

Chapter Seven

Spiritualism and paganism

In this last ethnographic chapter I turn to religious traditions that lay on the social edges of the Nottinghamshire network: spiritualism and paganism. By discussing my fieldwork at a spiritualist healing circle and an occult study group, without seeing these as strictly representative of each tradition respectively, I explore similarities and dissimilarities with my other fieldwork sites. There was social movement between all these sites, as well as with others within these three traditions such as an Anthroposophical group and a magick group (both briefly described here), and spiritualist churches, the Theosophical Society, a group focused on Gurdjieff, and an astrology group. There are also overlaps between each of these traditions themselves; indeed, they can be seen as elements within Euro-American religious revivals from the late nineteenth century. Each part of this chapter first deals with more general points about the history, organization and authority of each tradition, before turning to my fieldwork. Discussion about their formative tendencies distinguishes them from my other research sites and it is this issue that is taken up in a more theoretical and explanatory manner in the concluding chapter.

The spiritualist healing circle

Spiritualism in historical and social context

Spiritualism has featured throughout my previous chapters, with many people shown to have trained with mediums, attended spiritualist churches or becoming influenced by groups such as White Eagle Lodge. Spreading from the Eastern United States in the nineteenth century in a context of broad religious revival associated with trance, ecstasy and possession experiences (Taves, 1999), spiritualist practices of communication with the deceased developed into a bewildering variety of organizational forms: churches, cults, circles and entertainment. Although spiritualism declined after the First World War, it remained a lively and important religious element in British popular culture (Hazelgrove, 2000). In a rare sociological study of spiritualism, Nelson (1969, pp. x–xi) draws out its ambiguous reactions and connections to wider Euro-American society in terms of what he sees as its democratic belief that anyone can communicate with the spirits of the deceased. Tracing the effect of this through the early years of spiritualism in Britain, Nelson (ibid., pp. 91, 96–7, 111–12, 165–7) describes the trouble that regional and national associations experienced in establishing themselves, only managing this when mediums came under increasing attack from various sectors of society such as the judiciary's invoking of the Witchcraft Act of 1735. Even with the establishment

of spiritualist churches, authority tended to become decentralized and dispersed, reflected in the circuit system of visiting mediums that was adopted from Methodism and Congregationalism: 'Spiritualism is based on the freedom and spontaneity of mediumship and many people feared the effect of formal organisation on this spontaneity' (Nelson, 1968, p. 474).

Although there arose, at times, prominent national figures, such as Emma Hardinge-Britten who helped establish the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU) in 1890, no figures stood for the whole tradition, not least because of the split between Christian and non-Christian spiritualists (Nelson, 1969, pp. 105, 241). Rather, authority played its greatest role at the local level, although it was often inhibited by being viewed as fraudulent, by the crediting of religious power to a medium's spirit guides rather than to mediums themselves, and by more than one medium sometimes claiming to receive messages from the same spirit (*ibid.*, pp. 242–5). Although these features hindered the formation of strong forms of social organization, Nelson draws out a number of points that demonstrate significant coherences within the tradition, concluding that 'Spiritualism then is a cultic movement containing within it centralized cults and a large number of independent local cults' (*ibid.*, p. 234). Healing formed a part of spiritualism from its earliest days and continues to be practised at church services and in circles (*ibid.*, p. 200). This aspect in part became formalized through the establishment of federal organizations to certify, aid and protect healers. The largest of these, the National Federation of Spiritualist Healers (NFSH), delegates authority to regional associations; publishes a monthly magazine; provides insurance, legal and advisory services; refers patients; organizes lectures and demonstrations; and negotiates with National Health Service hospitals for the admittance of its healers (*ibid.*, pp. 200–201).

Spiritualist healing

Twice a week, Alvin Simmonds held a spiritualist healing circle with his wife, Irene, and their friend, Edward. I have already described how I became acquainted with Alvin at the religious fair, where he held a stall and lectured. I was keen to investigate a spiritualist involved with the Nottinghamshire network because of the prominent role of the religion in the lives of many of those I had met. Alvin and the others were very happy for me to attend their meetings, which they allowed me to observe and which provided considerable opportunity for talking with them. This did not seem to disconcert their clients, who all declined Alvin's enquiry whether they preferred me not to be present. Indeed, many of the clients were enthusiastic in talking with me about their health troubles and their experiences of spiritualist healing. I continued this fieldwork for six months, during which time I also attended the fair.

The healing circle took place in the Simmonds's home, a bungalow in one of Nottingham's less affluent suburban areas. The client was seated on a stool around which the three healers would position themselves on an easy chair, another stool, the arm of a chair, or by kneeling on the floor. The healing would last between 20 and 40 minutes, after which there would be between 10 and 15 minutes' chat whilst Irene made a hot drink for the client – the chat would be very informal, particularly as the healers were usually tired by their exertions, and touched not only on how the

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healing had felt to the client and how he or she now felt, but also on how they had been keeping and how their lives were going. It seemed like an informal auditing session designed to gauge whether the healing was making any difference to their lives, and thus how long they should continue to attend. Within an hour of arriving the client would have left, leaving the healers to relax and gather their strength before the next arrived. There were three ways in which people heard about Alvin's work: through word of mouth from clients or other healers, through advertisements at fairs and spiritualist churches, and through his other religious practices such as the Tarot and clairvoyance (for which he charged fees, unlike these healing sessions).

Each session comprised three or four smaller periods in which the healing was stopped and started, with each healer changing their hand actions. This 'laying-on of hands', as Alvin called it, took three forms: a sweeping massage from the top of the client's head down the sides, to the neck, shoulders and back, which he called 'polishing the aura'; placement of both hands on a local part of the body, such as the cheeks, back of the head, or a thigh; and placement of the hands further apart, covering a wider area of the body, such as both knees, an arm, or the back. When all three healers had finished, they stood or sat back, appearing exhausted and flopping into comfy chairs, as the client took a minute to open her or his eyes, stretch, and feel different body parts such as the neck and back. The majority of clients expressed satisfaction with the healing, claiming an improvement in symptoms and describing to me the different feel of the 'energy' from each healer. Healing was seen not as a quick remedy but as an ongoing treatment. Whilst some clients only required a few sessions, others received several months of weekly or fortnightly attendance and frequently returned for more sets of sessions as new health problems arose, as well as referring relatives and friends to Alvin.

This spiritualist healing did not presuppose the clients' participation in spiritualist churches or further involvement with mediums, nor any overt acknowledgement of the role of the healers' spirit guides. It did, however, involve recognition of the authority of the healers – particularly Alvin, as the teacher of the other two, as I will explain – and many comments were made by clients to the healers and to me about the 'power' and 'energy' of Alvin. The contrasting feature to other healing practices that I had researched in the network was neither the exercise of authority by the healer, nor the fact that many clients believed their own power to be the crucial factor in healing (with this power enabled by that of the spirits and energies). Rather, it was the way in which this authority structured clients' experiences and their understanding of themselves. Over successive sessions, the majority increasingly talked about these in the same terms as did Alvin, not only employing the same terminology but, more importantly, viewing this healing as crucial for any effective treatment of their problems. Unlike in the meditation group, for example, authority in this circle provided a framework and not just a context for experiences and understanding. Moreover, again in contrast to the multiple authorities with which the meditators were involved, this framework was strengthened by clients' experiences of other mediums and spiritualist organizations (such as churches and other circles) because these multiple authorities tended to act in unison as regards such experiences and understanding. Thus, there was not the relativization of authority that I found elsewhere in the network, where the recognition of a healer's authority or efficacy

did not structure experiences and understandings in a formative manner but were inhibited by doing so as a result of involvement with other divergent authorities.

Attitudes to authority

It is useful to discuss Alvin's life history, since this is rather different from those that have been presented in previous chapters in that it shows a religious career within a specific tradition. In his forties and employed as a hospital porter, Alvin was brought up as an Anglican but said he did not interest himself in religion until his twenties, when his first wife and father died within six months of each other. This, he said, led to him asking 'the two fundamental questions', of whether there was a God and whether there was an afterlife. To answer these, Alvin decided to attend his local spiritualist church, there finding out for the first time that his paternal grandmother and father had both been practising mediums and certified healers. Comments by a medium at one service convinced him that his dead father's 'spirit' was 'alive' and led him to train in a spiritualist circle for three years, under a medium whom he regarded as good because he 'let spirit teach'. After that time, which included many 'wonderful experiences', Alvin found that his attitude to life had changed and he began a small 'home circle' at his mother's home (where he was living), as well as establishing a reputation for lecturing and for mediumistic abilities on the 'spiritualist church circuit'. Alongside this, Alvin trained as a counsellor, doing voluntary work with the charities Samaritans, Scope and Leukaemia Research, including as a social therapist at local hospitals.

Alvin told me that a turning-point in his work as a medium came when one of his 'spirit guides' led him to a book on mediums at a local spiritualist church library, after he had received a name by automatic writing. This name turned out to be that of a medium who had established a spiritualist circle or 'bureau' at the end of the nineteenth century before dying in tragic circumstances. Alvin 'instinctively' knew that he was to re-establish this bureau as a home circle to develop mediumistic, psychic and healing powers such as table-tapping and table-lifting, use of the Tarot and astrology, and homeopathy and meditation. His leaflets for this group described it as an 'alternative natural health and spiritual awareness centre'. Its meetings were held in a hired hall with as many as a dozen members, but it was temporarily disbanded as too many people had left or died. Coupled with this loss of activity was Alvin's discontinued involvement on the spiritualist circuit once he married Irene five years before my research, but he continued to attend religious fairs.

In spiritualist healing and clairvoyance, Alvin claimed access to eight spirit guides, all of whom once lived on earth, but at different times and in different societies. The spirit guide he had worked with for longest was a woman named Lee,¹ who Alvin said appeared to him nearly twenty years previous to my fieldwork and with whom he had formed an 'intimate relationship' such as is rare, he said, between any people. From the information she had given him about her life, Alvin managed to trace her origins to Vietnam, discovering that she lived and died there earlier in the twentieth century. Lee came to him often, he said, comforting him when he feels troubled and she has promised to be with him until the end of his life. Alvin said he could often see her near him even in everyday situations, and during clairvoyance

she stood behind him to tell him about his clients. It was another spirit, however, who directed his healing work, a man who had practised as a medical doctor whilst alive and whose existence Alvin had again verified by checking birth and medical records. But the most important spirit he worked with was White Cloud, who had been a Native American chieftain and who now acted as his 'doorkeeper', allowing access to Alvin only to those spirits who did not have malicious intent. Alvin said he had spoken to White Cloud only five times, to be told things of great importance (the details of which he did not wish to discuss with me, saying that they had been for his 'ears only'), although he always sees him when he is in contact with other spirits.

The sort of possession that Alvin experienced was not, he said, 'trance-mediumship', by which he meant cases where spirits take over the bodies and minds of mediums to speak and act through them – although he had experienced that once in his life. Rather, the spirits spoke to him, giving him information about people's lives and illnesses, or directing him how to interpret Tarot cards, and gently manipulated his hands during healing sessions, the better to transmit the energy that flowed through him. At the time of research, Alvin may be described as having reached a mature stage in his spirit possession career, whereby he had mastered both his contacts with spirits and his social context of possession (in the sense of managing a healing circle, holding stalls and delivering lectures), as well as training those new to possession. It was through him that Irene and Edward, who originally came to him for healing for cardiovascular problems and alcoholism, began to develop their own abilities. In fact, Edward still received healing from him and Irene, usually being the first client of one of the twice-weekly sessions. Although he had attended spiritualist churches and healing circles for a number of years, Edward's mediumistic abilities only developed, he told me, when he came to Alvin for healing several months before my research. He had now acquired a medical doctor as a 'spirit guide' and begun to practise aromatherapy, reflexology and homeopathy in conjunction with his healing as a medium. As for Irene, Alvin was acting as her trainer to be a certified healer with the Healer Practitioner Association (HPA), for which she was required to spend nine months training with a certified healer.

Alvin's social position was also indicated by his authoritative statements that came not from spirits but from his own reflection on social issues, such as about a 'new science' that will take account of 'psychic issues', as expressed to Irene, Edward and myself, as well as to some clients and in his lectures at the fair. Unlike channelling, then, spiritualist healing may be seen as formative for four reasons. Firstly, it is usual to train for a relatively long period with an established healer. Secondly, this training usually takes place in a context where others are being trained, such that the trainee forms part of a group. Thirdly, there are several marked stages to this training, such as becoming used to being contacted by spirits, acquiring a spirit guide or doorkeeper, and, eventually, taking on clients by oneself. Fourthly, standardized forms of recognition exist for mature, established healers, such as certified membership of the HPA or NFSH. This relatively strong authority structure in spiritualist groups, notwithstanding participants' ambiguous attitudes to authority, is shown in Locke's (1983), Skultans's (1974) and Zaretsky's (1977) ethnographic studies. This is also shown by the greater degree of personal rivalry amongst the spiritualists in the network in comparison to other authorities. Alvin

and Irene frequently made critical comments about other mediums and their lack of real powers or inflated egos. Alvin, for example, talked negatively on a number of occasions about Matthew Manning and Doris Stokes. Another instance of rivalry occurred at the Derbyshire religious fair which I attended with Alvin. In the late morning, after I had helped him set up his stall and then gone to investigate on my own what the fair had to offer, Alvin complained to me and to the woman who held the stall next to his, about his lack of clients. He attributed this in part to his position at the back of the hall but mostly to another medium who had a stall nearby and who was doing better business than he. This woman had, he explained, placed a spell on the other mediums' stalls that surrounded them with negative energy and thus drove away potential clients. He had been able to feel this energy and to counter it he said he had performed a spell of his own. When I asked Alvin in the afternoon if his spell had worked, he told me that it had and, with a grin on his face, pointed out the lack of clients at the woman's stall.

As such, becoming a spiritualist healer or medium clearly involves different forms of authority and social organization than those groups considered in previous chapters. Yet in some ways, this spiritualist circle and its members, as well as other spiritualists I met whilst researching the network, bore similarities to people in those groups, enabling it to exist on the periphery of the nonformative regions of the religious field. There existed a relatively strong criticism of spiritualist organizations, and a tendency to develop abilities in other practices and to hold views drawn from outside the remit of these organizations. Alvin was outspokenly critical of spiritualism and those involved with it, saying in fact that he did not describe himself as a 'spiritualist', for there is too much 'politics' involved within it, although he occasionally attended those spiritualist churches in the region which he described as 'nice'. He was also critical of the 'spiritualist circuit', claiming that today's 'spiritual readings' (that is, pronouncements by mediums during seances) concentrate on the audiences' 'feelings', rather than, as in the past, providing 'facts' about their lives, such as street names of where people used to live. This meant, he said, that people are not given the evidence that will convince them their dead loved ones are alive, which was important in prompting his involvement with the movement. Likewise, Irene expressed dissatisfaction with spiritualist groups, explaining that she would not join a spiritualist development circle because she disliked the jealousies that arose in them, but regularly attended the United Reform Church for its preferable 'atmosphere'. Like Michael, Alvin and Edward held criticisms of such circles for allowing human teachers to take precedence over spirit guides. Alvin and Edward practised other forms of therapy and all three actively participated in religious fairs in the region, expressing considerable interest about the other practices and groups they encountered in these.

A note on the Anthroposophical group

Arising from spiritualism, the Theosophical Society and its subsequent splinter groups such as the Anthroposophical Society (founded by Rudolf Steiner in 1912) marked a more erudite and middle-class development from the late nineteenth century. Unfortunately space does not allow any detailed discussion of the

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Anthroposophical group I researched at the start of my fieldwork; instead, I have concentrated on spiritualism, because this was important in the life histories of so many in the network, and paganism, because the relationship between the New Age and paganism has received significant scholarly attention. Nevertheless, some brief ethnographic remarks on this group can be made to indicate its relatively formative nature. The group's fortnightly meetings involved a series of short readings, followed by discussion, of texts by Steiner, with one of his chosen books being worked through meeting by meeting, this being Steiner's (1986 [1906]) *At the Gates of Spiritual Science* during my attendance. These discussions were managed by Tom and Maria, the two leaders of the group, who in a subtle but firm manner brought them back continually to Anthroposophical issues and terminology.

One example of this concerned a woman new to the group who purported a view openly critical of Steiner's comments in a passage we had just read (namely, Steiner, 1986, pp. 114–16). In this passage, Steiner (*ibid.*, p. 115) distinguishes between 'three different ways of development': the 'Eastern way' or 'Yoga', in which an initiate follows a 'Guru' and whose 'absolute surrender of one's own self suits the Indian character; but there is no place for it in European culture'; the 'Christian way' in which 'there is one great Guru, Christ Jesus Himself'; and the 'Rosicrucian way' in which the 'Guru' acts not as a leader but as an adviser, providing directions for 'inner training'. This woman objected strongly to such a view of yoga, explaining how it had benefited herself and other 'westerners' she knew. Maria took the lead in defending Steiner's views by arguing that other 'cultures' could not be comprehended because they are at a different 'evolutionary stage' to the 'West'. Thus, she explained, 'Eastern practices' should not be sought for 'spiritual development'. When the new attender continued to disagree and to argue that it was 'silly' not to make use of practices that had proven so 'spiritually beneficial', Tom interjected slowly and quietly to reiterate Steiner's position at some length, drawing attention to a passage in the previous chapter (*ibid.*, pp. 99–102) that had been read in the last meeting that this woman had not attended. There, he reminded us, Steiner argued that Indians are 'the first sub-race of the Aryan race' and as such are to be distinguished from 'the fifth sub-race, to which we [Steiner and his assumed audience] ourselves belong' of the 'Germans and Anglo-Saxons'. Then, drawing our attention to the next chapter we would cover (*ibid.*, pp. 117–28), Tom explained how 'these evolutionary differences' apply to all areas of our lives, such as economics and bodily posture. Tom's interjection terminated this discussion of yoga, for he then asked Maria to begin our study of this chapter by reading the first few pages; the woman who had defended yoga was given no opportunity to reply. It is important to note, however, that she did not attend again.

With between 12 and 16 participants in the group, six of these had regularly attended for at least two years and focused their discussions on Anthroposophy and Steiner. My conversations with them showed a strong Anthroposophical identification, despite some being involved with other religious practices such as channelling workshops or religious fairs. Clearly, they did not engage with these other authorities to the extent that they upset the formativeness of Anthroposophical authority. However, as in the example provided, the other attenders were much more likely and willing to divert discussions to other issues and to refer to other authorities, leading to contestations with the core Anthroposophists. Their failure to achieve this

in any enduring manner left them frustrated with the group (expressed publicly and privately) and usually meant that they did not attend for very long. One of these was Anne, the retired civil servant who introduced me to other groups and expressed strong criticism at how the group was run. The relatively formative nature of this group may therefore be compared to the spiritualist and pagan groups I researched, but contrasted to those discussed in previous chapters.

The occult study group

Pagan formations

The history and development of modern paganism is even more complex than that of spiritualism and Theosophy, in part because of the greater strength of local geographical and historical strands. These include witchcraft, druidry, shamanism, magic and occultism, although none unambiguously identifies a set of social phenomena and each covers a wide range of histories and developments. Despite this, there have been sufficient points of contact between these strands, and sufficient formation of common identities, for 'paganism' to stand as a useful and accurate description. Here, I will discuss paganism's formative tendencies before turning to my fieldwork with an occult study group on the fringes of the Nottinghamshire network.

Hutton's (1999) history of 'modern pagan witchcraft' traces in detail the invention of this religion in Britain from the early nineteenth century, as a number of largely erudite and wealthy people drew eclectically on writings and practices from folk traditions and post-Enlightenment occultism, magic and secret societies. There is evidence of the formation of isolated covens with limited authorities of priestesses and priests, but in the middle decades of the twentieth century there developed two specific strands of witchcraft (or Wicca): Gardnerian in the 1940s and Alexandrian in the 1960s. These established more persistent and identifiable traditions and social organizations that spread popularly, due to the publications of their founders Gerald Gardner and Alex Sanders, and to media interest. This occurred both nationally and internationally such that in Euro-America today there is widespread popular interest in witchcraft (Ezzy, 2003), as well as a thriving coven scene. Within witchcraft, which as Greenwood (2000) and Luhrmann (1989) show substantially intersects with magic and occultism, there are different emphases. There has also emerged a strong feminist current, which in San Francisco and partly due to the authority of one witch, Starhawk, took a staunchly social activist direction (Hutton, 1999, pp. 340–68). Significantly, Hutton (*ibid.*, p. 413) concludes that 'pagan witchcraft ... is more than a shared set of stories, language, or images, and more than a common store of deities or texts. It has a common identity and a common institutional structure.'

Witchcraft has spread by initiates deciding to set up their own covens, often by splitting from existing ones and taking a number of members with them (Luhrmann, 1989, p. 38), as well as by claiming authority on the basis of the lineage of their training. Covens are small groups, mostly with numbers in single digits, usually led by a woman (the priestess), often in conjunction with a male priest. These

exercise authority within the group by directing and taking leading roles in rituals, by the training of uninitiated members, and by the management of relations within the group, members of which are not supposed to belong to more than one coven (Hutton, 1999, p. 389). Yet there is considerable contestation of this authority, such as by those initiated members who wish to claim more weight in the running of the coven, and because many members maintain an active interest and participation in a range of pagan practices and groups (Greenwood, 2000, pp. 138–43; Luhrmann, 1989, pp. 27, 33–5; Magliocco, 2004, pp. 11–12; Simes 1995b, p. 187).

A significant formative factor within witchcraft is the practice of structurally prescribed rituals at certain times of the year, especially the cross-quarter days of Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain, but also the equinoxes and solstices. These involve drawing circles as a protective boundary, calling on elements to connect with nature, symbolic enactment of couplings and sacrifices (particularly by the priestess and priest), and the invocation of deities (particularly the goddess) in order to communicate with, or enter the bodies of, the ritual participants (for descriptions of rituals, see Greenwood, 2000, pp. 84–102). These prescriptions allow for a large degree of improvisation in terms of spoken texts, the structure of the action, objects used, roles adopted, and so on (Luhrmann, 1989, p. 70). Even within the same coven, rituals are likely to differ from one year to the next and are often the cause of conflicts. Covens also practise less formal rituals at their regular meetings, as well as teaching systems of magic (such as the Tarot, the Kabbalah and astrology) and meditation or visualization. Magliocco (2004, p. 147) argues that pagans largely agree about what rituals should feel or look like; indeed, it is because there is such a basis that contestations over group rituals make sense, because there is something common to contest. Furthermore, the strength of this commonality is reflected in the strength of contestations, since pagans believe that what they are contesting has social value. The persistence of rivalry within paganism, often taking public forms, is again confirmed by Magliocco (*ibid.*, p. 116) who notes incidences in which pagans felt others in their 'community' had attacked them, particularly those with whom they had had disagreements although the 'accused always denied the allegations', and by Hutton (1999, p. 408) who claims that 'British Pagan networks are ... riddled with rivalry and gossip'.

Thus, despite the presence of endemic power struggles that frequently dissolve or weaken groups, there are strong and enduring identifications that establish differences with outsiders. 'Pagan' has emerged as one of the most important of these, in part fostered through the institutionalization of common identities such as through national conferences and associations (Greenwood, 2000, p. 6; Hutton, 1999, pp. 371–3; on national organizations, events, sanctuaries and temples in the United States, including in response to perceived threats and misrepresentations, see Hartman, 1976, p. 175; Kelly, 1992, pp. 142–5). The Pagan Federation, based in the United Kingdom, has an institutionalized authority structure and membership, and one of its key roles is in endorsing pagan prison chaplains, which, as Beckford and Gilliat (1998) show, is a key area in which religious organizations attempt to define themselves. These formative tendencies are shown not only by the strength of networking across groups but, crucially, also by the emergence of study groups and discussion forums, which assume common interests and identities (Greenwood,

2000, pp. 3–4; Harvey, 2000, pp. 165–6). Within the English network of pagan groups she studied, Simes (1995a, pp. 331–2) describes the negative reaction to the idea of creating a national central pagan meetinghouse. But what is noteworthy is that such a project was discussed in the first place and that it was rejected on the basis of being too permanent and costly, and involving too many problems of ownership, which suggests common recognition of a pagan identity (however ambiguous) that *could* be represented nationally.

Magliocco (2004, pp. 57–60, 70–71, 84–91) explores this sense of common identity within the pagan scene in California by focusing upon the concern of her field subjects with who is or is not part of their community or movement (most commonly identified as 'pagan'). This has led to what she refers to as an ethnicization of paganism and the emergence of jokes that address issues of boundaries (as well as differences *amongst* pagans).² Magliocco (*ibid.*, pp. 62–4) also draws attention to the formation of identity through consumption and the resultant presentation of selves and homes, which clearly can be related to a sense of taste by which social groups mark themselves off from each other. Simes (1995a, pp. 102–3, 149, 393) similarly likens paganism to an ethnic identity, because it is formed through boundary-making and not just because those from different traditions share a commitment to ritualizing or to a common vision. Furthermore, ethnographies show that an important element of pagan boundary-making is the drawing of distinctions with what they perceive the New Age to be (Lindquist, 1997, pp. 289–90; Magliocco, 2004, pp. 84–7), a project that scholarly accounts of the New Age and paganism have replicated through their methodological adoption of folk models for sociological explanation (see Greenwood, 2000, pp. 8–11; Prince and Riches, 2000, pp. 250–63; York, 1995).

Nottinghamshire paganism

The meetings of the occult study group Each meeting of an occult study group in Nottinghamshire, which I attended in the four winter months of 1993–94, was devoted to exploring in detail a topic, by a talk and discussion lasting approximately two hours, and to socializing, lasting at least a further two hours. About a dozen people attended, eight of whom were regular attenders, with roughly equal numbers of men and women, but the average age of about thirty was at least ten years younger than those other groups with which fieldwork was conducted. The meetings rotated between the houses of three of those who presented talks: Martin, Susan and Mary. During the whole of 1993, the founder of the group, Martin, led 16 of the 25 meetings, with the others shared by a further seven speakers.

Martin had founded the group by getting some friends together, by posting notices in an alternative bookshop at the end of 1992, and by advertising in what he described as 'a local pagan magazine'. This latter was done, he said, specifically to 'link up with pagans' in the area. He attempted to run the group with some formality, organizing a newsletter at the winter solstice of 1993 and a trip to Arbor Low stone circle in the nearby Peak national park earlier that summer. The meetings were held every other Friday evening, like the meditation group, but lasting beyond 11.00 pm. The topics covered in the group provide an insight into its treatment of religious issues, being dominated by ancient traditions: creation myths, Nostradamus, Theosophy, Egyptian

pyramids, stone circles, both personal conviction and the history of religion in religious matters. Those who utilized such a group taking part-time attendance with a view to enrolling another attendee, an older couple, Leon and

The meetings began after the talk had been presented by key participants (two were held) decided to have a (sometimes) name, reinforcing the last between 40 and 50 minutes. Martin sat cross-legged and props; Leon's practical, such as we could experience significant amount of notes), often starting of the relevance of

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pyramids, stone circles, Celts and Toltecs all featured throughout 1993–1994. In both personal conversations and public speech, participants showed an interest in the history of religion and frequently included psychological and sociological views on religious matters. This was particularly espoused by, although not confined to, those who utilized such perspectives in their work and educational studies: Martin was taking part-time Access (A-level equivalent) courses in psychology and sociology with a view to entering university; his partner (Marion) and Suzi (the partner of another attendee, Peter) were taking postgraduate courses in social work; and an older couple, Leon and Clare, were social workers.

The meetings began informally with people arriving from 6.45 pm and sometimes after the talk had begun, which was never at a set time but simply when some of the key participants (those who tended to give talks and in whose houses the meetings were held) decided that it should start, which was usually between 7.30 and 8.00 pm. Although the majority of participants knew each other, it was not uncommon to have a (sometimes intimate) conversation with someone without knowing their name, reinforcing the sense of informality at the group. The talks themselves would last between 40 and 60 minutes, and be given in a variety of styles. During his talks, Martin sat cross-legged on the floor and spoke quite softly, often turning to books and props; Leon's were much more formal and authoritative; and Susan's were more practical, such as involving a visualization or an exercise with a partner, so that we could experience what she was talking about. The talks generally provided a significant amount of information on the chosen topic (some people would make notes), often starting from a historical overview before moving on to a consideration of the relevance of the particular tradition to society today and to our personal lives.

Participants engaged in a lively manner with the material with which they were presented, which broadened out into a general animated discussion after the talk ended. During the talk, there would usually be some interruptions by the audience, asking the speaker for further information or clarification. This occasionally, and especially during the discussions, became argumentative when speakers presented their own opinions. These arguments were frequently sharp and heated, drawing in other people and leading at times to rude, even personal, remarks. Unlike at the Anthroposophical meetings, however, such confrontations did not lead to the subjugation of one speaker by the other, for no overriding authority existed (such as group leaders or a body of work such as represented by Steiner's) from which resolution could be sought. Rather, different opinions were expressed without any of them being retracted, humiliated or silenced. Nor did there seem to be any bad feelings afterwards, in fact, such disagreements usually led to longer discussions during the socializing period, which others would join. At times, however, Martin would intervene to suggest that whilst differences existed, it was time for the discussion or talk to move on, 'or else', he would say, 'we'll be here all night'.

The discussion would usually move away from the evening's topic, so that presenters were not necessarily central to what happened after their talks. Most people would contribute at some point, although those who spoke most were the key figures already mentioned and three or four others. The direction of these discussions was unpredictable, but they would generally orientate around pagan traditions and traditions of astrology, the Tarot and the Kabbalah. Correspondences

between different traditions and religious histories would be raised and discussed, and religious traditions from different cultures and historical periods were commonly linked to those already listed, to suggest a common thread in humanity's religious variety. After about an hour Martin would suggest that someone should put the kettle on and the discussion would break up. Small groups would generally then carry on their discussions, there would be invitations to other groups and events, and the lending of books and materials.

Participants at the occult study group The ethos of these meetings can be explored by turning to some of the key figures in the group and from this a broader sense of the pagan scene in Nottinghamshire can be established, in which the study group was clearly situated, thus largely separating it from the Nottinghamshire network. Like all other participants, Martin was white and British. In his early thirties, he had never had stable employment and generally found work in casual manual labour. Martin had attended a Baptist church some years previously, to explore, he said, 'the depth of the world' that he had experienced through drugs, but after a couple of years had left that church and started to become interested in the occult through the influence of some friends. This provided him with a more satisfactory insight into 'what's real', as he put it, and this interest had since become increasingly important to him. As already noted, he and Marion were mature students. His studies were reflected in his talks at the group, for example he had given one on Abraham Maslow whilst preparing an essay on humanistic psychology.

Whilst Martin explicitly located his interests within paganism, they specifically lay with occult traditions. His interest in these may be described as a concern with systems: principally, the Tarot, the Kabbalah and astrology. Particularly influential upon him was Aleister Crowley, as shown by a picture he had drawn of the Kabbalah Tree of Life, which he told me had influenced Crowley, and his ownership of a reproduction set of Crowley's Egyptian Tarot cards. Crowley was a significant figure in the formation of modern British paganism who developed 'a system of occult practice' that he likened to science rather than religion, which he called 'magick', and who influenced Gardner, who claimed to have been initiated into Crowley's British occult group the Ordo Templi Orientis (Hutton, 1999, pp. 171–80, 206). Crowley, in fact, was a dominant figure in the occult study group, not only because of his general importance on the development of British paganism, but more specifically because it was his system that formed the focus of a Kabbalah group which Leon ran and which several of the study group attenders, including Martin, frequented.

Martin's house contained several metres of bookshelves on occult topics, to which he would refer frequently in order to clarify issues. The study group provided Martin the opportunity to develop his thoughts on occult subjects, prompting him to research and formulate them further, but also provided the opportunity for him to learn more about them through the discussions and the topics presented by others, since several attenders were, he said, 'experts', such as Susan on astrology and Leon on the Kabbalah. His interest in astrology led to the view that significant changes were occurring in society as a result of the shift to what Martin called a 'new astrological cycle'. He described this as an emerging 'new age' and in one discussion explained that there existed a 'new age movement' because of the general interest in the 'sorts

of things' looked at. The term 'new age' was used in cycles as found in the Toltecs. I never heard of it although there were people interested in similar things more specifically.

Many participants in the local area. Respectively, the latter had two sisters, Susan and these groups were illuminations shown by Martin the Kabbalah in the group. According to the study group in called 'the psy-

Susan had been on Earth, the environment of the group mental health valued the 'open' astrology for their interest in systems. She was described as 'telling' in getting us to especially the would often and was considered in her talk on with Mary, who including Martin groups focused

In research (indeed, a local counties of Derbyshire by Amy Simeon people within coherent in terms as 'pagan' de organization, in comparison reinforced by

of things' looked at by the study group. No one disagreed with Martin's opinion, but the term 'new age' was rarely used at the group, except to articulate the idea of a shift in cycles as found in astrology and the belief-systems of other cultures such as the Toltecs. I never heard the term 'new age movement' mentioned again in the group, although there were frequent references to a sense of greater numbers of people interested in similar topics, often referred to as 'pagans' or 'occultists', or sometimes more specifically as 'astrologers' or 'Wiccans'.

Many participants at the occult study group also attended two other study groups in the local area: Leon's Kabbalah study group and an astrology study group. Respectively, these had around half a dozen and a dozen or more regular participants. The latter had arisen from one of the occult study group's meetings and was led by two sisters, Susan and Mary, who were regular attenders. Although I did not study these groups ethnographically, discussions about them with those who did attend were illuminating. Whilst both were concerned with the interest in religious systems shown by Martin, Leon practised this in a group that studied Crowley's exposition of the Kabbalah more formally and in depth, with himself acting as the teacher within the group. According to Susan, however, she was involved in running the astrology study group in order to open up further vistas of religious concern, notably what she called 'the psychology of personal development'.

Susan had heard about the occult study group through a friend from Friends of the Earth, the environmental group in which she was active. It turned out that at least two other of the group's attenders were also members of this organization. A 34-year-old mental health worker, she had begun attending with Mary, her sister, and particularly valued the 'open' atmosphere at the group. She and Mary had been practitioners of astrology for many years, and viewed the occult study group as a way of discussing their interest in this with other practitioners and of learning about related religious systems. She was, however, wary when talk at the study group became what she described as 'too academic'; in her two talks that I attended she was more interested in getting us to do something practical so that we could 'feel' for ourselves. It was especially the forthright voicing of book-based opinions that annoyed her, and she would often argue with Leon at the meetings, since his attitude, as will be shown, was considerably more didactic. It was as a result of the considerable interest shown in her talk on astrology that Susan had decided to set up an astrology study group with Mary, which was frequented by several of the occult study group attenders, including Martin, although not Peter, Leon or Clare (who were more involved in the groups focused on Crowley that Leon ran).

In researching the occult study group, then, I entered a network of pagan groups (indeed, a local pagan *scene*) that existed across Nottinghamshire and its adjacent counties of Derbyshire and Lincolnshire, and that was concurrently being researched by Amy Simes (1995a). It was not uncommon for Simes and me to know the same people within this scene through our separate studies. This scene was far more coherent in terms of identity (specifically through people's descriptions of themselves as 'pagan' despite their interest in a variety of different traditions) and social organization, as I have already discussed and as Simes's ethnography demonstrates, in comparison with the fieldwork sites examined in previous chapters. This can be reinforced by discussing the attitudes of Peter and Leon, and their magick group.

Peter, Leon and the magick group Like his good friend Martin, and roughly the same age, Peter was employed in casual manual labour, and his partner was on the same vocational course as Martin's partner. A regular at the occult study group, Peter was also an initiated member of a witchcraft coven. Privately, he was rather derogatory towards the occult study group, in whose discussions he would not participate very much. He criticized some participants by saying that they did not investigate occult matters with sufficient seriousness and commitment. 'They do not really want to get to grips with the things they look at', he told me, giving Anne as a particular example, a point that will be discussed further on. Leon's Kabbalah and magick groups, he said, provided a context for the 'serious study' of the 'occult', especially through Crowley's writings.

The magick group had three levels of initiation (or 'Orders'), which according to Leon were taken from the rituals of freemasonry that had influenced Crowley, the third being to take on a role of responsibility within the group: Peter was the 'publicity officer'. In addition, it issued 'degrees' to its members relating to competence in various aspects of magick, such as the Kabbalah and the Tarot. The group was a year old, which, Peter said, was 'good for a magickal³ association', because many collapsed within a few months. As part of his role, he had arranged for the group to be listed in a directory of pagan and occult groups. Whilst showing me the entry, Peter commented upon other listed groups, making a number of derogatory remarks about some of them.⁴ Certainly from this side of his pagan activities, Peter's main interest was in the writings and life of Crowley, from whose books he would read to me to explain points about the Tarot, Kabbalah or magick. Although his practice of the Tarot and Kabbalah was guided by Crowley's work, at one point Peter took pains to explain that he was not 'all concerned' with Crowley but it was simply that Crowley 'just said things best'. For this reason, he said, he became concerned when people misinterpreted Crowley, either those who were against him (such as Christians) or ignorant 'pagans'.

Peter's reaction to me is enlightening to consider, because it expressed a different attitude than I experienced from my research discussed in previous chapters, although there were similarities to the way in which Alvin and the leaders of the Anthroposophical group treated me.⁵ In the first place, he was wary of my status as a social researcher and wanted to 'grill me', as he put it, about my research and personal views, particularly in order to make sure that I was not a 'fundamentalist Christian' trying to 'expose' the magick group. As part of this, he tested my reaction to a condom (thankfully still in its packet) that he casually tossed over to me when I first visited his house. The fact that I picked it up seemed to allay his fears, even though, whilst thanking him for his kind gift, I told him I preferred to purchase my own. Whilst it would be too strong to claim that Peter tried to convert me to Crowley, he was very keen that I should become seriously involved in the group in order to study it, which he urged me to do. 'Now you are getting to the real meat', he said of my studies, adding unflattering remarks about the other groups that I had researched. This would require, he said, making the magick group the focus of my research, since I could only understand it as an 'insider', which demanded 'great commitment'. I should, he said, 'pick his brains' on these religious matters. There was clearly a publicity orientation to his urging, since he asked me to name

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and thank the magick group in my doctoral thesis, which he also offered to help me publish because he knew someone in the publishing industry.⁶

In his mid to late forties, Leon was held in high regard in the occult study group. He had been interested in 'the occult' (Leon used this term rather than describing himself as a 'pagan') for a long time, following a period in early adulthood in which he had been a Seventh Day Adventist. Leon was the most practised speaker at this group, establishing himself as an expert on many of the issues with which it dealt, expressed by the steady flow of his speech which, along with its authoritative and clear manner, made it difficult for people to interrupt him. Also unlike others in the group, the points he made were less soft-spoken, with a sharper intonation that emphasized them. Leon attended the occult study group with his partner Clare, who spoke much less than he and usually directed her remarks to him, providing Leon the opportunity further to expound his own views. It is important to note the differences of these two from the majority of the other attendees: both were social workers and thus enjoyed a higher income and social status.

Unlike Peter, Leon was not wary of my presence and specifically invited me to meetings of his magick group – even if I was a 'fundamentalist Christian', he said, when I was talking to him once about Peter's suspicions, 'any publicity is good publicity'. This group – and, from others' descriptions of it, the Kabbalah study group – allowed him the opportunity to exercise authority, by acting as the most prominent speaker and by directing discussions. Indeed, these were basically teaching groups; as Martin put it (he himself was a fairly regular attendee), it was another group for 'teaching and swapping knowledge'. At the few meetings I attended, there were never more than eight people present. Martin was there twice and a couple of other regulars at the occult study group, other than Peter and Clare, also attended once or twice. In addition to Leon, Clare and Peter, there were two other regular attendees, one a female bank manager in her fifties and the other a slightly younger man. This group's meetings were marked by Leon's speech – 'he doesn't give full stops', joked Clare in front of him at one meeting, which elicited a laugh from Leon. Our attention was continually brought back to Crowley's life, theories and writings. As in his talk at the occult study group, there was much referencing of books, particularly those by Crowley. The group's meetings, however, did not include specific ritual practices, except for a short period of meditation on one of Crowley's themes or symbols. More often the meetings, which usually lasted about three hours, would become a discussion based around Leon's knowledge of Crowley's systems (including the Tarot and the Kabbalah), extending into an interpretation of current affairs and participants' lives.

It is useful to investigate authority at the occult study group through considering reactions to Anne. It was Anne who had mentioned my research to Martin, leading to him telephoning to invite me to his group. Anne had begun to attend the group after ceasing to attend the Anthroposophical meetings and was of a different age-group and social background to most of the others, reflected in her more outspoken and confident manner. Whilst interested in the various speakers' topics, she would openly adapt their ideas to shed light on her religious concerns. In one meeting she interrupted Martin, who had just made reference to one esoteric tradition that had begun four hundred years ago, to tell us about a catastrophic flood that had

also occurred at that time, remarking that it was going to happen again soon, as prophesied by David Icke. This rather unusual deviation from pagan traditions was treated in a similar way in which views deviant from Steiner's theories were often treated at the Anthroposophical meetings in that no one responded to her and Martin then resumed his talk, although her view was not contested in the way it might have been in those meetings. Icke had recently figured as the subject of one of Martin's talks, although the general tenor of that meeting (which Anne had also attended) was that Icke had little basis for his theories and many in the group had mocked them. Martin had become intrigued by Icke after seeing him speak in a local lecture, but told us that he was not impressed by him, for although Icke claimed to be saying something new, in fact he was not. Aside from this, some of his beliefs, such as in aliens, Martin considered not 'proven' and as 'not particularly religious anyway'.

In contrast to others at the group, however, Peter was irritated by Anne's presence and warned me to take what she said 'with a pinch of salt'. He cited her as an example of why the study group had 'turned out' as it had, rather than becoming a group that could deal 'properly' with religious issues, which he had hoped it would when it first began, such as the other groups he attended. For example, Peter ridiculed as 'pathetic' and 'ludicrous' Anne's belief in 'grays', the term given by Icke to aliens who negatively influence people on Earth, as espoused in his numerous books and in his frequent lecture tours (including to Nottingham) in the 1990s, which Peter did not think warranted serious consideration in an occult study group. As with his other negative views on the group, Peter's remarks were voiced in private – vociferous public denunciations were generally confined in the occult study group to situations in which opinions were felt to have been expressed too authoritatively, as with Susan's disagreements with Leon.

Conclusion

This ethnographic account of spiritualist, Anthroposophical and pagan groups shows significant differences from the meditation group, the channelling workshops and the religious fair. I have drawn attention to the much greater presence in the former of social identity, social boundaries, rivalry, gossip and authoritative leadership, and of the focus upon key figures, texts and systems of belief and practice. To emphasize these differences, it is useful to compare the Nottinghamshire network with those traditions on its social periphery in terms of six criteria that Mitchell (1973, pp. 31–2) uses to classify a 'corporate group': 'membership recognized by both members and non-members', 'Common aims and interests of the members', 'Norms and rules commonly accepted by the members', 'Capability of joint action by the members', 'A division of labour between members in terms of their common aims and interests', and 'The persistence of relationships of positions beyond the incumbency of individual occupants of those positions'. Whilst Wilson (1975, p. 13) rightly points out that our conception of religious movements should allow for informal organization, arguing that 'classification of religious movements by the extent to which they are institutionalized is a clearly inadequate procedure for movements that have arisen outside the boundaries of established Christianity', unless some criteria are established the very meaning of 'movement' or 'organization' becomes

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My ethnographic network, but not a questionable form of movements and groups I researched Nottinghamshire as experts, often their leadership establishment rivalry and de each other for religious habits particularly as bodies of knowledge the Nottinghamshire a limited degree of occult study groups differences in scholarly literature compare practices traditions, in

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incoherent, as I have argued occurs in New Age studies. By interpreting the notion of membership loosely, Mitchell's criteria can be useful for indicating the manner in which people's experiences and subjectifications are shaped in a relatively more formative (though, of course, not uncontested or replicating) manner.

My ethnography shows that each criterion is weak or very weak in the network, but moderately to very strong in the peripheral traditions (although this is questionable for the last criterion). Spiritualist, Theosophical and pagan traditions, movements and groups demonstrate this formativeness, reproduced in the particular groups I researched. In these, leadership was exercised differently than in the Nottinghamshire network, with those who had in-depth knowledge being recognized as experts, often leading to the establishment of study or training groups centred on their leadership and the establishment of a describable religious career. This greater establishment of authority was also reflected in the significant degree of gossip, rivalry and denouncements at these groups, as individuals or factions competed with each other for religious capital. The resulting subjectification in terms of a particular religious habitus amongst participants was shown in their speech and attitudes, particularly as these were expressed in idioms of social identities and traditions, and bodies of knowledge and experts. These groups remained at the social periphery of the Nottinghamshire network because these formative tendencies facilitated only a limited degree of overlap, such as Anne's presence at the Anthroposophical and occult study groups or Susan's attendance at the religious fair. I now explore these differences more theoretically in the concluding chapter, engaging once more with scholarly literature on the New Age. My discussion then moves beyond this to compare practices of possession in the Nottinghamshire network with other religious traditions, in terms of wider social changes of a neoliberal nature.

Notes

1 As with field subjects, the names I use for these spirits are pseudonymous but attempt to reflect the spirit of their names, as it were.

2 One very formal kabbalistic group, for example, was referred to as 'High Episcopagan' (Magliocco, 2004, p. 146).

3 I later confirmed this spelling with Peter.

4 For example, Peter described the leader of one occult group as a 'wanker'.

5 This was also similar to the relations I had with some Methodists in my later postdoctoral research.

6 I hope it is superfluous to explain that the present book is not such an outcome.