

A Community of Friends with a Religion of Options

Community is at the heart of my research. Gatherings of like-minded individuals give rise to the artifice that makes humans so unique. The use of language allows people to share ideas, the repeated sharing of ideas about ethics, spirituality and the supernatural lay the foundation for a collective set of ideas to be put into practice, generally in the form of religion. My work over the course of this semester focuses on the way that The Fellowship of the Spiral Path, known generally as Spiral, demonstrates the creation of a community of spiritually diverse individuals joined by a digital network, an eco-conscious worldview, and the solidarity of a marginalized religion.

Spiral is not a singular religious group; rather, it is a collection of groups which practice a variety of reconstructed religions ranging from Shamanism to traditional Germanic forms of worship. It is not so divided however as I had initially imagined. The groups are very fond of eclecticism, drawing their individual faith and style of worship from personal experience, online or literary research and especially from their fellow members. I conducted my research as a participant observer for my first round at a monthly gathering, and the impromptu dinner following. During my second round, I opted to conduct an interview and spend a day in passive observation of the community at a pagan festival in Berkeley, California. As an anthropologist, my aim was to get a broad view of the community, first as a participant, to orient myself with a small group in a ritual setting and second, as an informed observer of the larger group in a primarily social setting.

The event that I attended was specifically called The Liturgy to the Lady. It is an open, public ritual held at the The Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists on Cedar street

in Berkeley, California. The group was dressed casually, two women and one older man made up the other participants bringing the grand total to seven, including the three priestesses and myself.

It started with an introduction by Diane, largely for my benefit, explaining the significance of the ritual in the pantheon. She said that the explanation was generally glossed over in light of the fact that most of attendees knew why the ritual was held and had heard the introduction on numerous occasions previously. She continued by explaining the significance of the spirit to be invoked that night, Mother Bear, as the harbinger of spring and a powerful caretaker, nursing cubs born in the winter and looking after them. This Goddess however is only the most present caretaker of humans, the spirits ebb and flow during the course of the year, she explained, with other cardinal spirits becoming more prominent as their specific advice is needed. This was also the only aspect of the ritual which was not scripted.

I realized that save for a guided meditation, and different prayers, the liturgy was nearly identical in style and form to a catholic mass. Alternating sets of prayer, a song, followed by a reading or parable, made this ritual all too familiar. We all had programs which had the songs and responses, and the ritual even called for bread and wine. However the wine was Mead, appropriate as bears are quite fond of honey, and blueberry nut bread, which was delicious. Like a Catholic mass, the food was consecrated with the spirit of Mother Bear and presented to each person present. Unlike a usual catholic mass however, the food was distributed by passing the blessed loaf around much like a family at dinner. Whether it was the Spirit of Mother Bear wishing us a health through bread, or the fact that the fresh blueberry bread studded with walnut pieces was simply delicious in

its own right; the bread divided and eaten until the whole loaf was consumed. We washed the small meal down with the remaining mead while discussing upcoming events. After cleaning up, I went to dinner with the priestesses and a Dianic Wiccan whom I will call Elise. The conversation over dinner brought out a few nuances about their organization which surprised me, chiefly the use of the internet as an anchor for the community.

The community I worked with was largely organized online, and very often through the calendar on Spiral's homepage. The Spiral members I worked with were affiliated through LiveJournal.com, a forum/Blog style social networking program. In fact it was through the Spiral website that I found the information about the event I would attend for my first round of research! I feel that it is online that the seeds of the community are sown. People read about what Spiral has to offer, and find a group which suits them best. The calendar has dates times, and a brief description of each event. Through those events you gain access to more guarded schedules and private postings involving locations of events for the initiated only. Many of these events are gender specific or are by invitation only. Also these schedules give the individuals options, posts are visible 24 hours a day, and with the majority of the Bay Area residents reasonably adept at using the internet, the accessibility is very high. This results in groups forming not just in the Bay Area, but from anywhere, and following digital paths linking those seeking more involvement with people who can provide answers and even open doors to groups locally that may be very small or hard to contact.

My second round of research comes in two parts, the first is my observations of the Pagan Festival, and the second part will be my interview with Rev. Joel Schonbrunn,

an ordained druid. It was a balmy day in Berkeley when my girlfriend Charlene and I arrived at the festival. Located in MLK Jr. Civic center park, the festival was warming up when we arrived, and people buzzed back and forth from the farmers market next door to the festival and back again. There were about twenty booths set up, a third had wares, usually jewelry or art on display, and several booths were dedicated to the religious hardware, crystals, candles and herbs frequently used in the rituals of the many groups represented. Another third were devoted to their practice, with Science fair-styled boards in a whimsical array of color, photos, and text describing their beliefs, and present congregation. The last and most enterprising third had both displays present, with their religious leaders doubling as cashiers for the day. Most of the folks inside the booths were dressed in simple flowing garments often of natural fibers. Several groups were witches, as indicated by their long cloaks, stereotypical pointy hats and many of them sported decorated brooms. One even had a Vacuum with a sizeable Quartz crystal affixed to its handle. What I noticed most about the festival was how unassuming everyone was. Of the folks that I talked to, all were friendly and helpful, many had worked or attended the festival in years past and had much to say about how the people got along.

In particular, Joel Schonbrunn, a Microsoft programmer, Brewer and ordained Druid had enough comments about the community to warrant an interview. Most folks simply stated that people here get along, and that no one group was trying to fight over the festival goers, they were just there to have a good time. Joel, expanded this with a great quote, “you won’t find much ‘our God is better than you God’ around here, we tend to be like, ‘hey, let’s talk about this’.” As a druid he talked about how if you were to ask

anyone to define what they believed in three words, you could ask everyone, even the high ordained, and never get the same answer twice. He said that what people believed had a lot to do with whom they are around and where they come from. Paganism has a myriad of forms which frequently borrow from each other. When asked about his community he mentioned that his order was reticent to go digital, favoring regular gatherings to plan events and keep the group posted on recent issues. One of the most noticeable aspects of the festival was the emphasis upon environmentalism. Most products were organic, fair trade, or hand made by the person selling them. With so many groups I could not classify them all, but the unifying thread was definitely a penchant for enjoying and respecting nature and the inherent power of each person. Spirals presence here was limited to my knowledge, as several of the subgroups were present, but as there is no public list of Spiral groups outside of the calendar, I have no idea which groups they were. Rev. Joel Further explained how many of the groups represent reconstructed religions, many of which are hybridized by their practitioners into novel ideas and practices.

Eclecticism and environmentalism are definitely the common ground for the community. The majority of Pagan religions are earth based, so it comes as no surprise that Paganism tends to draw more eco-conscious people than not. Eclecticism is best defined as a tendency to pick up concepts from people, ideas, and usually other religions and incorporate them into your own system of beliefs. Paganism being a non-exclusive and often free forming style of worship lends itself well to this model. This model is more true for the individual than it is for the whole, the differences in the individuals of a congregation may be great, for example, one of the priestesses I met with, Lorrie, was

primarily a Shaman with extensive totemic Animal spirits, while the other, Ember, was a believer in the Norse pantheon, specifically under the tutelage of Odin. Both are individually different, yet are ordained in the same order, with both people meeting at a moderately shamanistic tradition as the ritual dictated. Neither are exclusive in their belief however, as they both know, and believe in Shamanism and the Nordic pantheon. This sharing of ideas results in a great tolerance of religion as well as the creation of many points by which the congregation can relate to one another.

These points lend great solidarity to communities of Pagans with so many avenues with which to connect to each other on a spiritual level. These avenues are points which join the Spiral members, but are also the points which leave them open to attack from other non-pagan groups, such as aggressive forms of Christianity. In the Spiral homepage, the third sentence of their “About the Fellowship” section, lists protection as one of the reasons why Spiral exists. The community, online and off provides a safe, and easy to access, avenue of communication and religious pursuit. As well as a resource for finding like-minds and possibly friends whom share your beliefs. One of the interesting elements of Spiral is the way in which religions and practices are reconstructed. With no living priest or priestess type person to educate and ordain new religious leaders, often the first members of a reconstructed group are self-taught and self ordained. This method of recreating a religion gives the practitioners even greater freedom to practice as the wish, and however they interpret the historical references which the reconstructed religion is based off of.

The Spiral members, with all their variation in ideas, beliefs, and preferences in spirituality, still come together on a common, digital medium online, a shared and

heterogeneous system of beliefs and the pride of being on the fringe, with the safety of not being alone. I would best define Spiral as a community of friends sharing a religion of options. What each person makes of their beliefs is up to them, and if they look, they can find some one else who thinks the same way. These concepts are not the total of what the community is, but rather, these concepts are how a group of people can find each other in the dense, modern city, connect on a common ground, and celebrate who they are, openly, freely, and without fear.

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