual as a creative process which is used to construct meaning worlds. As an experimental instrument, this creative form of ritual focuses on techniques which produce what Iwersen describes as experiences of intuitive truths.

Leary's observation suggests that an epistemological framework consisting of conducting ritual, experiencing intuitive truth, making knowledge claims based on that experience and using authorised claims to construct a meaning

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world, is analogous to the epistemological framework of science. However, this analogy masks some real-world difficulties for the esoteric knowledge process. Ritual techniques do not reliably produce an intuitive experience each time a person engages in them, the resulting truths are not replicable by different people who achieve intuitive experiences and the entire process does not easily lend itself to creating a consensual meaning world around which a community can organise.

There is no contemporary esoteric community to which this process and its problems apply more than American Neopagans, with their fascination with altered states phenomena and the technology which produce them (eg drumming, brain wave machines, psychedelic drugs), and their drive to construct a privatised form of religion that celebrates autonomy and individualism. In historical conditions similar to those which Iwersen argues lead to monism, American Neopagans are organised as a confederation of disparate religious communities: purported re-creations of pre-Christian European religions (Holser 1972; Hutton 1999; Pike 2001; Scott 1980; Walker 1983), animistic tribal-based religions such as Native American Shamanism and African Diaspora religions such as Voodoo (Davis 1985; Martinie & Glassman 1992), and traditional western mysticism (Jorgensen & Jorgensen 1982; Tiryakian 1974).

Within the marketplace of religious beliefs, one common and arguably unifying belief (Bloch 1998) is that people can have paranormal psychic experiences that transmit authoritative knowledge. Iwersen refers to these as intuitive experiences, but I have referred to them in previous research as psychism (Laubach 2004). Psychism as used in this context was originally defined by the Theosophical Society as “every kind of mental phenomena, such as mediumship and the higher sensitiveness, hypnotic receptivity, inspired prophecy, simple clairvoyance or seeing in the Astral Light, and truly divine seership; in short, the word conveys every phase and manifestation of the powers and potencies of the human and the divine Souls” (Judge 1943:246).

Science has struggled to understand psychism both as a phenomenon and as a basis for knowledge since the Spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century. Freud dismissed spiritual experiences and religion itself as manifestations of the “omnipotence of thought” reported by “obsessional neurotics” (1950:107; see also 1961a:35), as “projections of ... emotional impulses” (1950:115), and as pathologies involving the “ego boundary” (1961b:13). Subsequent psychologists reduce psychism to psycho-

physiological processes such as endorphin responses (Prince 1982), responses to rhythms (Neher 1962; Rouget 1985), or some version of temporal lobe discharges (Persinger 1983, 1993; Persinger et al 1994; Winkelman 1986). Sociological explanations typically involve stress from social deprivation or pressures to conform (Glock & Stark 1965; Greeley 1975; Greyson 1998; Houran 1997; Malony and Lovekin 1985; McClenon 1991; Wuthnow 1981), compensators (Stark & Bainbridge 1987), reactions to social change (Ben-Yehuda 1985; Tiryakian 1974; Webb 1974), or a “breakdown of modernisation” (Eisenstadt 1970).

Ethnographers have focused on the specialised discursive processes by which communities make claims of psychism and other magical beliefs plausible. Jorgensen (1984) described a “divinatory performance” through which Tarot practitioners and clients negotiate how readings apply to the client’s life. Howell (1997) noted that religions promote trance-induction techniques, offer self-serving interpretive frameworks, images and symbols to be incorporated or reproduced within the experience, and then claim credit for successful experiences, all as a means of developing commitment to the organisation. Similarly, Tumminia (2002) has described how Unarians frame, as evidence of their beliefs, dreams, recovered memories of past lives, visions, bodily sensations, psychic readings, channelings, and other experiences.

Luhrmann (1989) offered a broader theory of how modern people accept magical beliefs in her ethnography of the modern witchcraft movement in England. She discussed “shamanic” alterations in consciousness that magicians experienced in ritual as “evidence” of a successful ritual. She asserted that “to those who experience them, they seem to be irrefutable proof of the power’s presence” and that the experience “serve[d] an important function to magicians ... [indicating] the magic’s reality regardless of its results” (1989:134-136). She later described these “potent phenomenological results” and “feelings of ecstasy, oneness and peace” as “probably the most important element of the magician’s increasing commitment to his practice.” But after this insight, she noted that magicians find these experiences “pleasing in their own right” and asserted that magicians become more interested in simply repeating the experience than using it as proof that magic works. She ultimately dismissed her insight that the experience validates the belief system with a comment that “perhaps the difficulty of proving magic’s efficacy in the physical world inadvertently pushes the magician’s attention onto the inner psychological realms” (1989:178).

Luhrmann defined magical claims in terms of a “commitment to the view that rituals do produce results” and then offered four “primary rationalisations of magical claims” (1989:283): realist, that the claims are objectively true; two worlds, that claims “are true but cannot be evaluated by rational means”; relativist, that a “magical” truth is as real as an “objective” truth; and metaphorical, that “the claims themselves are objectively false but valid as myth.” Of these, the first three assert some material efficacy to a ritual, while the fourth asserts merely a social efficacy – offering an expressive or aesthetic result for the claimant. She acknowledged that for the majority of magicians who use the first three, personal experience is an important element of the rationalisation, but she then described these “new phenomenological experiences” entirely in terms of imagination, symbolism, and emotion (1989:131). Ultimately, she explained magical claims with an elaborate theory of “interpretive drift,” in which an otherwise rational person comes to accept the plausibility of magical beliefs and practices over an extended time frame by refocusing perception and reconceptualising experiences to confirm those beliefs.

It is easy to see the processes Luhrmann described of rationalisation, interpretive drift, and failure attribution occurring among the American Neopagans, and it is tempting as an empiricist to want a theory that explains claims of psychism in terms of inner psychological realms and metaphorical truth. However, in rejecting an explanation based in the magician’s experience in favour of metaphor, Luhrmann seems to have missed a distinction between the way magicians make psychism claims plausible to themselves and the way they explain those claims to others who have not had that experience. As she argued at first, magicians accept a magical belief system because they have validated it with experience, just as empiricists accept a non-magical belief system because they have validated it by experience. But the facticity of such an intensively subjective experience is difficult to convey, leaving the analyst with little beyond metaphors. The key lies in the nature of psychism.

My research defined psychism as “intrusions within the stream of consciousness that are interpreted by the actor as not originating within the self’s normal information channels” (Laubach 2004:242). Psychism experiences are effectively “mind-glitches” like *déjà vu* or hearing your name called when nobody is around, except that they are perceived as entering the stream of consciousness from an external source. People initially regard intruded objects with the same facticity as empirical perceptions because they enter the stream of consciousness in the same way

as psychic objects derived from sensory input. People only recognise them as intrusions upon reflection, and ultimately decide on their origin (ie brain glitch vs supernatural) after identity considerations. People who define intrusions as originating in the supernatural regard their information content with a level of authority that supersedes beliefs developed and validated by social interaction, and can even act on them in violation of social identity commitments. This conclusion, which contradicts the prevailing conformity theory, led me to operationalise psychism using the Greeley and McCready (1974) scale (used in the General Social Survey [GSS] as “paranormal experiences”) and construct models using the GSS data that demonstrated that these experiences lead away from conformity and communal religious practices and toward autonomy – the conditions I was observing among American Neopagans during my study. In apparent confirmation, the Pagan Census conducted between 1993 and 1995 verified that American Neopagans claim to have psychism experiences at a much higher rate than the American population as a whole (see Berger et al 2003).

Recognising the centrality of psychism is important to understanding the epistemology of Neopagans because it helps to define the authority structure for the Neopagan world view. Weber’s (1964) conception of authority as “legitimated power,” indicating some person whose position in the accepted social order gives them final say on what is right or wrong, does not work well in the Neopagan context. As a loose confederation of religious communities, American Neopaganism is much more of a marketplace of ideas governed by *caveat emptor* than a coherent set of shared beliefs. One of its appeals is what I call a democratisation of revelation – an ideal that anyone is presumed to be capable of accessing the spirit world, making claims that carry spiritual authority, and developing a religious group based on those claims. It is distinguished from other esoteric groups by an obsession with individual autonomy (see Bloch 1998) and an aversion to authoritative individuals who are seen as inevitably corrupted by material-world concerns, leading to conflicts of interests and abuses of power. On the other hand, in keeping with Tiryakian’s (1974) conception of the esoteric world view, the Neopagan social order does include a spirit world that is unconcerned with material world interests, to which Neopagans look for unadulterated guidance via ritualised altered states practices.

This authority structure has consequences. Claims based in psychism are often used to define the internal stratification of the community, to create boundaries between affiliated groups and with the external world, and to legitimate collective action. With these possibilities, claims that challenge

the existing stratification, attempt to cross boundaries, or influence collective action must not be authorised easily or the collective structure will quickly fall into chaos.

This study investigates elements of the developing epistemological framework of the American Neopagan movement. I use source materials, general observations made over years of involvement as a participant (since 1978), formal ethnographic observations made as a researcher (since 1995) and interviews of 26 practitioners focused on spirit possession.¹ As shown in Gieryn's (1999) work on the boundaries of science, these procedures become visible when claims are made and contested, so I focus on claims that are contested or generally define the boundaries of Neopaganism.

1. Esoteric Authority

In an early analysis of truth claims by occult practitioners, Truzzi (1974) argued that the authority structures by which claims are validated can be understood in terms of Weber's three types of authority. Appeals to traditional authority are made when claims are based in culturally inherited beliefs which are handed down by family or spiritual leaders. Appeals are made to charismatic authority with claims that are based in "knowledge [that] has been psychically obtained by [a] spiritual superior." Finally, appeals to rational-legal authority can be seen in beliefs based in the "pragmatic experience of the belief's effectiveness" (1974:249). The lived experience of American Neopagans seems to bring Truzzi's analysis into question.

Traditional Authority

Truzzi categorised claims based on family or culturally inherited traditions as traditional authority, but again this does not fit the conditions of the American Neopagan community. There are very few members who can substantiate a claim of a "family tradition" of occult beliefs and practices. Jorgenson and Russell's study of the demographics of Neopagans shows that since it "is a very new religious movement, almost all of the participants initially were socialised in some other religion" (1999:332). Adler pointed out that in the 1970s, "decentralism and individualism in the Craft [ie Neopaganism] seem to overshadow any 'tradition' or 'ritual'" (1979:111). She continues that "new traditions are springing up in the Craft almost every day. ... In my travels across the country I found that easily half of the people I interviewed in the Craft were forming their own traditions or changing the ones they were involved in" (Adler 1979:127). There is clearly a sense in which Neopagans are constructing the religion as they go along, which can

be disconcerting for outsiders with traditional academic understandings of religion. In one example of this,² a student of religious studies who participated in a Neopagan “ritual” expressed her confusion as she saw leaders from very different religious subgroups negotiating the design just before it started. She pointed out that “rituals” were supposed to be established patterns that express symbolically the values and shared meaning of the group. The leaders laughed and responded with a saying I had heard often, that among Neopagans, “Traditions are measured in months.”

This sense that Neopagans are creating traditions can be felt throughout the movement and exists in tension with the claims that Neopagans are recreating traditional pre-Christian religions. While there has been some research to authenticate these practices as pre-Christian traditions, especially conducted by feminists to support a belief in an egalitarian matriarchy that predated patriarchal cultures (eg Graves 1978/1948; Griffin 1995; Stone 1976; Walker 1983), most participants appear to be recognising and becoming comfortable with Neopaganism as a creative project – ie a religion under construction.

This tension and simultaneous ease with which Neopagans adopt and move between religious belief systems can be seen in the following passage by Donna, one of the practitioners interviewed in my possession study. Donna’s primary religious affiliation is with the Norse mythology, and her involvement with and interest in possession practices began when a member of her group engaged in a spontaneous possession by Odin. According to Donna, “He also worked in Wicca, and I’d seen him do something similar in a Wiccan ceremony, once. But Wiccan ‘drawing down’ is usually not anywhere near this level, this depth. He was, in fact, trained in the Wiccan procedure and he never lost awareness of self in the other system...” After that she decided “If it was going to happen in the group I was running I then had to be able to do it myself so I could understand how to deal with it ...,” so she “...got in touch with the local Umbanda house because they had more experience in training people than anybody around ...” She said that as people began to incorporate possession in their divination practices (*Seidh*) at large group festivals (*Trothmoots*), other members “got real twitchy about it – the Norse community as a whole is not experienced with trance work of any kind, and possessory work is really pushing the envelope.”

Neopagans justify this creation of traditions by recognising the very real beliefs behind them. Adler writes about the combination of “humor, play, and seriousness” in the earliest stages of Neopaganism. One member told

her that “Large parts of the Neo-Pagan movement started out as jokes” (1979:298). Two examples update this point. The first was a group of ceremonial magicians who developed and performed rituals substituting cartoon characters for deities.³ This practice was based on a belief generally held by ceremonialist Neopagans that the Kabalistic Tree of Life is a symbolic map of the spiritual world that can be used to ‘map’ symbols such as deities from different religions to each other (see Ashcroft-Nowicki 1983; Crowley 1982, 1994; Gonzalez-Wippler 1987; Martinie & Glassman 1992). The group assigned cartoon characters to deities based on their relevant characteristics and developed rituals ‘as if’ they had the same spiritual reality as the deities.

In the second example a group that called itself the “Third Shift” developed a deity they called “Azo” out of a toy bull purchased at a truck stop on the way to a festival.⁴ The toy bull had a mechanism that allowed it to walk, but because of an apparent defect in manufacturing, it moved to one side in a wide circle. The group meets informally at festivals to dance and drum around festival fires late at night, and at one festival, members of the Third Shift followed the toy in its circular progression around the fire pit and mimicked its movements. After this, group members developed correspondences with deities represented by a bull. Although this process developed in a joking manner, the widespread occult knowledge and artistic skills of members of the group resulted in symbolic objects, elaborate rituals, and writings which could easily be seen as indicators of a serious cult.

In each of these examples, Neopagans construct what could be seen as serious practices out of everyday symbols and objects in combination with beliefs and practices. One might look to the ancient traditions that underlie Neopagan beliefs for authority, but Neopagans are more than willing to stretch or even violate those when it suits their current interests. In any case, Weber’s conception of traditional authority, “resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them” (Weber 1964:328) does not appear to be applicable in a meaningful way to the process of validating esoteric knowledge among American Neopagans.

Charismatic Authority

Truzzi asserted that claims of esoteric knowledge are based in charismatic authority when the claims derive from psychic experiences by a spiritual superior. While this appears closer than the theory of traditional authority to the lived experience within Neopaganism, it still warrants finer scrutiny.

Weber's conception of charismatic authority focused on an individual who is "set apart from ordinary [people] and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers and qualities" (Weber 1964:358). Authority lies with the person, and until it is perceived that that person's "god or ...magical or heroic powers have deserted him," what that person says is accepted as "of divine origin." Extending this specifically to religion, Weber defines a magician as "the person who is permanently endowed with charisma" (1963:3). Subsequent theorists such as Meindl (1990) have focused on the "charismatic syndrome," the social behaviours of followers who develop a sense of community and mission and a "complete personal devotion" (Weber 1964:359) to the leader. However, with charismatic authority, the power rests in the leader.

Neopagan democratisation of revelation takes a large step away from the Weber's concept of charisma because any member of the collective has the potential to make an authoritative claim, while their very next claim may be regarded as utter nonsense. Furthermore, Neopaganism's highly diffused and individualised nature makes the development of the charismatic syndrome difficult. Despite this individualism, Neopagans are capable of collective action, as demonstrated by the development of "sanctuaries" owned by various Neopagan groups. Two examples of these are Circle Sanctuary in Wisconsin and "Lothlorien," owned by the Elf Lore Family (ELF) in Indiana. Each of these can be said to have developed around the revelations of their founders, but each also faced regular power struggles as members rejected claims of their respective leaders.⁵ Meindl's "feet-of-clay" syndrome, where followers recognise the leader's fallibility and lose their sense of devotion, is very quickly active among Neopagans. However, these groups do not always dissolve over the loss of charisma – a Neopagan organisation which focuses on its core beliefs will often hold together. The need to balance collective action with individualism prompted Starhawk, one of the more prominent Neopagan theologians, to write a book about power relations that proposes alternative forms of organisation to avoid hierarchical relationships (1987). Many organisations, including ELF, are structured around a consensus of the collective body authorised to make decisions.⁶

Rational-Legal Authority

Weber's concept of rational-legal authority requires a degree of institutionalisation and centralisation that is not apparent in the American Neopagan community. Starhawk wrote at an early stage that Neopaganism "tends to attract people who, by nature, do not like to join groups" (1979:35) and noted that the coven structure nurtures individualism. Adler's discussion

of the instability of Neopagan groups emphasises that point (Adler 1979: 33). From the late 1970s, many Neopagans were “solitaries” (Adler 1979:106), and even into the late 1990s, 46 per cent of Neopagans describe themselves as “solitary practitioners” (Jorgenson & Russell 1999; see also Berger et al 2003). While there are some large organisations (eg Circle, Covenant of the Goddess, Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans), most recognise that they have limited authority even over their own members.

This is not to suggest that there are not rudimentary forms of gatekeeping that are similar to those found in the contemporary scientific community, especially in the selection of workshops to be held at festivals and in articles for journals. The Neopagan selection process is generally conducted (at least overtly) not on the basis of ‘authorised’ knowledge – subject to a selection process akin to peer review – but more on the basis of practical considerations such as who can draw more paying attendees or readers (especially if the presenter is being paid from attendance fees), who is being let in to a festival free, or who can fill a workshop slot or article space without making the sponsoring group look bad.⁷ Festivals organised by ELF often have very little pre-scheduling of workshops because they promote the belief that “Everyone is a Star” and that anyone should be able to offer workshops.⁸

Another example of rudimentary gatekeeping was conducted by Black Moon’s Archives Project, which served as a clearinghouse to which any magician could submit writings and results of ritual meditations which would then be copied and distributed to others in the community at cost.⁹ Their official policy was to accept anything, but this was modified to exclude anything that the workers were not willing to copy because they might consider it offensive (eg sexist, racist, advocating violence) or what can be considered even worse, boring.¹⁰ Again, while these gatekeepers perform some of the same functions as scientific gatekeepers, they still do not qualify as Weber’s rational-legal authorities because they do so informally and are not given the type of socially sanctioned power implied by Weber.

Practicality and Consensus

Weber’s three forms of authority are generally considered exhaustive in the sense that any religion-specific form (eg spiritual authority) should be reducible to them – at least when considered in empirical terms. However, Neopagan authorisation seems to defy that reduction because there are few unambiguously authoritative traditions, legal structures or people who are given the power to be charismatic. One conception of authority that

approaches the Neopagan context is offered by Zablocki (1980), who analysed charismatic communes that developed in the 1970s. He noted that the presence of a leader was not necessary for group cohesion, and that the real local authority was provided by a deputy of the charismatic leader. He argued that the groups he studied were actively seeking the feeling of consensus that a leader would bring, and that the leader, while retaining some level of personal authority, became more of a figurehead around which the charismatic syndrome developed. This conception comes close if we see the spirit world as a substitute for the absent charismatic leader and the community consensus as the local deputy.

From an analytical perspective, Neopagan authorisation of truth claims rests in the consensus of the collective – a group determination that a claim solves an existing problem within the overall belief structure. The problem-solving aspect is important because without a need for collective attention, there is no need to authorise claims. In this conception, while one person can be seen as very good at receiving and interpreting messages from spirit, that person can also be wrong and it is up to everyone's connection with spirit to help make that decision. This emphasis on practicality and the coherence of the belief system, and the ability of the group to reinterpret revelation, is echoed by Melton's (1985) re-analysis of failed prophecies (Festinger et al 1956). Melton concluded that groups don't disband over failed prophecies because they are more concerned with the overall belief system and the social network which carries it than the prophecy itself.

This conception of authority is not well understood or institutionalised in Neopagan culture, but an example can help to illustrate the point. Scott (1980) describes an incident surrounding a decision by a coven whether to initiate a woman (Nancy) who was perceived by others as "not fitting in":

Clovis, who was the most hostile, brought spiritual charges against her. He claimed he learned psychically that they had been in a group together in a previous lifetime in the Middle Ages and the she had betrayed the group. He also claimed that she had come to Earth during this lifetime from another planet. Since the High Priestess and the others considered the charges valid and discussed them seriously, Nancy had little defense. She could only protest that his charges were not true, but there was no rational way to counter his claim. A spiritual charge permitted no rational proofs.

(Scott 1980:153)

My experience suggests that this kind of incident happens often. What Scott did not discuss was the risk that Clovis took with his claim. His status as a

group member supported his psychism generated claim against the lower status petitioner, and by providing a solution to a group problem, his status likely increased (Scott does not report). However, if such a claim had been made against someone with similar status, or if someone with similar or higher status had rejected (or especially ridiculed) the claim, Clovis would likely have lost status in the group.

Metaphorical vs Perceived Reality of Spirit Authority

The ease with which Neopagans refer to spirit authority can belie the perceived reality of the spirit world for Neopagans. While most Neopagans talk about spiritual experiences from the perspective of a direct experience of the stream of consciousness (described here as psychism), many non-pagans (especially academic observers) hear the reference as metaphorical, an acceptable cultural interpretation that obscures the claim of direct experience. Academic observers are thereby spared from writing about practitioners communicating with “secret chiefs.” Instead, practitioners have direct experiences of “existential truths,” either by revelation from “divine or supernatural agencies” or through consensus interpretations of some shared ritualised experience (Truzzi 1974:250).

An article that exemplifies this potential for confusion was written by Selena Fox in the Spring 1980 *Circle Network News*. It was titled “Herb Craft” and described a training process for the use of herbs. She starts with advice that can be interpreted in terms of the metaphorical discourse that can be heard even in some mainstream plant shops:

Herbal wisdom, and knowledge, too, comes from becoming friends with herbs and establishing those deep intuitive bonds that solidify any serious friendship. ... Meditate among herb plants. Talk to herbs and send loving thoughts to them. Be still, and be aware of any messages they may send you in return.

She then breaks out of that discourse with: “Every herb plant has a spirit (or ‘deva’, as it is sometimes called). This spirit is the Self of the herb, just as your inner Self is the essence of who you are.” She concludes with a discussion of how to communicate with these spirits through clairvoyance, clairaudience, and clairsentience, and advises students to use information obtained in this manner to determine which medicinal herb to use, what dosage, and how to prepare it.

The potential for confusion between metaphorical and realist interpretations is not lost on Neopagans, and some use that confusion to disguise their beliefs as harmless metaphors to facilitate their acceptance in broader

society. Eli Elva, one of the founders of ELF and author of most of its promotional materials, intentionally used “Elf” terminology to be disarming given its association with fantasy literature such as JRR Tolkien, standing in contrast to the use of the more sinister “Witch” terminology employed by many Wiccans.¹¹ This is not to suggest that the entire ELF mythology was constructed to hide its Neopagan roots, but that the organisation certainly took advantage of the fact that it portrayed more of an image of fantasy and folklore.

This distinction has real consequences for understanding the dynamics of an interaction, especially one involving conflict. This distinction becomes clear with the following example from Pike’s (2001:41) discussion of a tree-cutting incident at “Lothlorien”, an intentional community owned by the Elf Lore Family. In this incident, Andrew, an ELF member who was in charge of a crew that was building a community kitchen for festivals, used as a centre pole a tree that was cut down in “Faerie,” the area designated by the group as a sacred nature sanctuary. This act outraged many ELF members as a violation of the basic values of protecting “the Green Man and other spirits of the forest” and of maintaining the balance between humans and nature that is expressed in sacred areas such as Faerie. In describing the effect, Pike writes that:

Designated sacred places like Faerie become sites of conflict because they are where human and divine meet. It is at these sites that Neopagans want to feel and express an ideal relationship with their deities. At these sites, festival goers must encounter and revise their understandings of the meanings of festival, deity, and nature. If a goddess is to be honored by not allowing tree cutting in her woods, then it is the goddess itself and not just the community that is violated when the rules are broken. ... It is in the presence of these mythological figures and ‘the faeries and elves’ that acts of violation must be judged and specifically Neopagan ethics affirmed. (Pike 2001:49).

Pike concludes her account with a discussion of how Andrew was “tried” and “punished” by being required to participate in a healing ceremony and to plant additional trees – a means of reaffirming “ELF’s community integrity” and spiritual values.

This account is accurate at a high level in which existential meanings and truths are the only elements of interest. However, an account of the lived experience reveals a much deeper dynamic. I was a member of ELF’s Elder Council at the time, and was one of the first Elders involved in the incident.

Andrew was not just a “member” – he was “Elf Clan”, an organisational status at which he was being actively considered for membership in the Elder Council. Andrew stated that he had received direct communication from the spirits of Faerie and the trees in question that he was to use them as the centre pole for the kitchen structure so that “the heart of Faerie would be in the heart of Avalon” (which was what the festival area was called). What Pike had interpreted as a conflict or violation of values and meanings (“existential truth” in Truzzi’s terms) was in the lived experience a contest over Andrew’s claim. From the metaphorical perspective, the Elder Council faced a simple administrative decision that Andrew had violated a longstanding rule. However, Andrew’s claim forced the Elder Council into a position of an authorising body for a psychic claim, a position that Neopagans are generally quite adept at avoiding. This was complicated by the “revealed” nature of the rule, it derived from a longstanding claim of psychic communication by Eli Elva that the trees in Faerie should never be cut.

There were three dilemmas that the Elder Council faced. The first was that the incident undermined ELF’s egalitarian rhetoric that skirted the boundary between individual freedom promoted on ELF’s land and the need for a sense of communal ideals and action. The Elder Council reserved its right to authorise actions, but demonstrations of that authority exposed that “there were in fact ‘secret chiefs’ who make important decisions and act on behalf of the community” as Pike put it (2001:43). The second dilemma is that the incident demonstrated that everyone is not “a star” in the sense of being able to act on interpretations of spiritual connections made at the festivals – a problem that threatened the solidarity of ELF’s community. If the Elder Council could delegitimise Andrew’s claim, then it could do so to any other claim as well. The third dilemma was that the Elder Council would have to establish some criteria for accepting or rejecting claims, criteria that could potentially be used to question the authenticity of the claims on which the organisation itself was based – a danger that “people in glass houses should not throw stones.”

Ultimately, the Council separated the issues of authenticity and validity of Andrew’s claim. It did not ‘rule’ on Andrew’s credibility, whether he had an authentic experience of communication with the Elves, but did rule that if he had an authentic communication, he must have misinterpreted it – that the Elves would not contradict themselves about the tree cutting rule. As a Neopagan organisation, this ruling reaffirmed that the authority for Andrew’s

claim rest in the spirit realm, but that the claim by one of ELF's founders was the valid interpretation.¹²

Authentication and Validity

All of these examples illustrate the authority given by Neopagans to information derived from the spirit world, but the ELF example touches on the complexity of the epistemological framework that supports it, especially given the stakes involved in using psychism as a basis for collective behaviour. To attain that authority, claims derived from psychism must be authenticated (ie accepted as originating in the spirit realm), and the information they contain must be validated (ie authorised as a true interpretation). In practice, unless the claim is contested, an authenticated claim implies its validity, and a validated claim implies its authenticity. Therefore, the general strategy for establishing the authority of a claim is to establish either its authenticity or its validity.

2. Personal Context

Neopagan organisations generally avoid making determinations on the authenticity or validity of claims because the stakes for the collectivity are so high. However, at a personal level, the stakes are very different and claims are regularly authenticated and their authority questioned. Requirements for authentication and validation at the individual level often vary depending on the reason that the claim is being advanced and who is advancing it. Reasons for claims can vary from simple entertainment, to justification for an action on the part of the claimant, to a demand for action on the part of the person hearing the claim. Authentication and validation requirements obviously get more stringent as the demand for action by the recipient increases and the less the recipient knows the person making it.

Neopagans look for evidence of authenticity and validity in very similar ways to those described by Shapin (1994) as processes used by the early empiricists of the seventeenth century. His study identified two main concerns which empirical epistemology had to address: the believability of observation claims and the epistemological decorum with which the claims were decided. Claims were determined to be believable because of characteristics of the claimant, who were inevitably the "gentlemen" of the period. A key characteristic was "perceptual competence," the assumption that a gentleman could give an accurate account, that "that which was available to be experienced, and thus reported on, in the natural and social worlds was in fact registered by their senses and experienced in a manner

deemed normal within the relevant community” (1994:75). A gentleman was considered competent because his nature, temperament or humoral constitution predisposed him to truthfulness. Additional considerations which predisposed gentlemen to truthfulness were their pragmatic concern with maintaining a reputation of truthfulness, their moral convictions of Christian faith, and their independent wealth which gave them a social, political, and economic disinterest in the outcome of the observation.

Shapin defines epistemological decorum as “the expectation that knowledge will be evaluated according to its appropriate place in practical cultural and social action” (1996:xxix). While the ideal was that each individual would make their own observations (ie replicating all experiments), the practical need for accepting testimony of observations by others prompted the development of formal schemes with which to evaluate testimony. Shapin synthesises these into seven “maxims of prudence”: plausibility, multiplicity, consistency, immediacy, the “knowledgeability or competence of the source,” the style of presentation or “manner which inspires a just confidence,” and the “acknowledged integrity and disinterestedness” of the source (Shapin 1996:212). These guides served to manage uncertainty and arrive at epistemic conclusions without engaging in conflict that could undermine the civility of the discourse and unravel the social order of the scientific collective.

In the Neopagan context, the credibility of the claimant is an essential element. The recipient of a claim would look for evidence of perceptual competence on behalf of the claimant. In the case of claims made through a divination technique such as the Tarot, a client would look for the apparent skill with which the reader manipulates the tools, the rhetorical skills with which they relate the elements of the reading to the client’s life experiences, and their apparent dedication to the technique – which can often be seen by the props or sometimes the lack of props used by the claimant. The person deciding on a claim would also look at evidence of a pragmatic concern the claimant might have with maintaining a reputation of truthfulness, such as if they had a visible social position in the community or were in business. They would also look for evidence of the moral beliefs of the claimant. Most Neopagans believe in some form of retribution for misusing psychic or magical skills – often expressed in the “threefold law: that whatever you do returns to you threefold” (Adler 1979:110). Finally, considering the concern over exploitation, they look for evidence of personal disinterest by the reader in the outcome of the claim.

Claimants are fully aware that their claims are subject to being questioned by the recipient and often incorporate statements that are meant to help authenticate the claim. My position as an insider should have obviated the need for respondents in my possession study to make authenticating statements as they would if they were discussing their experiences with an 'outsider.' However, almost all respondents still included such statements in their accounts. In a sense, these statements appear to be an artifact of the account itself, perhaps included to help construct a sensible reality for the respondent, or perhaps as a residual of the explicitly social (rehearsed) nature of even privately constructed accounts (see Harvey et al 1992; Orbuch 1997).

The strategy for establishing the authenticity of a claim requires some form of confirmation in the empirical world. For a divination, this is generally found in a fact about the client revealed in a reading that the diviner could not have known. For possession claims, this is generally found in associated events, object, or report of their behaviour by a third party that 'demonstrated' the event to have been improbable without there having been a 'real experience.' In that regard, these practitioners are again similar to the seventeenth century scientists (Shapin 1994) in that they are basing the plausibility of their accounts of unobservable phenomena (in this case an internal experience) on observable phenomena that they tie to their claims using the logic of their subculture.¹³

Two respondents in the possession study specifically included statements about their concern for authenticity. They described systematic "experiments" that they conducted apparently to validate some aspect of the experience to themselves. In one case, Zeb reported that his body temperature appeared to rise as a part of the experience, and he went so far as to take his temperature to substantiate that. In addition, he reported that he and his partner, "would not communicate verbally during the experiences. We did not want to shape the experience with any type of communication.... when it would be over we'd write up our experience then before we'd communicate anything." Donna also described an "experiment" in which she compared content and style from writings produced by her possessions with writings sent to her by practitioners in England who were being possessed by the same deity. She described the similarity in results as "very validating."¹⁴

With my possession data, statements that addressed authenticity tended to take six forms: improbable events that were conceptually or temporally related to the experience; behaviours that were well out of "normal" for the respondent; external corroboration of the respondent's internal experiences;

attribution of enhanced abilities of healing, prophecy, or knowledge of another person's thoughts; physical manifestations; and getting results that were unexpected.

Improbable Events

Examples of improbable events that authenticate claims of psychism can be considered fairly mundane by an objective observer, but need to be understood as meaningful within the life experiences of the practitioner. However, only an understanding of the practitioner's spiritual path and knowledge of their development within that path can provide any guide to the appropriate interpretation of these events. Within the Neopagan community, possible conflicts in interpretations are reflected in clichéd 'sayings' that are relevant to these types of events. The first is that the spiritual aspirant must 'consider every event as a direct communication from the Holy Guardian Angel' (or higher self, gods, etc), meaning that at the critical point of spiritual attainment, any life events, especially improbable ones, will coalesce into a spiritual teaching experience for the aspirant. The second is that 'the "prover" will prove what the believer believes,' meaning that people will interpret events in such a way as to substantiate their claims to spiritual attainment. Depending on the perceived stage in the claimant's spiritual growth, this second statement can be applied in a pejorative manner, indicating that the claimant is either 'grasping at straws' or wilfully making false claims to bolster their status, or it can be applied in a more benign way, indicating that the interpretation is an appropriate response based on their experience. A third saying that applies to possession trance is, 'if you contact a spirit that tells you how great a magician you are, you have probably contacted your ego.'

The accounts in my study present a number of examples of improbable events being interpreted as a supporting part of the total spiritual experience. Paula slipped in the mud without soiling her costume but dirtying an object that she created to symbolise the 'mud' in her life. During his period of psychic openness, Fred wrote the only poetry he had ever written, and he reported that it was in "perfect 13 meter rhythm." He also reported a card playing experience in which he "went from being a mediocre player to like virtually a world champion level player, during this game." Linda painted her face while in trance and reported that someone told her later that she used exact markings from a tribe of which she was unaware. Donna reported not feeling the effects of strong drinks imbibed while under possession, performing actions that she didn't know were traditional to a deity, and using

very unreliable sewing equipment while in trance which worked without problems throughout a very complex project.

Unusual Behaviours

Although all of the practitioners in the psychism study would consider their altered states behaviours ‘unusual’ in the context of the wider society, several chose specific behaviours within the wider set of possession behaviours as supportive of the validity of their claim. Paula, for example, said that “usually I do dance... I can dance for a long time but I don’t dance with that intensity.” She said that her dancing was described to her as “very scary.” Linda reported that she was obsessed with her costume and face painting, “changing my appearance drastically,” which, she said, “is not one of those things which I usually worry about,” and was doing so without a mirror. Donna reported that “as a writer I can adopt a lot of personae, but in my own person I never say these things – I don’t talk like that.” She also reported behavioural changes such as smoking and drinking strong liquors that she didn’t like.

External Corroboration

A further important tactic in establishing the authenticity of claims is to use external corroboration. Because of the internal nature of the possession experience, practitioners find this corroboration especially difficult, but not impossible. Laura reported visions of past lives that she said were corroborated by psychic readers. Zeb and his partner reported an experience which “I would hesitate to call it a vision because it was so detailed and we were both seeing it ... It would be so bizarre that we would both describe the same scene and the same actions ... I’ve done a lot of magick with a lot of different people and I’ve never experienced anything like that. It makes everything else look like shit. As far as corroborating experience, it just goes beyond anything that I’d – but it kept leading up to that.” As mentioned earlier, Donna had compared her results with people working with the same deity as a means of corroboration.

Enhanced Abilities

Several practitioners reported enhanced abilities, a claim that in itself garners status in the same way as claims of possession; however, that these were reported in the context of the possession experience meant that the abilities were attributed to the possessing entity. In one sense, these reports can be considered in the same vein as the ‘improbable events,’ but have a character

that is sufficiently different as to warrant separate consideration. In one example, Linda reported that:

someone walked into the fire and burned themselves and the Dumballa spirit came back to me and said that I needed to work in this capacity. We did a full healing on him. I don't really remember very much of it except just trying to balance the energy that he was giving off. He was fine, actually. He just had a few black spots on him afterwards – the next day – even though he had, I guess, when they took him to the hospital, third degree burns.

When asked how often she would have altered states experiences, Edith reported that:

In minute ways that are minimal and not incredibly relevant, just about every day. It took me years to realise that this was happening. Walking into a room and knowing what people are thinking and finding through practical experience that they were really thinking that. Now I'm not saying that their thought pattern was verbatim, what I may have picked up. I don't pick up words, I pick up feelings.

Donna and Mitch also reported picking up information about people in ways described by Donna as “just there from somewhere.” Mitch described it as follows:

There was also an immediacy of knowing impressions from other people very fast. I was trying to determine at the time if I was just reading their face really closely or if I was actually reading their mind. I was very much of a sceptic at that time.... So I was thinking, ‘well, I'm just reading your face, I'm reading your body language. I'm picking up cues in your voice’ and so forth. But I was picking up stuff that was not said. I was picking up stuff that people had kept private to themselves and thought nobody but themselves knew.

Mitch also reported healing wounds and making unexpected prophesies my body would touch things on the other person and ... people afterwards were telling me that cuts they received during the day were immediately healed and said that I had prophesied – I had told them things that nobody else knew, that came true almost immediately for them.

Physical Manifestations

Even more difficult than external corroboration were physical manifestations connected to the experience, but there were a few incidents in addition to the

healings which were reported. In one mentioned earlier, Zeb took body temperature and found it elevated. In another, Peter reported that:

...some people were taking some pictures of me and when they would take a picture of me they would see fire all around me. Fire all around me like I was standing in a bonfire, and if they would take a picture of somebody else it wouldn't be there, and so if I take the camera and take a picture of them there would be fire in every picture, and so they've got pictures where the circle is a fire a spiritual fire and you can see it in the pictures are around me all the time.

Unexpected Results

A fairly typical strategy by which people were authenticating their experiences to themselves was that they reported obtaining results that were unexpected. In one example, when asked how he knew that he had succeeded in invoking the other, Zeb reported that, "Well, when it's an intentional process, when I'm being surprised. When my perceptions of what's going on somehow are different from what I would expect in my own imagination. I felt very strongly that if it was simply my imagination I would have gotten something more amenable to my desires." Of course, these reports were clearly not intended as evidence for the interviewer, because there can never be any opportunity to verify the report.

3. Organisational Context

While Neopagan organisations generally try to avoid authorising claims, there are situations in which they will present an authorisation argument: if they are attempting to establish their authority as an organisation, if they are attempting to teach students practices to achieve altered states experiences, and finally, if they are responding to claims that encroach on their boundary. The strategies for organisations can be seen as extended versions of authentication strategies used by individuals, but this extension explicitly includes appeals to the values and ideals of their target community. The authorisation strategy often focuses on demonstrating that the organisation is worthy of the target audience's trust by establishing (1) the credibility of the founders by establishing their perceptual competence, reputation, moral concern, and disinterestedness; (2) the authenticity of the experience which provided the rationale for the organisation and the validity of their interpretation; (3) that the organisation is a true carrier of the 'magical current' of the founder; and (4) that audience members can verify the visions

by performing similar magical procedures. This strategy can be seen in the following examples.

Aleister Crowley and the "Great Revelation"

Perhaps the best documented example of a psychism claim that authorised a Neopagan organisation is Aleister Crowley's "great revelation" which has been carefully maintained and promoted by the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO). The OTO is an organisation that bridges the occult revivals of the late nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries, and has been very influential in the late twentieth century revival either directly from people being interested in its materials or indirectly from materials borrowed or adapted from it (Adler 1979; Kelly 1991; Hutton 1999). It presents itself as an organisation dedicated to preserving and disseminating the original form of the revelation received in 1904 and an orthodoxy of interpretation.¹⁵ It produced an authorised narrative¹⁶ on "how the Revelation was obtained" (Crowley 1994:389) in response to their interpretation of the statement in the manuscript itself which says "... all this and a book to say how thou didst come hither" (Crowley 1994:316).

This narrative first attempts to establish Crowley's credibility by focusing on his perceptual competence, moral concern, and personal disinterest in advancing his social status. It starts by building an image of Crowley as a type of "imperfect genius." It describes him as having "possessed natural intellectual ability to an altogether extraordinary degree. He had a faculty of memory, especially verbal memory in astonishing perfection." When he was tested on a number of authors, he "was able to place exactly any phrase from any of these books and in nearly every case to continue with the passage" (Crowley 1994:390). The narrative describes him as an honours student at Cambridge, a great (amateur) chess player, poet, mountain climber, and a man of "inhuman unselfishness ... not incompatible with consuming and insatiable personal ambition." On the other hand, it attempts to "humanise" him by describing his limitations as being unable to "apply himself to any subject which did not appeal to him" and unable to "[put] the finishing touches to anything he started." The following build a sense of general disinterest in material gain:

...a man of such unimaginably commanding qualities as to have made him world-famous in so many spheres of action, ... [he was] so grotesquely unable to make use of his faculties, or even his achievements, in any ordinary channels of human activity; to consolidate his personal pre-eminence, or even secure his position from a social or economic viewpoint. (Crowley 1994:392)

The narrative returns to his perceptual competence with descriptions of his knowledge and skills in a number of belief systems and practices. He was brought up in a very religious family and knew the Bible well enough to “find almost any verse after a few minutes search.”¹⁷ As an accomplished magician: “he invoked certain Gods, Goddesses, and Spirits to visible appearance, learnt how to heal physical and moral diseases, how to make himself invisible, how to obtain communications from spiritual sources, how to control other minds, etc., etc. [sic]” (Crowley 1994:394). He became dissatisfied with the existing western magical systems and became adept at eastern meditation practices, but then abandoned them all to what he describes as a study of metaphysics – “he devoted his intellect to the cult of absolute reason” (Crowley 1994:405). But, following the narrative, this was in accordance with the plan of his “Secret Chief” from the spirit realm, what he also referred to as the Argenteum Astrum, or more commonly the “A.:A.:”:

At the period of writing, it is evident for what purpose our student was led into this state. It was not to the Magician, not to the mystic, it was to the member of the Rationalist Press Association that the great Revelation was to be made. It was necessary to prove to him that there was in actual truth a Sanctuary, that there was in sober earnest a body of Adepts. ... [Though these are spirit, not physical, they are] conscious Beings in possession of the deepest secrets of Nature, pledged to the uplifting of humanity, filled with Truth, Wisdom, and Understanding. (Crowley 1994:401)

The subtext of this portion of the narrative is that Crowley was credible because (1) as a scholarly and adventurous man, capable of intense discipline, he had the perceptual competence to have the revelation, and (2) as someone willing to forego social and economic standing to struggle through all of the known avenues to find some sense of ‘ultimate truth’ to give to humanity, he had the moral conviction and personal disinterest in his own social position to advance a believable claim. That this claim is described as “an event which will lead, as time will show, to the establishment of a New Heaven and New Earth for all men” (Crowley 1994:403) is apparently not seen as detracting from the assertion of Crowley’s personal disinterest because it was given to him by the Secret Chiefs, not something he pursued.

This assertion that “the Revelation” was guided by from spirit realm and came despite, not because of, Crowley’s magical skills, marks the transition from establishing Crowley’s credibility to authorising the revelation. In the

following, Crowley is referred to as “Fra P” or just “P”: “The A.:A.: subtly prepared Fra. P. by over two years training in rationalism and indifferentism for Their message. And we shall find that so well did They do Their work that he refused the message for five years more, in spite of the strange proofs of its truth” (Crowley 1994:404). Note that the assertion of the claim included the authentication technique of unexpected results in that Crowley had initially “refused the message.”

The “proofs” that are promised come in the form of the authentication techniques of enhanced abilities and unusual behaviours of his wife, written at the beginning of the 1900s from a viewpoint that would be described at the end of the 1900s as outrageously sexist. As a preface to this narrative, I found that many OTO members (including women) describe Crowley as “advanced for his time” in his attitude regarding women. If so, then the following might be seen as a rhetorical attempt to exaggerate the improbability of the events and the unusualness of her behaviours.

The narrative asserts that “the great Message came to him came, not through the mouth of any person with any pretensions to any knowledge of this or any other sort, but through an empty headed woman of society” (Crowley 1994:402). The narrative says that the process by which the manuscript was delivered started with Crowley’s wife, Rose, becoming “inspired” during a ritual that he performed “to amuse” her while they were in Egypt. She told him, “They’re waiting for you” that day, and over the next couple days it was “about the child,” and “all Osiris,” and that “the waiter was Horus, whom I [Crowley] had offended and ought to invoke” (Crowley 1994:408). Crowley did not believe his wife at first and “cross-examined” her, initially agreeing to follow her instructions “in order to show her how silly she was.” However, the “striking character of her identification of the God” convinced him that she was communicating instructions from some source beyond herself. This “identification” was authenticated using an improbable event, for which Crowley computed the probability of Rose randomly answering correctly the 12 tests he gave her at 1:21,168,000. The narrative asserts:

We cannot too strongly insist on the extraordinary character of this identification. We had made no pretension to clairvoyance; nor had P. ever tried to train her. P. had great experience with clairvoyants, and it was always a point of honor with him to bowl them out. And here was a novice, a woman who should never been allowed outside of a ballroom, speaking with the authority of God, and proving it by unhesitating correctness. (Crowley 1994:409)

The narrative next employs the authentication technique of external corroboration. As one of the tests, Crowley took his wife to a museum to have her identify an image of Horus, but she walked passed several and went straight to a wooden stele from the 26th Dynasty (ca 725 BCE) of Ankhefenkhons I, of whom Crowley later claimed to be a reincarnation. The narrative finally offers a series of numerological proofs, or “name coincidences of the Qabalah,” for which the logic is idiosyncratic to Crowley’s religious system, but which are a variant of unexpected results. It concludes that Crowley related that, “the coincidences were much more numerous and striking than those we have been able to reproduce here; but his attitude is, we understand, that after all ‘It’s all in Liber Legis. Success is thy proof: argue not; convert not; talk not overmuch!’ And indeed in the Commentary to that Book will be found sufficient [proof] for the most wary of inquirers” (Crowley 1994:418).

This authorising organisational narrative for the OTO uses a number of the same validating procedures as the individualised accounts of possession. It focuses on the unusual behaviours of his wife, that she was operating with enhanced abilities, and that it would have been highly improbable that she could have correctly answered the tests without spiritual guidance. The stele was offered as a form of external corroboration, and the narrative of his state of mind at that point suggested that such an intense direct communication from the spirit world was unexpected.

As noted earlier, Crowley’s organisation, the OTO, was dedicated both to maintaining the orthodoxy of Crowley’s revelation and to helping its students achieve a similar connection with the spirit world and to bringing spiritual knowledge to the world. The OTO’s attempt at orthodoxy, which includes the classification scheme for revelations and regular focus on Crowley’s work, can be seen as connecting the group’s authority to the authority of Crowley’s initial revelation. But this revelation is seen as ongoing as students of his magical techniques are taught to achieve their own connection with the “Secret Chiefs”.

Crowley attempted to institutionalise a focus on establishing the authenticity of spiritual results through a highly methodical and systematic practice which he described as “scientific illuminism”. The motto of the *Equinox*, Crowley’s journal for publishing these results was “the aim of religion and the method of science.” Crowley distinguished his practice of scientific illuminism from magic as entertainment and stage tricks by spelling the former as “magick” and the latter as “magic.” He described his work as

making “an Epoch in the Art of Magick by applying the Method of Science to its problems ... The Magicians of tomorrow will be armed with mathematical theory, organised observation, and experimentally-verified practice” (Crowley 1994:264). In one set of instructions to aspirants to his magical order (the A.:A.:), he writes:

By such methods, the A.:A.: intends to make occult science as systematic and scientific as chemistry; to rescue it from the ill repute which, thanks both to the ignorant and dishonest quacks that have prostituted its name, and to the fanatical and narrow-minded enthusiasts that have turned it into a fetish, has made it an object of aversion to those very minds whose enthusiasm and integrity make them most in need of its benefits, and most fit to obtain them.

It is the one really important science, for it transcends the conditions of material existence ... and it must be studied as a science, skeptically, with the utmost energy and patience.

(Crowley 1994:488)

His instructions to followers included:

It is absolutely necessary that all experiments should be recorded in detail during, or immediately after, their performance. It is highly important to note the physical and mental condition of the experimenter or experimenters. The time and place of all experiments must be noted; also the state of the weather, and generally all conditions which might conceivably have any result upon the experiment either as adjuvants or to causes of the result, or as inhibiting it, or as sources of error. (Crowley 1994:593)

Many contemporary Neopagan groups consciously pursued these ideas whether or not they were affiliated with the organisations authorised by Crowley. Members of one non-affiliated group, the Crystal Serpent, took his ideas seriously and regarded themselves as “experimental magicians.” One “experiment” involved the “spirit of coldness,” in which the group created a process to evoke a spirit which should make objects colder into a ritually prepared object that had a thermometer. Identical objects with thermometers were also placed in the room, but not in the area in which this “spirit” was supposed to manifest. The participants all agreed that they were successful in evoking the spirit and that the prepared object felt colder to the touch, but a check of the thermometers showed that it was the same temperature as the controls.

Maat

One final example of organisational claims surrounding Crowley's revelation involves a claim that attempted to update Crowley's system. Crowley's *Book of the Law* proclaimed the "equinox of the Gods" in which the old "Aeon of Osiris" was passing away to a new "Aeon of Horus," the Egyptian God of war who stated in the revelation, "I am the warrior Lord of the Forties; the Eighties cower before me and are abased." By the 1970s, the elitist, colonialist, and sometimes misogynistic attitudes inherent in Crowley's materials, which were characteristic of the period in which his vision was written, clashed with the egalitarian, pacifist, and feminist attitudes promoted by the counterculture. This tension created an opening for a new revelation, which was supposedly written (or "channelled") in December 1974 by Nema, and proclaimed that the influence of the Aeon of Maat (which Crowley had described as the next Aeon)¹⁸ would run simultaneously with the Aeon of Horus¹⁹ and help humanity to evolve enough so that it would survive the wars associated with Horus and ultimately reach the consciousness embodied in Maat.²⁰

This update was rejected by the more orthodox followers of the OTO, but achieved a wide acceptance from many other magicians whose practices followed the general theme of Crowley's work. The attitude of the OTO toward this attempt to update Crowley's work was exemplified by an encounter I had with members of the OTO who knew I was a friend of Nema's and the people who published her materials. I was confronted with questions about the authenticity of her experience. The OTO members suggested that she had channelled a text proclaiming a new Aeon so she could be the priestess of it. In a reflexive move that demonstrated to them the danger of authenticity contests, I responded that Crowley could be perceived as having done the same. The conversation ended as they appeared shocked that I would equate Nema's claim with Crowley's.

Caught in a storm of controversy, Nema utilised a number of credibility and authentication techniques to establish her claim. In the publication that carried an extension of her material, Nema (1983:5) asserted that the revelation was itself improbable and by retrospectively describing herself as "a neophyte whose initiation was quite recent and whose wisdom was embryonic. The uncouth condition of the vehicle attests to the validity of the transmission." Nema related her material to the lineage of Crowley, naming other authors from whom she drew inspiration and support. She then asserted her personal disinterest by rejecting the permanence of sacred texts:

With the Maat system, as with any other valid system, it's important to remember that no one flash of illumination is the only, or final one. When the Maat material succeeds in its aim, it becomes irrelevant to the practitioner. When the Maat transmissions achieve their stated purpose (ie the mutation of the human race), they will become an historical curiosity. ... The magickal system presented in these pages ... has its own modest limits, and has value only in its function as a doorway for the Priest(ess)-Magickian. ... Anything that deliberately seeks self-perpetuity is Black, and will be shunned by the wise. (Nema 1983:6-9)

Nema then went on the offensive against the OTO by using the countercultural ethos to represent the OTO as a part of the "establishment" that was being rejected by the movement:

To effect global change, while at the same time removing from ourselves a type of invisible restriction of our own growth, we must let go of the parameters of Crowleyanity and archaism of any kind. The awesome accomplishments of "the Master" have shaped our awareness into a relatively narrow view that knows not how to think, discover, or create in truly new ways. We accept his work and methodologies as our unquestioned premises, adopt his interests as our own, and spend time and energy going over old ground. (Nema 1983:72)

In this statement, she is effectively establishing a connection between her revelation and the external social events of the counterculture.

Nema addressed the issue of authority by first evoking a universal concept of truth (which the goddess Maat is supposed to personify), asserting that "Truth stands alone and needs no blessing of authority, scholarship, or perfection." She then addressed the question of perceptual competence by asserting the efficacy of her system, that "if the rituals are done precisely, they will work; belief or acceptance of their validity has nothing to do with the process." She concluded with the following:

The only authority cited for this publication of this material is Truth itself; the only acceptable verification of it is by means of immediate experience. As to its origins – whether it came from "the future," or from extraterrestrials, or from THAT, or tradition, or from an individual's imagination – take your own choice if there's a need for a pedigree. Determine for yourself the Truth and usefulness of it – or of anything – and do what thou wilt. (Nema 1983:9)

Nema was successful in defending her claim among the Neopagan community, where her material found wide acceptance. She has continued to publish new Maat material and is frequently featured at festivals.

5. Conclusion

The Neopagan movement is a dynamic religious movement under construction. It is a product of a convergence of non-Christian religions and the 1960s-1970s countercultural values, emphasising individualism, democratic empowerment, and entrepreneurialism – all of which resulted in a democratisation of revelation. However, these same values present problems in organising collective action around the resulting revelations because they impede the development of structures with which to collectively authorise the revelation. Neopagans resolve this by authorising revelations around which a consensus can develop and that solve collective problems. On an individual and organisational basis, Neopagans authenticate claims in a way that is similar to the early empiricists – by examining the claimant’s social standing, the narrative structure of the claim, and the interests of the claimant and the judge.

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Notes

¹ Respondents were recruited in accordance with procedures established through the Bloomington Campus Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, Bryan Hall, Room 10a, Bloomington, IN 47405-1219. Approval was obtained under the title “Self in Trance.” In accordance with the protocols, all respondent names are pseudonyms.

² Personal experience at a full moon ritual I attended in the Fall of 1994. The two religious subgroups were the ceremonial magician members of the OTO and Wiccans from the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans (CUUPs).

³ Personal experience. The group was called the Crystal Serpent and was active in the early to late 1980s. The series of rituals was considered an “exercise” in learning the magical system and received positive feedback from other magicians at the time. These correspondences have been recorded and updated at www.kiva.net/~julianus/qtnqbl.html.

⁴ Personal experience and discussions with members of the “Third Shift,” late 1990s.

⁵ Circle experienced a revolt by people who described themselves as “the Circle volunteers...[who] get mailings out to you, give rides, house out-of-town visitors, do dishes, cook, cut wood, mow lawns, and sweep up after rituals.” They were upset with a revelation by the leader, Selena Fox, that Circle should no longer be a Wiccan group. (1990 mailing from the splinter group under the name Phoenix Arcana). The ELF Elder Council continually fought over whether policies and actions would diverge from the original psychically transmitted vision (per the Operations Manual Elf-Fest 1986 Guidebook and Winter Mass Mailing 1990 – in personal archives) or would evolve in accordance with the new membership (personal experience as ELF Elder).

⁶ ELF’s By-Laws require a consensus of the Elder Council. Personal experience 1985-1993 demonstrated that this is not an efficient or necessarily a satisfying means of collective action.

⁷ Some examples of the diversity of workshops listed in the 1999 Starwood Festival Guide include: “Intro to the Santeria Pantheon”, “Post-Tribal Shamanism”, “Create

Your Own Goddess”, “Nude Partner Yoga” and “Magic for Potheads”. Some workshops listed in the 1998 Starwood Festival Guide not oriented to esoteric claims include “Tarp Time: Learning the Ropes with Tarpman and Tentgirl” and “Brushwood Tree Planting Ritual”.

⁸ This started with the first festival’s advertisement which states that “all folks ... are encouraged to conjure up a workshop or more on your specialty. ... the information you have gathered in your life may be just what the next person is looking for!” (Wild Magick Bulletin, dated as “mid-winter 1984”, personal archives). This issue was debated at length in subsequent Elder Council meetings as the ELF festivals grew and were in competition with festivals which had organised workshop schedules and included people who were recognised in the Neopagan community for presenting good workshops.

⁹ This has since been moved online at <http://w3.iac.net/~moonweb/archives/ArchivesFrm.html>.

¹⁰ Personal communications with proprietors Luis Martinie and Mishlin Linden in the late 1980s.

¹¹ Personal communication, late 1980s.

¹² This account was verified by Eli Elva and his wife in a discussion on 25 August 2001.

¹³ For a discussion of esoteric culture specific logic, see Collins & Pinch (1982).

¹⁴ My discussions with Black Moon proprietors indicated that many Neopagans used their archive to look for similar ends – comparing results to authenticate and validate the results of their spiritual experiences.

¹⁵ However, in pure Neopagan fashion, members of the group are considered by many in the movement to have been the authors of a remarkably well written parody – the *Book of the In-Law*, which refers the original’s title, the *Book of the Law*. That the OTO would produce it was gratifying to non-OTO followers of Crowley and seen as a sign by the OTO of solidarity with the general attitudes of the Neopagan movement.

¹⁶ This was originally published as *The Equinox of the Gods* (OTO 1936).

¹⁷ Despite his obvious non-Christian beliefs, this claim might also be interpreted as establishing a moral basis for Crowley. His belief system can be seen as an attempt at transcending Christianity (seen as the “Aeon of Osiris”) by establishing the “Aeon of Horus.” In this way his moral message is a transcendence of Christian morality: “Christianity and all cognate religions worship death, glorify suffering, deify corpses. The new Aeon is the worship of the spiritual made one with the material” (see Crowley 1994:443).

¹⁸ Reportedly in his book *Magick without Tears*.

¹⁹ “There exists at this time a developing system of Thelemic Magick designed to bring into existence a new species of Man. For convenience sake, it’s called Maat Magick; its origins are in the Aeon of Maat, which is a way of beholding existence. Aeonic terminology is confusing in that it applies both microcosmically and macrocosmically. In the large, an Aeon is defined by the prevailing mode of living

and belief practiced by the human race and characterised by distinctive socio-religious motifs. Microcosmically, all Aeons exist simultaneously; they are a function of spiritual evolution and clarity of perception. To have access to all Aeons, one must disengage from all assumptions of time, space, and identity. To the Time Traveller, space is Here and time is Now” (Nema 1983:5).

²⁰ Personal communications with Nema, late 1980s.