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Individualism and Community in Alternative Spiritual “Magic”

JON P. BLOCH†

"Religion" has been distinguished from "magic" for the solidarity ties allegedly offered by the former, but not the latter, which by contrast is claimed to emphasize individual needs. However, the contemporary "alternative," or "countercultural" spiritual network (e.g., New Age, Neo-Paganism) utilizes beliefs and practices that could be described as magic, while still offering social solidarity. Excerpts from in-depth interviews with 22 alternative spiritualists illustrate how the strain between individuality and community is addressed. Shared ideology across individuals suggests that alternative spirituality is a contemporary social movement, in which protest against social control is voiced more through communication codes than overt political action. Thus, expression of individuality paradoxically becomes a source of solidarity. This movement reflects large-scale tensions in complex societies regarding individuality versus community. Therefore, "magic," when enacted in a complex society, deals with many of the same social strains as religion or other social institutions.

INTRODUCTION

"Magic" has been sociologically defined as a rite that is enacted to bring about a certain condition or change supernaturally, generally in response to a specific circumstance perceived as crisis-like or unfavorable. It can be enacted individually, without a shared group experience, consciousness, or ethos. By contrast, religion is viewed as more expressive and less instrumental, requiring an organized church, group experience and shared ethos (Durkheim 1897/1994; Malinowski 1948/1974; Goode 1951; Titiev 1972). Thus, when attempting to conceptualize distinctions between "religion" and "magic," social scientists have asserted that the former fosters group cohesiveness, while the latter does not. Durkheim (1897/1994: 42) stated that while religion is that which is commonly shared, practiced and believed in by an identifiable group, "[m]agic is an entirely different matter. Granted, magic beliefs . . . are often widespread among broad strata of the population . . . But they do not bind men who believe in them to one another and unite them into the same group, living the same life . . . [T]here are no durable ties that make them members of a single moral body." In Durkheim's terms, religion requires group identity and interaction (or "church"), and so can manifest and reinforce the collective conscience of a social order. By contrast, magic does not emerge from a collective effervescence that affirms social ties and values. Scholarship by authors such as Malinowski (1948/1974), Goode (1951), Titiev (1972) has offered similar conclusions.

Assertions about the differences between magic and religion largely have been based on studies of so-called "primitive" or nonmodern societies that are not confronted with a multiplicity of social institutions offering competing claims of knowledge. However, the recent steady growth of the so-called "alternative" or "countercultural" spiritual network suggests that magic, when practiced in a complex, industrialized society, also offers soli-
darity and shared values. Therefore, the alleged distinction between magic and religion might merit reconsideration.

On the one hand, the alternative spiritual network indeed is "spiritual" as opposed to being a "religion," as the latter term connotes a more organized body (and persons who explore these beliefs characteristically call themselves spiritual but not religious). This spirituality is comprised of eclectic elements of world religious traditions, pop psychology, New Age "parapsychology," Neo-Pagan ritual and spell-casting, and the occult (Melton and Moore 1982; Melton et al. 1990). Conceptual boundaries across these various traditions are presented as highly permeable, and people generally feel unconstrained to combine different ideas or practices into highly privatized belief systems. Some of these beliefs or practices might be labeled "magic" outright by adherents. Other forms of countercultural spirituality could still technically be defined more as "magic" than "religion" for the emphasis on alteration of self-circumstance as opposed social solidarity per se, given the criteria for these categories offered by Durkheim and others.

Moreover, these beliefs and practices can be called "alternative" or "countercultural" in that they are enacted within an explicitly stated flight away from the perceived rigid dogma and norms of mainstream society. As might be expected of persons interested in magic, alternative spiritualists generally do not maintain strong affiliations to organizations. For example, only about ten percent of the people who might be called "Neo-Pagan" belong to an organized group (Melton et al. 1990). Highly routinized, hierarchical group structure is considered symptomatic of the linear, rational tendencies of mainstream society that one seeks flight away from. Such individuals find little need to partake of a highly organized creed, and instead emphasize the right of each individual to seek for himself or herself what to practice and believe (Bailey, Jr. 1978; Misra and Preston 1978; Stone 1978; Adler 1986; Melton et al. 1990; Kelly 1992; Neitz 1994).

However, there is a paradox: This explicit flight away from rigid organization and dogma provides commonality and social solidarity amongst countercultural spiritualists. Their beliefs are expressed in ways that indicate an ongoing critique of the allegedly rigid mainstream society that is seen as trying to limit one's ability to partake of the many different knowledge claims available. And so despite — or perhaps because of — the strong emphasis on individual self-autonomy, these persons can be conceptualized as a type of contemporary social movement. Such movements are characterized less by explicit political agendas or organization than by a dynamic effort to criticize and reconfigure social norms and institutions through new codes of communication and role enactment (Gusfield 1981, 1994; see also Neitz 1994; Melucci 1985, 1989, 1994; see also Buechler 1995). In these ways, the contemporary experience of "magic" can involve efforts toward shared identity, norms, ethos and community.

In the remainder of this paper, I develop these arguments first by describing in more detail the paradoxical strain between individual self-autonomy and community in alternative spirituality, and how it suggests affinity with large-scale social dilemmas in complex societies. Next, I will elaborate on how its response to these dilemmas could be conceptualized as a form of social movement. Then I will apply these theoretic assertions to an empirical analysis of in-depth interviews with countercultural spiritualists. Finally, in summarizing the findings, I also note some of the directions that future research might take on the basis of this study.

**ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON**

While early sociologists sometimes predicted that modernization would virtually eliminate religion, modernization instead has been utilized to propagate religious information. Just as technology has offered the individual more information and choices in secular
domains, thereby encouraging individual self-autonomy (Turner 1976; Gagnon 1992; Giddens 1994), so has this occurred in regard to religion or spirituality. The locus of authority as to religious "truth" is more on the self, and often successful survival strategies involve being able simultaneously to consider a multiplicity of worldviews (Luhmann 1967; Luhmann 1982). In fact, modern pathology can be viewed as a dogmatic adherence to a singular social institution or belief system for the relative unlikelihood that such an approach will be consistently viable (Luhmann 1982; Giddens 1994).

In this context, it is not surprising that alternative spiritual magazines explicitly promote individual self-autonomy. For example, in Llewellyn's New Worlds of Mind and Spirit, Cicero and Cicero (1995: 52) discussed the practice of "self-initiation," which "is a valid and effective alternative for today's spiritual seekers who want to progress at their own rate, without pressure from teacher, gurus or peers." Similarly, in a recent issue of Yoga Journal, Harvey (in an interview with Ingram, 1995), stated that the guru system is no longer useful, and that the time has come for each person to find his/her direct and unmediated relationship with spiritual forces.

Nor is it surprising that a within a single spiritual publication one finds numerous belief systems being tolerated. A "reader's survey" in a recent issue of Green Egg: A Journal of the Awakening Earth (1995: 39) listed the following choices for present affiliation: Pagan, Wiccan, Goddess Spirituality, Buddhist, Agnostic/Atheist, New Age, Unitarian, Jewish, Eclectic, and "other." Indeed, Green Egg — like numerous similar publications — features ads and articles on such diverse activities as Zen meditation, the Christian-based "Course in Miracles," the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition, Hindu-based yoga techniques, occult practices such as Tarot card divination and astrology, Native American shamanism, reported communications with angels, and so on.

However, the very existence of these magazines suggests an identifiable market. Technically, Green Egg's readers may not share the same affiliations, but presumably there is something pertaining to spirituality that the people who read it share in common. One such eclectic spiritual periodical, New Age Journal, has a present circulation of 240,000. Entire sections in book stores are devoted to alternative spiritual literature, some of which volumes have topped the national best-seller lists (e.g., James Redfield's The Celestine Prophecy). A given community might see weekly study groups, and alternative spiritual "classes" and workshops; there are also retreats, fairs and festivals on the national and worldwide level. For example, there are upwards of 200 nationwide Neo-Pagan festivals held each year in the United States alone for the upwards of 330,000 persons who could loosely be labeled "Neo-Pagan" (Kelly 1992). Thus, while some people might engage in counter-cultural spirituality in isolation, there are numerous activities that offer one sporadic or even regular opportunities to experience alternative spirituality on a group level. (In fact, the Green Egg survey asked readers to indicate if they practice spirituality alone or with other people, or both.)

Moreover, despite all the emphasis on individual self-autonomy, "community" is an explicitly important concept to these people, and frequently is mentioned in popular literature. According to an editorial in Gnosis: A Journal of the Western Inner Traditions there is a newly emerging spiritual brotherhood/sisterhood (Smoley 1995: 1) (my italics):

I'd say that the brotherhood (which is also a sisterhood) is secret precisely because it can't be equated with any one organization... Joining this brotherhood, I believe, isn't a matter of learning secret handshakes or mystical syllables. Instead it involves taking a conscious vow of responsibility for oneself and for the welfare of others, and offering allegiance, not to any particular religious form, but to the ultimate, ineffable truth that underlies all forms. At times, I'm sure, this is done in the context of a group, but it can also be carried out privately, in one's own heart... And what is the goal of this society? Fulfilling the word of God? Advancing human evolution? Maybe. But these in the end look like mere agendas, and the ordinary world provides enough of these agendas already. Rather it seems that this acknowledgment of a truth beyond all
creeds constitutes the brotherhood's goal as well as its starting point, furnishing its members with a common life that undercuts any differences in belief.

In brief, it would appear that this community that works to "further the evolution of humankind" finds solidarity in being something of a "secret" that "can't be equated with any one organization." Yet this very absence of rigid creed (in contrast to the "ordinary world") paradoxically offers a sense of community.

However, this paradox is not an anomaly: Technology has promoted individual self-autonomy, but it has not eliminated the need for a shared identity, history and normative belief system with others. Social institutions have had to emerge that claim to offer a sense of community along these dimensions, while also alleging to feature self-autonomy to accommodate diversity (Turner 1976; Gagnon 1992; Shotter 1993; Giddens 1994). Therefore, countercultural spirituality might be a salient manifestation of the social and private needs that confront the contemporary individual.

**ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY AS A FLUID SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

Giddens (1994: 6) views current political struggle within a framework of response to what he describes as "fundamentalism," referring not necessarily to religious expression but to virtually any social sphere that sees "tradition defended in the traditional way": "The point about traditions is that you don't really have to justify them: they contain their own truth, a ritual truth, asserted as correct by the believer. In a globally cosmopolitan order, however, such a stance becomes dangerous, because essentially it is a refusal of dialogue." This "fundamentalist" refusal of dialogue, according to Giddens, precludes the necessary reflexivity and spirit of negotiation needed to accommodate diversity, and the relatively fluid yet nonetheless functional forms of trust and solidarity that emerge thereof to create what he terms a "dialogic democracy." Social movements, states Giddens (1994: 120), contribute to this process of dialogic democracy by asserting "into the discursive domain aspects of social conduct that previously went undiscussed, or were 'settled' by traditional practices."2

In its quest for finding ways to express respect for individual self-autonomy and therefore avoid the alleged pitfalls of "fundamentalist" dogma, alternative spirituality can be conceptualized as a relatively unbounded community that nonetheless is indicative of a newer form of social movement (Neitz 1994). Gusfield (1981, 1994: 62; see also Neitz 1994) discusses recent social movements as networks that "manifest a shared direction, a set of goals, and a shared conception of what is right and just as well as a procedure to obtain such goals," despite relatively informal organization. Gusfield lists some of the more diffuse aspects of feminism, gay rights, or the hippie movement as examples of what he calls *fluid social movements*, offering an alternative set of values, explanations or lifestyle choices that are likelier to be enacted in micro, everyday settings than in traditional, highly organized social movements. However fluid or diffuse such movements are, they — and their participants — nonetheless suggest some recognizable form of social dissenion.

While weak in the way of formal organization or legal/political agendas, alternative spirituality nonetheless promotes a set of values or lifestyle options viewed as being in contrast to those of the mainstream, where allegedly less fluid symbolic boundaries are enacted in the maintenance of social institutions. Certainly those who identify with alternative spirituality often are identifiable (i.e., "New Agers," and so forth) for their flight away from mainstream social controls. In this way, an emphasis on individual self-autonomy need not preclude an active promotion of shared interests. While countercultural spirituality has been disparaged by both mainstream secular rationality as well as mainline religions, the result has been that an alternative spiritual network has flourished apart from the sanc-
tions of these other institutions, creating its own norms and values (Campbell and McIver 1987; Hess 1993).

Furthermore, it has its own communication codes. Melucci (1985, 1989, 1994; see also Buechler 1995) offers that the agendas of newer social movements might be promoted through symbolic, communicative codes of opposition (often of a spiritual or personalized nature) to the rational pragmatism and control mechanisms of modern society. These symbolic codes are viewed as deeply embedded in these personalized communication acts that virtually “invisibly” reflect underlying social expectations. Hence, such social movements provide participants with identity claims in the form of symbolic codes indicating social solidarity while also emphasizing a relative absence of social control, promoting individuality and tolerance for new information. Self-autonomy and solidarity can coexist in paradoxical yet viable ways.

In considering exactly how these symbolic codes might be manifested in terms of the paradox between individual self-autonomy, it is useful to consider Geertz’s discussion of ideology. Geertz noted how Parsons and others (see Gieryn 1983: 782) claimed that statements are ideological in nature when they offer generalized and symbolic solutions dealing with some form of strain. That is, ideological declarations “are symptoms — as well as symbolic resolutions — of role strain, contradiction and disequalibrium.” Hence, “strain” here connotes both the contradictory condition itself, and the symbolic reckoning with it. At the same time, as per Sutton and others (see Gieryn 1983: 782), ideological claims provide the speaker with a means to promote one’s personal interest: “They are manipulations of ideas to persuade people to think and act in ways benefiting the ideologist.” For example, the issues of “self-initiation” and the “secret” brotherhood/sisterhood as discussed in the popular literature (and mentioned above) indicate strain between individual self-autonomy and shared values. At the same time, these articles advanced the interests of the alternative spiritual community, which is explicitly critical of the more “fundamentalist” elements of society that allegedly deal less successfully with this strain.

However, countercultural spiritualists do not limit their activities to magazines. Their highly personalized yet socially located ideology finds them spending considerable time engaging in dialogue with others. And so it was of interest to see how people would discuss their spirituality one-on-one, in an interview situation. I wanted to see if comments concerning individual self-autonomy and community would be present, and if so, if such comments indicated similarities across interviewees and suggested a fluid, modern social movement expressing itself through ideological, symbolic codes.

**Methods**

*Background and Sample Construction*

Eighteen months of preliminary fieldwork across a three-state region found me attending large-scale alternative spiritual fairs and festivals as well as small weekly discussion groups and workshops. In brief, this experience indicated that countercultural spiritualists indeed characteristically constructed personalized and highly nuanced belief systems. And so I anticipated interviewing people with open-ended questions that would permit more personalized and nuanced answers. Therefore, I purposefully constructed a relatively small sample to be able to examine the data at length and in depth.

Through my preliminary fieldwork, I established social ties with a number of individuals in a small midwestern town, 11 of whom became part of the sample of 22. Another 11 individuals were persons whom I had not met before, but who responded to ads I placed in strategic locations (such as an occult bookstore). Half the interviewees were male, half were female. The age range went from early 20s to late 40s, therefore utilizing persons who
had been pursuing alternative spirituality since the late 1960s/early 70s, as well as persons who had been doing so for only a few years. Thus, though the sample was one of convenience, efforts were made to safeguard against unintended biases by gender, age, length of time involved in alternative spirituality, and personal familiarity (see also Table 1).

Collectively, these people either knew each other or else knew many of the same people. It would not be unlikely to see them all at the same large-scale event. Yet their specific spiritual beliefs and practices proved to be highly individualized. While there was overlap across the interviewees (see Table 2), no two individuals gave indication of having the precise same configuration of spiritual beliefs. Also (as per Table 1), most were raised in an organized religion; those that were not stated they nonetheless always had been curious about religion. But in either case, all the interviewees shared in common an ultimate disenchantment with what they perceived to be the dogma and rigidity of organized religions (as per Table 2). Thus, this collection of individuals was suggestive of exactly the type of spiritual network that would seem to be emblematic of countercultural spirituality: Strong individual self-autonomy, avoidance of ties to any one organized group, and yet — possibly — an overriding sense of community based on other kinds of shared values.
TABLE 2
NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF SIMILAR BELIEFS AND PRACTICE (N = 22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief/Practice</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychic experiences (e.g., dream work, out-of-body, healing)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>(73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magic (Shamanism, Kabbalism)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern (Zen, Hinduism, yoga)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>(77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American tools and rituals</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>(86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other tools and oracles (tarot, runes, astrology)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>(77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth-based Spirituality (solstice celebrations, ecology as spiritual)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to participate in other kinds of spirituality</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disenchantment with organized religions</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviewing and Analysis

The spoken word is a primary means by which religious or spiritual understanding is communicated (Fenn 1980; Stromberg 1993; Szuchewycz 1994; Wuthnow 1994), and narrative accounts in general are a means by which one can infer the presence of large-scale social forces within the individual's belief system and perception of events (Mishler 1986; McCall 1990; Bruner 1990; Riessman 1991; Shotter 1993; Calhoun 1994; Somers and Gibson 1994). Therefore, excerpts of narrative from open-ended interviews were a fitting unit of analysis for exploration of how alternative spiritual ideology has informed the worldviews of those who associate with it in regard to self and community, and the extent to which — if any — that articulation of these worldviews suggests social protest or new modes of social discourse.

For the interviewing itself, I utilized a two-fold process (as per Riessman 1991). First, I simply turned on a tape recorder and asked each person to tell me the story of his/her spiritual journey, in as much detail as he/she felt comfortable. I never interrupted a speaker during this phase of the interview, as I did not want to unduly influence the speaker insofar as what to say — I wanted to see if interviewees brought up issues related to individual self-autonomy and/or a sense of community without any prompting from myself. Only when the interviewee explicitly stated that he or she was finished with his or her story did I probe for clarification. This first phase of the interview took anywhere from about 20 minutes to two-and-a-half hours. In the second phase of the interview, I asked a short, set list of questions to each person (some of which will be referred to below). In this paper, I utilize remarks made in both phases of the interview.

I contacted these individuals one year after interviewing them, sharing what I thought to be the main points that emerged from the specific interview with that person, as well as the similarities that seemed to emerge across interviewees and which would appear to be reflective of countercultural spiritual ideology. Through so doing, I hoped to increase both the internal and external validity of my claims. I also asked if the interviewee felt that the things said a year ago reflected his or her beliefs as of now. None of the interviewees stated that he or she had dramatically altered his or her beliefs from the year before, though 16 of them said that their commitment to and understanding of these beliefs had deepened considerably. In seven cases, people also said that while they still believed in basically the same things, they were learning to incorporate more kinds of information within their spirituality.

In transcribing upwards of 300 pages of interviews (and from listening to them repeatedly), I made note of certain kinds of comments being made by all or at least most of the interviewees. This in and of itself could be regarded as finding: for all the eclectic and
individualized assortments of spiritual beliefs (i.e., individual self-autonomy), there were overridding shared ways of speaking, suggesting the shared symbolic codes of a fluid social movement.

**IDEOLOGICAL FLIGHT FROM DOGMA**

*Self as Authority*

All interviewees were asked to name their sources of spiritual information, and all 22 of them mentioned the self as primary source of such information. They also all elaborated on how or why this ideological tenet was featured in alternative spirituality, and less likely to be found in mainstream society by comparison. At the same time, individual self-autonomy was conceptualized as existing in a state of strain with the need for shared values and understanding with others. For example, Sylvia⁴, an MSW in her 30s, replied as follows when asked to name her sources of spiritual information:

> Myself — almost entirely myself. I read books, but generally they don’t teach me anything. Um, the inner voice is my best teacher. Um, the world and all my ancestors, I would say, is the second best teacher. Um, most of it is internal. Uh, it varies from one of the — uh, at the early stages that was one of my problems because the everybody [sic] ‘I am — I am the student of — the student of So-and-So, or I am — this is my tradition, and I am — ‘You know, all that — I didn’t have any of that. Um, for a long time it would bother me, and I kept looking for a source for my spiritual teachings, and finally realized that I wasn’t supposed to do that. That I was supposed to do that — that I was supposed to do it on my own, so that everybody could see that they could do it on their own. My whole basis is a phrase that a lot of people have used over and over again which is “everyone is a star,” and I take that very literally.

Sylvia addressed a strain she experienced between individual self-autonomy and the expectation that she find a more rigid, organized means toward spiritual understanding. Ultimately, by maintaining this individual self-autonomy she felt she was setting a good example for others, and so some sense of interconnectedness to a larger community was also expressed. In describing the strain she experienced, Sylvia simultaneously promoted her countercultural spiritual approach as a viable means of resolving it.

Similarly, Jesse, a small business owner in his 40s, replied as follows to the same question:

> Gnosis, direct knowledge. Uh, books can give you hints and directions to where you might look, but you gotta do it. Even if you practice ceremonial magic, it does nothing for me to take a ritual out of a book and perform it. That's just a performance. But if I understand wha—what this ritual is aiming for and how the symbols may help evoke [understanding] . . . A direct gnosis, or a direct working knowledge of rather than basing it on belief — because somebody told you this and now you must just believe this. I have a hard time believing anything without some form of personal proof, it — now it doesn’t have to be objective, it can be subjective, for me, but if I’ve experienced it, then to me, it — it — I can accept it as true, but if I don’t experience it, I can’t — I have a very hard time accepting it. I have to check it out myself.

Not unlike Sylvia, Jesse dealt with a strain between personalized spiritual understanding versus information others might impose upon the self, and promoted his viewpoint accordingly.

**Self-Autonomy as Spiritual Ideology**

Each interview also contained comments concerning individual self-autonomy at numerous other points, suggesting that this concept indeed is a shared ideology within alternative spirituality. For example, Arthur, a returning student in his 30s, was asked to list his spiritual tools, and replied as follows:
Resistance was part by explicitly attending the being the create hear, while simultaneous — simultaneously believing absolutely nothing." You know, allow yourself to create your own belief systems.

The question did not require that Arthur promote his agenda regarding individual self-autonomy, but he found an opportunity to do so nonetheless, and included his "sensitivity" to diversity as a symbolic form of spiritual tool. Though spirituality was seen in terms of individual self-autonomy, to do so required a social arena of mutual respect.

Melanie, an office worker in her 20s, was asked what it meant to say that someone was "on the path," and here was her answer:

Being on the path, to me, means getting those things to a place so you can help others and help yourself and in return, um, (to) grow and grow beyond, um, the physical and move on either to your next reincarnation, where you learn the next lesson that you need to learn or move on from this plane. But the path is helping other people to get on theirs as well. Um, just, um, staying out of people's way when they don't want help. It's — it's like intuition, kind of. You — you do it and you feel — if you feel you should help someone or not. I'm not explaining it very well — it's kind of like . . . not listening to, um, conformity in the masses and what people think society is, but being able to say, "I am an individual and this is what I believe." Even in the heart of — I don't want to say "the enemy," but someone who has very different beliefs, and, uh, everybody has different paths. They're not necessarily peaceful, you know, but to me — mine hopefully is sometimes — not lately, but, um, basically, you know — mine is just to be a good, uh, person and learn and help others to grow as well as myself.

Melanie discussed a tension between being attentive to the needs of others and knowing when to leave them alone; interestingly, this was talked about in terms of being "on the path," whereby so doing took on a significance beyond simply pertaining to social skills.

Resistance to Labels

That the alternative spiritualist is ideologically opposed to rigid organizational structure was evidenced by another type of remark commonly heard in interviews. Though all 22 of the interviewees spent a great deal of time engaging in spiritual pursuits, 20 of them explicitly avoided labeling their beliefs or practices. (And these two exceptions suggest special cases, to be discussed later.) Interviewees would list certain traditions as being important to them, only to interject a disclaimer that he/she was not, however, "officially" a part of this tradition.

For example, Jerry, a shopkeeper in his 30s, described a significant spiritual event he attended as follows:

I went to this festival called [name], at that time it was still being held in [state], and it was really good for me, because I saw all these other people that I could relate to spiritually. And they were not Christians, but they were not these terrible people that I was told they would be. And from there, it [his spirituality] really accelerated. It was considered a Pagan gathering, but I don't necessarily consider myself a Pagan. But I don't say that I'm not one, either. Um, it was good because it was a realization that there's something beyond what I was being taught, because I — I believed in the basic principles of Christianity. You know, to love yourself and to love your God and to love — love the people around you. But I couldn't deal with the politics that go with that, too. And now, I can have my — my own religion, which really is a religion based on many different spiritual paths of, uh — like shamanism and some Wicca, and some — very eclectic from different backgrounds and — and a pretty good brew of just things that I've learned, so it's one of my own making.

Jerry reckoned with the conflict of group homogeneity versus individual self-autonomy by being ambiguous as to whether or not he called himself a "Pagan." At the same time, he
promoted his alternative spiritual agenda, asserting that he was able to avoid “the politics” that go with more organized religious expressions.

Gypsy, a librarian in her 20s, also talked about a group event as being significant in her spiritual development, and went on to describe her spirituality as follows:

I do follow by a lot of different spiritual paths. I don’t consider myself — I call myself a witch but I’m not Wiccan. I study tantric techniques, but I’m not a tantric Buddhist. Uh, I do dream work techniques, but I don’t really follow that original path. Um, I look into Native American studies and at what they have, but I don’t consider that my path. I’m very eclectic — I like this idea of pulling from all different sources to find what works for me . . . diversity is the key. Whatever works for you is great as long as you don’t hurt anybody else. I think it’s fair. It’s about the only creed that I expect everyone to follow — don’t fuck with anybody else’s business, you know. That’s why I have a problem with a lot of the mainstream religions, because they’re fucking with other people’s business.

Similarly to Jerry, Gypsy found that she learned important information from other people at a festival: to learn to acquire a highly-personalized form of spirituality that emphasized individual self-autonomy and group cooperation simultaneously. In discussing this experience, Gypsy criticized more organized religions that would, in her view, be more dogmatic or rigid.

As mentioned earlier, two interviewees (Jack and Steven) technically did label their spiritual beliefs. But these self-imposed “labels” hardly suggested a strong embracing of dogma. For example, Jack, a graduate student in his 20s, described his disenchantment with the Catholicism of his childhood, and his incipient interest in countercultural spirituality as follows:

I turned to reincarnation instead, and found that it was a better answer to the, uh, the problems in this world. You know, like some people are born blind, or some people are born poor. I think reincarnation is the better answer. So I stuck with that, and, uh, I kind of grew away from Catholicism and I read a book by, uh, Marion Zimmer Bradley called Mists of Avalon, which talks about, uh, King Arthur and Merlin and all that, and she talks about the Goddess in there. And that’s another option that I decided to take into my religion — uh, referring to God not as a “God,” but as a “Goddess,” and so I kind of started leaning toward Wicca religion and all that kind of stuff. I’m not a practicing witch or anything. I just — I’m in the — in the, uh, rituals they do and all that. And, um, I’m interested in all the Pagan rituals which they have also.

And so I started experimenting with that also, with Wicca and, uh, the Goddess. That kind of stuff. So basically, I — I don’t go to church anymore. I’ve taken up a new [Hindu] meditation, and that’s what I do as part of my religion — meditate everyday, twice a day, uh, when — if I — if I can have the time for it. And so my religion basis — it’s of more Hindu religion now and Wiccan religion together. So, um, I do believe in a lot of Hindu thoughts. I have a lot of Hindu books. Um, I’ve taken two Hindu classes. So I know a little about Hindu religion, and uh, I guess my religion would be more Hindu than Catholic right now, so — basically, I’d probably count myself a Hindu religion guy right now. And that’s basically where I’m at right now — reincarnation and the Goddess and that kind of stuff.

It would seem that there was considerable flexibility and autonomy in Jack’s belief system, even though he technically labeled himself “a Hindu religion guy” — albeit only for “right now.” (There was even a kind of disclaimer regarding his being “not a practicing witch or anything.”) In describing his beliefs, Jack also managed to interject criticisms toward his religion of origin.

Steven, an artist in his 20s, was the one person I interviewed who belongs to a relatively organized spiritual group, and who explicitly labeled himself Neo-Pagan. Yet he actively participated in rituals and festivals located in the less-organized alternative spiritual community, and maintained numerous social ties thereof:

In practical terms, of course, I can work with a lot of people, even if we’re not theologically in sync, as one of the things about Paganism is that practice is more important than doctrine. With no central authority, how can there be a universally accepted doctrine? Christianity doesn’t — doesn’t have that. Islam doesn’t have that, for that matter. No religion really has it, and it seems to be axiomatic that only a handful, maybe five percent of practitioners of a certain religion have any real idea what the religion is actually about, and quite often these people are not the official leaders at all.
Steven freely admitted to working with persons who did not necessarily label themselves "Pagan," but who were part of this informal spiritual movement. He utilized the concept of the absence of "central authority" as a means of explanation, and critiqued more organized religions in the process.

**General Yet Personalized**

In alternative spirituality, information is offered through literature and group activities, whereby there is a certain shared understanding about a given practice or belief system. Yet each person can still decide for him/herself what the belief or practice in question should mean. This strain often is addressed through statements such as "I can only speak for myself," or "Everyone has to find their own way." These types of remarks were heard in 21 of the interviews. Such declarations are one of the ways that countercultural spiritualists strive to break away from what they see to be the dogma and over-rationalization of the mainstream, and promote their norms and values by contrast. For example, Alex, a college student in her 20s, stated the following in the first few minutes of her interview:

> It's hard to like just talk about it [spirituality]. Um, but it's like, you know, when people talk about — everybody, I guess everybody who does it has any — I don't know if you can call it Paganism, or you can call it, you know, whatever you want, I guess, but it's usually — everybody usually has their own individual interpretation of what they talk about, when they say things like "Goddess," or, you know, "Demeter," or something like that. For me, I guess, when I say "Goddess," I mean like it's not really a deity that I speak of, or some, like, woman, you know, up in the sky, or something, it's more like — it's more like an energy.

Disparaging of literalists who would conceptualize a deity in dogmatic terms, Alex instead used socially located, generalized names and terminologies to discuss a highly personalized symbolic conceptualization of deities.

Somewhat similarly, Flora, a graduate student in her 20s, described her spiritual activities as follows:

> One thing that I do on an almost daily basis is that I greet my guardian spirit. I greet that part of myself that's not in the three-dimensional universe. Um, some people call it their guardian spirit, some call it your guardian angel, your higher self, your fourth-dimensional double — whatever you call that part of yourself. Um, I greet that part of myself every morning, or every night, and I thank it for being with me, and staying present with me — which is really kinda unnecessary, because it is there whether I like it or not [laughter]. And — but I do that as a form of honoring, and I ask to be able to be in touch with that part of myself, and to act in the best interest of all beings, and to act in the best interests of myself, and to come from a compassionate place always. That's like my daily prayer. And I greet other people's guardian spirits when I remember. I'm getting better at remembering. It takes a while to remember to do that every time you see people, um, and ask that part of them to be present, and to work with that part of me. And I ask those parts of us to protect us. So that's something I do every day.

Flora stated that there was a spiritual dimension of self likely to be labeled differently across individuals yet which fundamentally signified the same thing. Her communing with this spiritual aspect of self was seen as a symbolic means by which to also connect with other people.

**Unique Yet Overlapping Belief Systems**

One question that proved especially telling was whether or not the interviewee ever met other people who shared his/her beliefs. All 22 of the interviewees answered this question similarly. Each person stated that he/she would never meet anyone who fully believed the same way, because each person was unique; however, there was a community of persons...
that suggested a common ground of belief. For example, Badger, a craftsperson in his 20s, answered this question as follows:

Sometimes I meet with people that share some of them [his spiritual beliefs]. You know, it's all varied. Uh, I do, I do — uh, really connect with certain people. I haven't met anybody that I could agree with everything, but I've met with people that will say, "It's okay if you do that over there, just don't pollute where I'm at, and keep it in your space."

For Badger, what mattered was that two people can disagree but still respect each other. (And he reported partial overlap between his beliefs and those of other people.) Badger discussed a strain between similar and diverse beliefs across individuals while also advancing the alternative spiritual perspective in this regard.

Iris, an accountant in her 30s, answered this question as follows:

That's a good question — yes and no. There is no one I'm going to meet who shares exactly the same doctrine or dogma or — or even belief about what, uh, what any given word means. You know, what karma means to you is going to mean something different to me. But yet we can still talk about karma in a — in a similar context. So technically, no, I don't think I'm ever going to into anybody who believes exactly as I do. I do, however, have a very close community that our beliefs are similar enough that we share ritual, we share, um, spiritual time together. Um, I have a woman's group that I — you know, I feel like I'm — my beliefs are radically different from them, but we meet every month for ritual, and we have, um, [a] very spiritual, very emotionally satisfying experiences.

Iris viewed her beliefs simultaneously as unique yet shared by others. She felt that countercultural spirituality had enabled her to emphasize both community and individuality.

Importance of Alternative Spiritual Community

For all the emphasis on individual self-autonomy in alternative spirituality, each person I interviewed spoke of some sort of group experience giving him or her a sense of solidarity with others while still being able to enact their individualized conception of self. For example, Eli, a returning student in his 30s, described his initial encounter with countercultural spiritualists as follows:

Uh, at first, I was just attracted to it immediately. People who didn't think I was a geek, as most people did. Uh, they were people who were willing to help me to classify my experiences and my desires, um, my — and my dysfunctions into a cohesive worldview. You know, all of a sudden, "Hey, look, you're not a freak, you're a human being, and this is where you fit into the scheme of humanity, these are the energies you're playing with, this is what's going on, this has meaning."

Eli made apparent how and why he would have preferred associating with alternative spiritualists than with more mainstream persons. The character traits that made him feel apart from most people were not criticized in spiritual circles but encouraged. Expression of individuality simultaneously enabled Eli to develop a "cohesive worldview" that made him feel a part of the overall "scheme of humanity."

Ralph, a dishwasher in his 20s, stated his main spiritual interest was drumming, which he described as a "healing" activity. When asked to explain what he meant, Ralph gave the following answer:

It's like you can have all this stuff building up inside you, you know, things that need to come out. Things that — it's like your energy can be shooting all over your body. But when you come together with a bunch of people and become like one energy, you know, like one — say you're playing one heartbeat... It forms a community, you know what I mean? It forms like, uh, like, almost like, you know, a church is like a community. That's the main reason I think why people go to church is because everybody else is there, and to feel this "community-ness" around them together and they're all together, you know, and uh, it heals me in the sense that it puts my life, like — gives it, like, uh — I feel more balanced, more centered, like more I
can flow my energy in whatever direction I want, you know what I mean? Lots of different people who are doing it [drumming], it's spreading across the nation in a big way. There's gonna be a big world drumming festival in [a state] for five days long this summer for world peace. I'm gonna be goin' there, and you know, there'll be thousands of people gathered in a huge sky dome drumming for like a week long, and I'm sure that'll be real healing.

Ralph seemed to have found the actual “healing” aspects of drumming to be somewhat ineffable — but he had no trouble communicating approbation for the “community-ness” of such activities, and how they provided both a shared and privatized experience.

Other Social Opportunities Less Viable

Not only was the alternative spiritual community seen as an important means of manifesting individual self-autonomy while maintaining strong ties with others, but other possible expressions of community were explicitly seen as conceptually less viable in accomplishing this. For example, Edward, self-described as an “inventor” in his 30s, commented at one point:

You see, each of us who are on these kind of pathways are doing so in isolation, if you will. We are emphasizing that part of our — of the common reality which is unique to us, and through that we are seeing the outer or fundamental part which is behind [it]. Therefore, it boils down to subjective spirituality. There is no single objective pathway that I’ve found yet that would account for all of the variations.

Edward made the paradox between individual self-autonomy and commonality with others apparent when discussing things like “the common reality which is unique to us.” In advancing this countercultural spiritual approach, he flatly stated that more objective, dogmatized belief systems were in his experience less able to “account” for this expression of individuality.

Mary Lou, a massage therapist in her 40s, was asked if she faced any challenges to her spirituality in her daily life, and gave the following answer:

There's a daily challenge for me to exclude a part of myself, to respond to people as they want me to be this little box of category that they can easily define and uh, I think that's a challenge for me to say, "I'm whole, I'll always be whole." That's what my — I mean, I'm always — uh, you know, in this multiple kind of facetted form, that, uh, um — and I continue to grow and everything, and when people want to exclude a part of me, to uh, chop off the part that they need, they can only do that with uh my approval, and I'm not willing to do that. Also, just, you know, that goes along with people's, um, uh, racism and sexism. I think those are constant challenges. They sound like political things but I think that from my point of view that's a very spiritual matter.

Mary Lou conceptualized social issues such as racism and sexism alongside her strongly felt need for individual self-autonomy — all of which was framed within the context of her spirituality. There was a conflict in her life between living up to her own expectations versus the what she felt were the more limiting, rigid expectations of others, but she stated that her spirituality involved a resolving of this conflict in such a way as to give her more confidence to express her full self.

Discussion

The interviews suggest that although alternative spiritualists emphasize individual self-autonomy, they also experience what they feel to be a strong sense of shared community. Within the course of a given interview — sometimes even within single statement — issues pertaining to self and community were addressed in a spiritual context. Additionally, there were similarities across interviewees regarding the specific form or content of these
INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNITY IN ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUAL "MAGIC"

remarks, indicating that the countercultural spiritual milieu includes the production of shared symbolic codes of communication (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUALITY/COMMUNITY REMARKS
(N = 22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Remark</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self as Authority</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance to Labels</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>(91%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Autonomy as Spiritual Ideology</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized Yet Personal</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>(95%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Yet Overlapping Beliefs</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Alternative Spiritual Community</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Social Opportunities Less Viable</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
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The excerpts from interviews have been conceptualized as essentially ideological in nature, naming and reckoning with a form of strain, and simultaneously promoting the interests of the speaker — in this instance, the speaker's preference for and identification with the alternative spiritual network. This loosely formed network can be thought of as a contemporary social movement to the extent that through discourse and interactions, the alleged rigid forces of social control viewed as outmoded are challenged.

Alternative spirituality reflects larger social tensions regarding simultaneous needs for social solidarity and a tolerance for diversity that permits individual self-autonomy; it is but one salient example of an overriding social trend. Future research might explore the relative similarity between alternative spirituality and other kinds of social movements, networks and institutions (religious or secular) insofar how they address this strain — and allegedly offer a solution to it.

Additionally, it is useful to consider that according to Melucci (1985, 1989, 1994), contemporary social movements develop their own system of elitism. In fact, Giddens (1994) notes that while social movements encourage dialogic democracy in society at large, within the movements themselves there may be pressures toward an anti-democratic conformity, and limitations placed on dialogue. It has not yet been fully explored if the alleged high tolerance for diversity and flight from organizational controls that characterizes much of countercultural spirituality becomes at some point exclusionary. Those who would claim that there is one particular belief system that is unambiguously preferable to others — or even those who are in search of such a system — might encounter social obstacles participating in the alternative spiritual network. Thus, one also might want to consider if this relative absence of dogma becomes, in effect, its own dogma. As noted by Bruner (1990: 51): "To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance, even if it is a moral stance against moral stances."

At the same time, it should be remembered that what the social actor perceives as being individual self-autonomy is not necessarily the case to the outside observer. In fact, if there is an essential individual that exists apart from social forces, it would be all but impossible to isolate its existence. It is largely through the social mobility that is possible within contemporary society — and the normative structures thereof — that one can conceive of such an "autonomous" self that is paradoxically at odds with the complex social controls enabling the rebellion to be articulated and enacted (Durkheim 1912/1951, 1897/1994; Turner 1976; Cormack 1992; Calhoun 1994; Somers and Gibson 1994). Further research is needed to learn more about the complex relationship between self-agency and the large-scale social conditions that implement or impede its perceived presence.
Finally, a basic premise of this paper has been that traditional definitions of magic as being self-focused and not community-oriented are thrown into question when one considers the contemporary countercultural spiritual network. This presents the possibility that defining conceptual boundaries between "religion" and "magic" might be reconsidered. For example, one might note that not only can social networks that feature magic promote a sense of community and shared values, but that a viable sense of community is exactly what some people did not get from organized religion. Also, one might consider in greater detail how the contemporary self-help movement figures into the relationship between religion and magic, given that alternative spirituality often is expressed with an emphasis upon changing the self. But it is equally important to consider that "magic" and "religion" per se do not appear to result in one’s being relatively isolated from or socially connected to others. Rather, one must consider the larger social forces and institutions in which magic or religion are being enacted. In a complex society, magic apparently can be utilized not only to manifest alleged change upon the self (as it has always been utilized to do) but to figure into a collective social response against alleged rigid and outmoded "fundamentalism." It can be enacted in ways that indicate a fluid social movement developing its own communication codes to promote a dialogic democracy. As perhaps summarized by Giddens (1994: 126):

To further illustrate the tolerance for diversity that was attempted, readers were asked to identify their sex as female, male, transsexual male to female, or transsexual female to male. Sexual orientation was classified as heterosexual, bisexual, gay male, lesbian, or celibate. When asked about the "dwelling" they lived in, readers could select among the following: house, apartment, condominium, RV/trailer/bus, room, and prison cell.

Giddens also states that self-help groups serve similar dialogical functions, and help to democratize information by wresting it away from legitimized experts. Certainly some aspects of alternative spirituality suggest affinity with self-help groups. The possible conceptual overlaps between contemporary social movements and self-help groups has yet to be exhaustively explored. See also Discussion.

One hesitates to make generalizations from a relatively small convenience sample. Still, one might note that alternative spirituality characteristically attracts European-Americans, and that the reasons for this have not been fully explored. Also, it is interesting to speculate (for example) that of the 15 interviewees who worked full time, seven of them were self-employed. Most interviewees were single at the present time. Future studies might explore in detail issues related to spiritual self-autonomy and employment and/or life-style.

All interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms. I quote from interviews verbatim, deleting within segments only when excessive "ums" and "uhhs" (or other superfluous utterances) diminish the clarity of the statement. When a segment of copy has been deleted, there are dots (...). Similarly, two segments of transcription might be bridged with a bracketed word, for example "[and]." Brackets also are used to delete words that threaten the interviewee’s anonymity. Punctuation has been inserted for intelligibility.
REFERENCES


