Out of the Broom Closet and into the Fire:
Examining How Modern Witches Communicate with Each Other and the World at Large

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Wicca, a contemporary pagan new religious movement, is a complex religious tradition. Traditional academic forms of inquiry are not always sufficient to gain proper and deep understanding of the tradition. Instead I propose that the analysis of unofficial communications of adherents, what I call Lived Religious Communications, allows scholars to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the tradition and to see how individuals shape and form their identities as Wiccans. In this thesis I analyze numerous communications regarding academia, popular media, and even internal debates about theology, which demonstrate that many individuals who identify as Wiccan have major concerns over whether or not they or their religion is seen as legitimate or authentic, both by insiders and outsiders of the tradition.

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CHAPTER I:

Introduction

The Wiccan World

"Of course I'm a witch. And I get great fun out of it." On July 29, 1951, readers of the British newspaper *The Sunday Pictorial* were probably shocked to read those words. It was unheard of at the time, a newspaper interviewing a self-purported witch, let alone one who claimed to belong to an ancient witch cult that predated Christianity. The words were uttered by Gerald Gardner, a British gentleman, former civil servant, amateur archaeologist, naturist, and witch, and it would not be the last time he spoke to reporters. In 1954 Gardner released *Witchcraft Today*, a non-fiction book designed to explain and espouse the beliefs of what he called the "witch-cult."[1] Gardner encouraged publicity around his faith, and communicated eagerly to all who would listen. Soon other self-proclaimed witches followed suit. Some, like Gardner and Alex Sanders, eagerly communicated with the press to spread news of what they saw as a re-emergence of their faith.[2] This publicity generated many converts, including Doreen Valiente, who would one day be called the "Mother of Modern Wicca." Valiente lived far from Gardner, and they initially communicated through letters before she joined Gardner's coven, eventually becoming his most famed high priestess. Written communications such as letters, newspaper articles and interviews, magazines and books have always been an important part of this nascent witch religion, extending more recently to blogs, social media, and specialized websites.

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[1] Gerald Brosseau Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (Louthe, England: IHO, 1999).

[2] Alex Sanders was an early rival of Gerald Gardner's; he likewise claimed to have been initiated into an ancient witch cult, and was founder of the Alexandrian tradition of Wicca.

This new religion, Wicca as it is now called, soon spread to other parts of the world, including the United States, where a 2008 study showed it to be one of the fastest growing religions in the country, a claim made by many to this day.[3] The exact number of Wiccans in the U.S. is not known, as many religious identity surveys do not include it as an option, and the loose organization of Wicca and secretiveness of many of its practitioners make collecting such information even more difficult to acquire. Due to religious and social discrimination, real or imagined, many Wiccans remain secretive about their identities. This has led to a practice of disclosing of identities, in ways similar to the "coming out" process of some LGBTQ+ individuals, in which Wiccans disclose to other individuals that they identify as Wiccan. Wiccans call this act of identity disclosure "Coming out of the Broom Closet."[4] The very fact that information about Wicca is so difficult to pin down is, I argue, evidence that Wiccan studies require more research and legitimacy.

Publicity and communication have been crucial to Wicca's growth. Because such a small population practiced or was interested in Wicca, and because the mainstream media viewed them as curiosities, the community turned to national and international magazines, newsletters, periodicals and books focused on Wicca and witchcraft. It was a natural evolution. Written communication allowed Wicca to spread without proselytization, and also helped Wiccans form both community and identity without ever meeting in person.[5] With the advent of the internet and email it has become even easier for Wiccans and practitioners of witchcraft worldwide to correspond and participate in online Wiccan and witch communities. In her work, scholar Sarah Pike recognizes internet communities as a prominent part of Wiccan and contemporary pagan life, as she states they have a "lively online presence" and that "Wiccans [have] used online networking as well as more traditional media channels to rally support…" for their community. [6]

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[3] See "2008 American Religious Identification Survey," Trinity College, last modified March 8, 2011 https://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf, accessed December 28, 2018.

[4] Gwendolyn Reece, "Contemporary Pagans and Stigmatized Identity," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 18, no. 1 (2016): 60-92.

[5] It should be noted that proselytization is extremely taboo in the Wiccan tradition, and many Wiccans view it as one of the worst and most dangerous part of other religions. See Stewart Farrar, *What Witches Do* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1971), 10-13.

I am not alone in arguing that television, cinema, and the internet have all deeply changed many aspects of religious life in the media age, and not just for Wiccans. In his book *Religion in the Media Age*, Stewart Hoover brilliantly lays out numerous ways in which religious individuals have begun to shift from more traditional forms of religious affiliation toward less organized forms of religious practice, largely as modern media and technology have opened up access not only to information about one's own religion, but also about other religions and religious practices, expanding and granting greater access to the contemporary "religious marketplace." "Religion and the media seem to be ever more connected as we move further into the twenty-first century," he argues.[7] As Hoover points out repeatedly throughout his work, all religions have been forced to adapt to address new forms of technology and media. Further, non-traditional forms of religion and spirituality have formed and continue to be supported in part due to greater media access. For instance, Hoover argues, the media age has provoked an increasing sense that identity, or rather the making of identity and meaning, has shifted from being the responsibility of one's surroundings, such as a school, culture, and family, to also being an individual's responsibility, encouraging a sort of self-reflexivity.[8] We see that not only has this inspired religious seeking through media, but also our modern media technology allows for this same seeking.

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[6] Sarah M. Pike, "Reflection: Wicca and Religious Freedom Networking in the Digital Age," in *Media, Religion and Culture: An Introduction*, ed. Jeffrey H. Mahan (New York: Routledge, 2014), 99-100.

[7] Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

[8] Ibid., 50-53.

The media-generated shifts in religious practice that Hoover describes resonate with the historical development of Wicca, which has changed dramatically over its short life. Wicca has seen a transformation from a religion centered around small individual covens, typically with only a handful of members each, to a tradition that continues these covens but also contains a massive online community with diverse individuals dispersed all over the globe. As I will discuss in chapter four, the internet has allowed a small secretive religion that traditionally practices anonymity and rites of initiation to develop into a public online religion, where many members now gain not only information allowing them to practice their religion but also initiation and community. That being said, some might argue that the Wiccan dispersal through the internet has heightened anonymity; after all, many Wiccans users possess usernames and pseudonyms that are clearly not their own name. Yet while the anonymity of names might be protectable, the internet has allowed for previously unconnected Wiccans to "come out of the broom closet" and meet and communicate with one another, something much more difficult without the internet. Online, Wiccans share not only personal stories and details, but also form communities, regardless of whether or not they reveal their offline identities.

Communication, then, plays a recurring central role in Wicca. Many Wiccans practice with each other every day not in person, but online. Wiccan social media site Witchvox has over 13,000 members alone.[9] Though most may never meet in person, they practice their craft, cast their spells, cry, fight, laugh, love, and hate online in many of the same ways as do religious communities that meet primarily in person. Indeed, it has been my experience that in many ways a major, if not a primary, way Wiccans interact with their own religious community is through the internet.

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[9] See http://www.witchvox.com/, accessed May, 11, 2019.

It is because of the internet and other forms of community and communication that Wicca has been able to maintain at least some common theologies and beliefs, though as will soon be clear, even this has complications. Wiccans as a whole tend to be highly pluralistic and ortho-praxic rather that ortho-doxic.[10] That is, to many Wiccans, it is what one does that makes one a witch, not necessarily what one believes, and many Wiccan traditions are quite dissimilar from one another. Due to this there is no end to the variations of Wicca; even within a single coven, theological opinions can vary wildly. That being said, as scholars like Hugh Urban have argued, Wiccans on the whole tend to be polytheistic and/or pantheistic, focused on nature and magic, inspired by ancient pagans (real or imagined), and possess a shared language regarding rituals and spellcraft.[11]

However, as we will see, nature, spells, and magic are not the only things that are important to Wiccans; communication is as well. But communication is no longer solely about survival, it is now a vital part of Wiccan community formation and identity. Wiccans do not just communicate with each other and about each other; they also communicate to, and about, the non-Wiccan world at large. Witches are on-again/off-again darlings of popular media, serving as major characters in numerous books, films, and television programs including the television series *Buffy the Vampire* (1996-2003) and the *Harry Potter* book and film series. *Charmed* (1998-2006), another television program, not only had witches as its main heroines, but also adopted numerous Wiccan terms, beliefs, and practices as part of its fantasy mythology. More recently, popular media such as the film *The Witch* (2015) and Netflix's *Chilling Adventures of*

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[10] Ethan Doyle White, *Wicca: History, Belief, and Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Sussex Academic Press, 2016), 30-34.

[11] Hugh B. Urban, *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 166-167.

Sabrina, itself a reboot of the *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* television series (1996-2003), have made witches, and by association Wiccans, once again popular culture tropes. Wiccans have also been the focus of several academic and non-academic studies, most notably the books *Triumph of the Moon* (1999) by Ronald Hutton and *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979) by Margot Adler, both of which achieved mainstream success.[12] Even the realm of politics has focused, in its own way, on the concept of witchcraft. Not only has Donald Trump frequently used the term "witch-hunt" in regards to his legal troubles, but, as I will discuss in the conclusion, some Wiccans participated in a ritual to sabotage his presidency through magical means.[13] Through the internet and other forms of communication, Wiccans have been able to discuss these issues with each other and with non-Wiccans in ways that seem foundational to their communities and identities.

The current field of contemporary pagan studies, which includes the study of Wicca, is one in flux and conflict.[14] It struggles to define itself and has faced its share of criticism, both with regard to whether or not contemporary pagan religions are worthy of research, as well as criticism aimed at its current level of academic rigor.[15] During the past 20 years, scholars such as Ethan Doyle White, Ronald Hutton, and Sarah Pike have excelled at tracing the history and beliefs of numerous contemporary pagan groups while also making the case for the field's existence. However, as expansive as their research is, there is still much to explore within these traditions. My intent is to build on this work and show one of the ways we can expand our understanding of these traditions, as well as to show how the study of Wicca, and other contemporary pagan traditions, can enhance and expand our understanding of the contemporary religious landscape and the traditions found therein. That is to say, it is important to study the ways contemporary traditions interact with developing technology, including the internet, and more precisely to study how religious individuals and communities interact with each other every day in such spaces, because these interactions account for a major part of contemporary religious life. To ignore them is to ignore great resources for understanding these religions and more importantly, the individuals who constitute them.

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[12] Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979); Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[13] See Jeanne Moos, "Witches Fuming over Trump's Use of 'Witch Hunt' - CNN Video," CNN (December 19, 2018), https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2018/12/19/witches-offended-donald-trump-moos-pkg-vpx.cnn, accessed December 28, 2018; Tara Isabella Burton, "Each Month, Thousands of Witches Cast a Spell against Donald Trump," Vox.com (October 30, 2017), https://www.vox.com/2017/6/20/15830312/magicresistance-restance-witches-magic-spell-to-bind-donald-trump-mememagic, accessed December 28, 2018.

[14] It is necessary here to add a note to explain exactly what I mean by these terms: "contemporary paganism" or "neo-paganism" refers to an academic umbrella term that describes Wicca, as well as Druidry, Asatru, and other similar traditions. "Wicca" refers to the Witchcraft religion begun by Gardner, and for the sake of inclusivity it includes any who claim the name. "Witchcraft," in this project at least, is a broad term used to describe a specific type of ritualized magical practice, of which Wicca is arguably the most prominent and well known form. Often Witchcraft and Wicca are conflated, both by outsiders and insiders, leading to confusion. In this project I will primarily use the term Wicca to describe the religion itself, Witchcraft will refer to self-proclaimed witches who do not seem to claim the Wiccan identity, and Contemporary Paganism will refer both to the religious category as a whole, but also the broader academic category as well. See Hugh B. Urban, *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements*, 160-163.

By examining how and in what ways Wiccans have used the internet and media to communicate, we begin to see aspects of the religion that we may not have seen or studied before, and we see new sides to previously explored ideas. We see concerns over representation and understanding, we see anger over internal and external debates, and most importantly we see concerns over identity, authenticity and legitimacy. I call these communications Lived Religious Communications, and they are, I believe, an undervalued resource in the study of religious traditions, particularly those like Wicca, which do not always fit the models of "traditional" religion.

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[15] Markus Altena Davidsen, "What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (2012): 183-199.

Lived Religious Communication

While scholars have examined the history and beliefs of numerous Wiccan and contemporary pagan traditions, more work remains to be done on the everyday religious practices and habits that have formed; the culture, the language, the very sense of being Wiccan. In his works *The Madonna of 115th Street* and *Between Heaven and Earth,* Robert Orsi introduced the concept of lived religion, a bottom-up alternative to the traditional top-down method of religious studies research.[16] Orsi defines lived religion loosely as a form of cultural world building:

> Rethinking religion as a form of cultural work, the study of lived religion directs attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas – all as media of making and unmaking worlds.[17]

That is, in a lived religion approach, scholars look at the daily practices and culture of a religion in conjunction with, or sometimes rather than, its sanctioned rituals and official dogma. Lived religion is the study of the cultural context and “everyday” understandings of members of a tradition, particularly in regards to how a religious tradition, and the social, cultural, and familial ties that often follow, shapes an adherent’s worldview and cultural identity. It is a both/and approach, looking at both what a text says, and what its readers say; looking at both what a religious figure says and what his/her followers say. The purpose is not to ignore those sources which might traditionally be thought of as “authoritative” but rather to supplement those sources with sources which might not initially seem as authoritative. This is why a lived religion approach is so helpful for studying Wicca: Wicca's pluralistic and highly individualized nature, as well as its relatively short history, limits the efficacy and value of traditional academic top-down approaches to the study of religion that have been used to study other larger and more established religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Not only is there no official tradition-wide hierarchy in Wicca, but Wiccans frequently debate as to who qualifies as an authority as well as exactly what some of their core beliefs are. One cannot study the "official" doctrine of a religious tradition if there is no one in the tradition who can agree as to who or what qualifies as official. Nor can one simply read sacred texts to understand Wiccan beliefs if Wiccans as a whole cannot agree on a canon or on which books qualify as sacred or even true.

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[16] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2005); Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

[17] Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, xix.

After all, without a traditional hierarchy or orthodoxy, Wicca can be inscrutable and misunderstood by those expecting both or either. On the other hand, Orsi's approach, as well as that of fellow founder of the lived religion approach David Hall, focuses more on the everyday (what some might call "profane") aspects of religious life like shopping, housekeeping, food preparation, and education, or in the case of Wiccans, watching fantasy television or "coming out of the broom closet." A lived religion approach allows scholars to examine Wicca more as its adherents actually experience it: a new-born, adapting, and unique tradition, one which sometimes contradicts what we think we know about religion.

In his seminal work, *The Madonna of 115th Street,* Orsi introduces his theory of lived religion. Speaking of his own background in Italian Catholicism, Orsi describes the shock of his initial work in religious studies. Raised in a culturally Italian Catholic home, Orsi knew a specific form of Catholicism, one located in a culture, a people, rather than a specific denomination. This cultural understanding of Catholicism ill-prepared him for the academic study of religion, for to his shock and horror, the Catholicism understood by the academy was nothing like the Catholicism he was raised with. This helped inspire Orsi's work, because lived religion as a model of religious studies helps explain this very disconnect between a religion understood in the abstract and a religion as it is practiced and experienced every day. His analysis of the Festa celebration in Italian Harlem explored how different and strangely alien the culture and beliefs might seem to some Catholics, and yet constitute a vital part of American Catholicism.[18]

In the lived religions model, a scholar looks not only to official texts or dogma, but also at the daily practices and beliefs of a religion's adherents. But more than that, the lived religions approach looks at how these everyday "low" beliefs and practices are doing "cultural work," in which the worldviews, identities, and relationships of religious adherents are forged.[19] In his books *Between Heaven and Earth* and *History and Presence*, Orsi explains how relationships shape and reshape us as individuals; he argues that individuals' relationships with friends, family, and other members of our communities, as well as with saints and other divine figures, are central to the study of lived religion.[20] These relationships forge how we interact with each other and how we treat each other, but also inform our cultural beliefs and attitudes. In a sense, our identities are constructed daily by the relationships we have, with whom (or what) we have relationships, and how we view those relationships. Because it is through communication that we maintain our relationships as well as convey our own understandings of ourselves and others, analyzing these communications is an excellent method for studying the everyday lives of religious individuals and communities.

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[18] Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, xii-xxiv, xxxix-xlviii.
[19] Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, xix.
[20] Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*; Robert Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

Orsi's theory of lived religion is particularly helpful for studying what I call Lived Religious Communications, or LRCs, which include forms of preserved communication, such as any written correspondence, email, blog posts, websites, internet commentary, and videos.[21] The importance of these forms of communication—that is, their role in community forming, goal forming, and identity forming—has been overlooked in the study of Wicca to this point. While communication is often regarded as a source of information, all too often scholars of religion look at more official religious communications, such as official documents, institutional publications, and correspondence between prominent religious leaders. Others focus on internet communications only as representational of specific internet subsets of a religion. Fortunately, scholars such as Sarah Pike, Deborah Whitehead, and Stewart Hoover, amongst others, have recognized that the internet and media can be valuable sources of information for scholars of religion.[22] As useful as official or sacred texts and communications are to the study of religion, they often do not provide valuable insight into the lives and culture of everyday practitioners, thus resulting in a shallower view of that tradition.

What is an LRC specifically? This is a hard question to answer, for it is fluid, and in many ways subjective, not only in the scholar's view, but also the view of insiders. In this study, I primarily study LRCs as digital media, as it is on the internet that many Wiccans communicate with each other, and indeed the same could be true of many religious traditions. That being said, any communication that is in some way part of the everyday religious lives and practices of individuals can be considered an LRC, from letters and email correspondence to blog posts and everyday religious conversations between practitioners. While in a general sense LRCs are not seen as religiously authoritative, their relationship to authority may also be fluid, so that what might be a mere letter today can one day become authoritative, while an authoritative and dogmatic speech today can become "just another speech" tomorrow. One needs only to look at the letters of Paul in the Christian canon to see examples of this fluidity in action. Thus the question remains: what counts as an LRC? That is ultimately up to the individual scholar, but typically, an LRC's authority is questioned or context dependent, that is, while the author or speaker of an LRC may view their opinion as fact or doctrine, it is not necessarily seen as such by the community as a whole. Likewise, an LRC, though typically religious in subject matter or tone, often deals more with community, culture, or identity, or the everyday aspects of practitioners' lives, often blurring the lines between theology and practical matters.

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[21] I will capitalize the term Lived Religious Communications for two main reasons: first to stress the term itself, and second to set it apart from other communications that may not qualify, and or are not being examined as such.

[22] See Sarah M. Pike, "Reflection: Wicca and Religious Freedom Networking in the Digital Age," in *Media, Religion and Culture: An Introduction*, ed. Jeffrey H. Mahan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 99-100; Deborah Whitehead, "The Evidence of Things Unseen: Authenticity and Fraud in the Christian Mommy Blogosphere," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 1 (2015): 120-50; and Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

The purpose of studying LRCs is not to discredit or attack approaches to the study of religion that focus on authoritative texts or communications. Indeed, just as the lived religions approach favored by Orsi argues for studying *both* official practices *and* unofficial practices, the LRC approach is not meant to necessarily replace the study of authoritative texts and communications, but to supplement and expand on it by including texts and communications that have been ignored or understudied. While no one project can ever fully examine and describe any religious tradition, my hope is to contribute to the greater understanding of Wicca, and the larger field of religious studies, by examining the Lived Religious Communications of Wicca. I will argue that because these communications help to build community, form religious identities, and are ritualized or repeated, they can be considered a form of religious expression and lived religious practice for Wiccans. I will highlight and analyze current forms of public communication between Wiccans and scholars of Wicca, Wiccans and popular culture commentators, and intercommunal debates about Wiccan practice in order to show that not only are such communications forms of lived religious practice, but they are also important sources of information that allow scholars to better understand the daily religious lives of Wiccan practitioners and communities.

Why Wicca?

The answer is multifaceted. First and foremost, my area of specialization is Wicca and other contemporary pagan religions. Second, I believe that my method of looking at Lived Religious Communications is particularly useful for studying Wicca. Wicca is highly pluralistic and non-dogmatic, as I mentioned before. It lacks a single leader or organization, there is no single agreed-upon sacred text, and even its founder is treated with some controversy due to questionable claims he made regarding his religion's origins (which will be discussed in more detail in chapter two), in addition to his now archaic viewpoints on sexuality and gender and his feuds with subsequent leaders such as Doreen Valiente.[23] Additionally, because many Wiccan covens remain highly secretive, and nearly every coven has its own unique culture, beliefs and practices, traditional ethnography is complicated. This means that more traditional methods of academic inquiry, such as textual analysis and ethnography, can be limited in their effectiveness. On the other hand, studying Lived Religious Communications within Wicca, in a sense fusing aspects of both online ethnography and textual analysis, can grant a great amount of insight into contemporary Wicca. Furthermore, Wicca has been a strong and early adopter of the internet.[24] Online activities such as comments on popular press articles, blog posts, and online forums – all of which I treat as LRCs – seem to constitute an important daily ritual for many Wiccans, judging by the sheer number of such sites and the frequency of activity on them. These are not practices that are dogmatically or scripturally instructed, if there could even be such a thing with Wicca for reasons I have already discussed. Instead, this kind of engagement with media and the internet seems to be generated organically by individual Wiccans, thereby constituting a prime example of lived religion.[25]

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[23] White, *Wicca*, 4-9.
[24] Pike, 99.

The third reason has to do with my own positionality. In a sense I too, like those I discuss in this thesis, must "come out of the broom closet." Like Orsi, I knew the religion I study most personally before I studied it academically, in my case because I was and am Wiccan. I admit this not only because it is important to acknowledge my own positionality, but also because it is because of my familiarity with Wicca that I experienced a similar moment of shock. Just as Orsi experienced when studying Catholicism, many academic works that I read on Wicca seemed incomplete, or didn't quite reflect what I knew. Invariably, contemporary pagan scholars I read were accurate as to the basic facts and were thoughtful and professional. Yet few seemed to have a good understanding of contemporary Wiccan culture, identity, or community. These texts not only didn't reflect the Wicca I had seen and experienced, they didn't seem to reflect any real sense of what it meant to live as a Wiccan, nor did they reflect the subtleties in its culture.

As I will discuss in this thesis, scholars of contemporary paganism are often particularly subject to scrutiny and criticism if they identify as scholar practitioners. Perhaps in other subfields of religious studies there is less scrutiny and criticism over a scholar's positionality, but within contemporary pagan studies, this is particularly true. Despite this fact, I find it best to admit my positionality, so as to be open and honest. Scholars of other, more established, religious traditions may be less susceptible to having their objectivity put at risk by discussing their positionality. Fair or not, I and other scholars of contemporary pagan studies, particularly scholar practitioners, do not have such a luxury. Indeed, it often seems a duty to report our own biases, as to do otherwise can undermine our work. But it seems strange to me that possessing a specific religious identity disqualifies one from studying that same identity. If this were to be the case, then within the field of religious studies we must also ask Christians to stop studying Christianity, and the same for Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and others in their own fields, for they too would have nothing to contribute. To go even further, this logic would seem to imply that women are precluded from studying Women and Gender Studies, that LGBTQ+ individuals cannot contribute to queer theory, and that Americans cannot objectively study American history. In short, I argue that my work should be critiqued and analyzed based on its own merits, not based on my positionality.

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[25] Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street,* xiv-xv.

A Note on Sources & Methodology

In this project I rely heavily on primary sources by self-identified Wiccans, including books, blog posts, online articles, and internet commentary. I do this for three reasons. First and foremost, one of my primary arguments in this project is that such sources are useful in providing necessary context and understanding for scholars of religion, particularly those of a sociological or anthropological bent. Without such context and understanding, scholars may suffer an impoverished and incomplete view of the traditions they seek to study and understand. While some may be skeptical about using the internet, particularly online communities, as a source of research, I believe it is absolutely necessary to research this information, while also respecting the privacy of those involved. Increasingly in a digital age, religious practice and communication is shifting online: for some, perhaps the goal is only to communicate with like-minded individuals, but for many others, the internet has become a space to practice their religion, build community, and even shape identities and worldviews.[26] Second, these sources provide the many different Wiccan voices within my project, voices which are absolutely necessary to include, as Lived Religious Communications often both embody and convey many religious voices. Finally, these sources represent a source of information about Wicca that has too often been ignored or trivialized. As scholars we often do not treat internet-based primary sources with respect. While it is true that many sources on the internet are less than academically rigorous, we forget that for insiders, these are not only accurate sources, but foundational to their group identity and social network. While I do not claim that all of these sources reflect objective truth or academically rigorous public research, I do argue that they offer a unique and useful insight into the communities and individuals involved. For this reason I juxtapose peer reviewed scholarship with blog posts and internet messages, not to proclaim them as equally academically authoritative or objective, but instead to discuss all of these sources as Lived Religious Communications that are equally authoritative in relation to how they construct Wiccan identity

Internet primary sources have been taken from a variety of public blogs, specialized news sites, and public chatrooms and forums. I have limited myself to publicly accessible sources; I have used no privileged information. Where I have included personal information due to my own positionality as both a practitioner and scholar of Wicca, I have noted that this is based solely on my personal and professional experiences, not the experiences of Wiccans in general, and should only be taken as such. No primary sources were taken from private blogs, membership only websites, or private messages (such as email, private forums, or instant messages). All primary sources are accessible to any general member of the public without any special knowledge necessary to access them. Print sources all come from published books that are available from a wide variety of retailers.

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[26] Hoover, 45-83.

Dangers and Possible Criticisms of the LRC Approach

As effective and useful as I believe the LRC approach is, others might have some criticisms of this approach. It is my intention here to discuss these and hopefully lay such concerns to rest.

One possible criticism is obvious: the problem of positionality. As the LRC approach engages the opinions and beliefs of individuals, particularly those we as scholars may feel at least some sympathy towards, there is always the temptation to take the opinion or side of one's subject. In an LRC approach one may be susceptible to the accusation of bias, in that they might be seen as over-sympathizing with their subjects or even taking the point of view of one's subjects without academic evidence. But I would argue that the same danger is present in traditional approaches to ethnographic research or textual analysis, where a scholar may also sympathize with their research subjects. As such, this flaw is not a flaw of the LRC approach in particular, but of any form of qualitative research.

Others might view my approach as an attack on other scholarly approaches. While I do argue that other approaches to the study of Wicca often and regularly ignore LRCs in their work, I do not mean to say that other methodologies are wrong. In fact great work has been done in the study of Wicca. However, I argue that by ignoring LRCs as important sources of emic information, our studies of Wicca, and religion more generally, are incomplete, because when we omit important factors in the development of the culture and identity of religious individuals, we ignore valuable resources for understanding these traditions and communities. So while LRCs should not be the only resource we use for studying religions, they are an important part to include. Just as Orsi advocates a both/and approach to the study of lived religions, I too am arguing for a both/and approach to Lived Religious Communications.

What do Wiccan LRCs reveal?

What exactly do Wiccan Lived Religious Communications reveal about Wicca?: a great many things. LRCs reveal a surprising amount of information about how Wiccans view both themselves and others. One can study LRCs from a variety of approaches and in a variety of contexts and discover many different ways that they reveal facets of Wiccan culture and identity, more than any single study can reveal. In the case of this study, my examination of Wiccan LRCs reveals a shared set of anxieties concerning authenticity and legitimacy.

Authenticity and legitimacy must be defined, however this is a difficult task as both terms are often conflated with each other. For the sake of this thesis, I will provide two broad definitions to explain how I use these terms and how they illustrate the different facets of these Wiccan anxieties. In his book *Authentic Fakes*, David Chidester examines the intersections of media and popular culture, focusing on what he calls "authentic fakes" or illusions, frauds, trickeries, and even arguably profane traditions and items that American culture treats in religious ways. As he puts it, such authentic fakes are authentic in that "they do authentic religious work by negotiating what it means to be a human person in relation to transcendence, the sacred, or ultimate human concerns."[27] Chidester's work on authentic fakes has influenced my own definitions of authenticity and legitimacy.

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[27] David Chidester. *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*. (Berkeley, CA: U of California, 2005), viii.

Authenticity is generally defined as having a quality of being “real,” genuine, traditional, or coming from a specific origin. As Chidester suggests, this comes into play in the “real” religious work being done within a tradition, whereby a particular tradition enables its practitioners to negotiate their identities, and understand or discover what their place in the world is, and often in regards to the sacred. Wiccan anxieties over authenticity in this study take the form of discourse over Wicca’s origins, the status of the religion, and who qualifies as Wiccan. As we will see, Wiccan LRCs demonstrate these anxieties as they emerge in negotiations around the words, actions, or beliefs of others, both inside and out of their religion.

Legitimacy is often defined along the lines of an object or person being recognized by others of conforming to certain laws, rules, or guidelines. It is a quality of outside recognition, and in some sense, respect. In this thesis, we see Wiccan anxieties over legitimacy surface in communications around whether Wicca is regarded as a valid or “real” religion by academics and society at large, and whether one is seen as a valid or “real” Wiccan by fellow Wiccans. In a sense while authenticity is almost emic in a sense of feeling oneself to be genuine or “real,” legitimacy is almost etic, in the sense of being recognized as valid or “real” by others[28]

What to Expect

In this project, I will examine three separate spheres of life in which Wiccan and non-Wiccan interests intersect. There are numerous such intersections, but I have chosen three for the purposes of this project, each of which prominently demonstrate certain aspects of Wiccan concerns over legitimacy, authenticity and identity. The purpose of this introductory chapter has been to provide context and background as well as to set out the initial argument of my thesis.

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[28] It is important to note here that while Wiccans, or other individuals may “feel” something is true or not, that doesn’t necessarily make that instinct correct. My inclusion of these “feelings” is focused on showing and explaining Wiccan discourse, not to present them as objective fact.

In chapter two, I will examine Wiccan and non-Wiccan communications in the field of academia by providing further context as to Wicca's historical and mytho-historical origins and the debates that surround them. I will also examine some scholars' arguments that the presence of Wiccans and pagans in contemporary pagan studies invalidates the field itself, as well as a response to this argument by a Wiccan scholar.

In chapter three, I will analyze a recurring anxiety about how non-Wiccans see Wiccans in popular media, particularly television and film. As I will show, Wiccans frequently critique and analyze popular media, at times shaping their own identities based on the characters they see, while at other times arguing against such media representations based on perceived effects they may have on how non-Wiccans view Wiccans.

In chapter four, I will examine internal debates within Wiccan communities that frequently arise on the internet, focusing on two debates about who does and doesn't qualify as Wiccan. In one case it is a theological debate over who has gone through the necessary rituals to be truly counted as Wiccan and who has not, while in the second debate we see how demeanor, aesthetic, and religious temperament all shape a debate over who is "Wiccan enough" and who "gives Wicca a bad name." My conclusion will show how the lived religious communications in each of these spheres provide insight into Wiccan anxieties over legitimacy and authenticity.

CHAPTER II:

Wiccans Talking to Academia

Though many fields and subfields in religious studies draw the attention of those they study, Wiccans seem to have a unique relationship with the academic study of religion. As we will see later in this chapter, Wiccans and other contemporary pagans are actually seen as dominating the field of contemporary pagan research. But before that we must examine one of the most prolific feuds in contemporary pagan studies, a feud regarding the very origins and history of Wicca, which has provoked Wiccan outrage on both sides.

One might be concerned in this chapter, and others, that I am juxtaposing peer reviewed scholarship and LRCs, such as blogposts. One might think I am viewing or positioning them as equal in the level of their academic rigor, factuality, and bias, or lack thereof. This is not the case. The purpose of these juxtapositions is not to discredit or slander one side or the other, or to even view them as the same. Comparing emic LRCs with peer reviewed academic articles, or other etic texts is like comparing apples and oranges. The purpose is instead to illustrate how even academic scholarship is noticed by and effects the identity of those being studied. The disconnect in this chapter between scholars and Wiccans is not to show one side or the other is wrong, but to show the disconnect itself, how it is influencing LRCs and practitioners of Wicca, and in some ways even some scholars.

The Witch-Cult: Context and History

In this chapter I will examine how Wiccans talk back to scholars of Wicca, both in positive and in critical ways, and vice versa. Wiccans tend to possess high levels of religious literacy, perhaps due in part to their lack of a traditional laity or clergy and lack of proselytization, which requires potential converts to do a fair amount of research on their own to find a community. Because Wicca remains so secretive, and because most Wiccans refuse to missionize or proselytize, Wiccan converts seem to have a good deal of awareness and knowledge of other religious traditions. These factors tend to produce modern witches who are also exceptionally aware of outsiders who study their beliefs.

It is appropriate then that the first major example of Wiccan Lived Religious Communications is focused not on Wicca as it is today, but rather its origins. Before Wicca was formed into a coherent group, British-Indian folklorist and Egyptologist Margaret Murray wrote the controversial books *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of the Witches* (1931).[29] In these texts, Murray posited the highly controversial theory that a matriarchal, almost utopian religion and society existed before Christianity spread into Europe from Rome.[30] Even more controversial was that Murray argued that this "witch-cult," as she referred to it, survived in secret and continued to survive into the modern era.[31]

Despite how controversial Murray's ideas were, her theories have been highly influential for Wiccans and neo-pagans. Many of the terms she used, such as referring to witchcraft as the "Old Religion," "the horned god" (referring to one of Wicca's deities), "esbats" (referring to a type of ritual holiday), "Sabbaths" (referring to the eight most important Wiccan holidays), and even her description of the structure of a coven, were adopted by many Wiccans, including Gardner.[32] Her argument that the early modern witch trials in Europe and North America were attempts to root out and destroy this religion and resulted in the persecution and murder of at least some real witches also influences modern Wiccans as well, with many referring to the witch trials as “The Burning Times.” However, as influential as Murray’s ideas are in modern Wicca, they are only part of the historical narrative of Wiccans, who usually credit Gerald Gardner with bringing Wicca into the world today, if not outright founding the tradition.

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[29] Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) and *The God of the Witches* (London: Oxford United Press, 1970).
[30] Murray, *The Witch-cult in Western Europe*, 15.
[31] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 196-199.
[32] White, *Wicca*, 14-16.

Gerald Brosseau Gardner (1884-1964) is often credited as the founder of Wicca and the “Father of Modern Witchcraft.”[33] While the term “founder” is deeply complicated in this regard due to his reliance on Murray’s work and its importance in the history of the movement, it can safely be said that Wicca, as it exists today, would not exist without him. Born to a wealthy upper middle class family, Gardner was a child of immense privilege. However, because he was also a sickly child and had asthma, Gardner was sent under the care of his nursemaid to live throughout North Africa and South Asia, as the thinking at the time was that hot and dry weather helped asthma, while cold and wet weather aggravated the condition. It was on these trips that Gardner not only taught himself how to read, but also developed interests in other cultures.[34] As an adult he worked as a tea plantation worker in what is now Sri Lanka, a rubber planter in Borneo, and a civil servant in Malaysia.[35] During this time, he also became an amateur folklorist and archaeologist, developing interests in folk magic, indigenous customs, freemasonry, spiritualism and the occult.

In 1935, Gardner’s father passed away, leaving him a tidy inheritance that along with his civil service retirement pension would grant him financial independence.[36] This, along with illness and the insistence of his wife Donna, led him to retire and return to England by 1938.[37] He settled in the New Forest district and began to pursue his interests in the occult, eventually attending a play by the Rosicrucian Order Crotona Fellowship, which he joined.[38] While he ultimately was unsatisfied by the group, it was within the Rosicrucian order that Gardner purportedly met the New Forest Coven.

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[33] Urban, *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements*, 165.
[34] White, *Wicca*, 24-25.
[35] Philip Heselton. *Witchfather: A Life of Gerald Gardner, from Witch Cult to Wicca*, Vol. 1 (Loughborough: Thoth Publications, 2012), 48-62; White, *Wicca*, 24-25.
[36] Heselton, *Witchfather*, 73.

This group, according to Gardner, was a witch's coven that claimed ancestry in the witch cult of Margaret Murray or at least something like it. He claimed to have been taken to a house owned by his high priestess "Old Dorothy" and initiated into the coven by her and other members of the group.[39] He believed the New Forest coven to be one of the last surviving groups of pre-Christian witches, and eagerly participated in the group.[40] He also continued his other interests in the occult by meeting with Aleister Crowley, attending a Druid ritual at Stonehenge, and apparently even attempting to study Voodoo while visiting family in the United States.[41]

Slowly but surely Gardner had been gaining notoriety in England, notably by claiming to be the resident witch of the Folklore Centre of Superstition and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man, his 1951 *Sunday Pictorial* interview, and the publication of two books in which he included his personal beliefs.[42] Finally, in 1954, after the repeal of Great Britain's Witchcraft Act in 1951 (a 1735 Act of Parliament that outlawed witchcraft and magic), and the death of "Old Dorothy," Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, in which he described the religion he claimed to belong to as a survival of Murray's witch-cult theory. In fact, Murray wrote the preface of the book seemingly delighted to have found proof of her theory, and both seemed to endorse each other's claims about witchcraft.[43]

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[37] White, *Wicca*, 25-26.
[38] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 205-206; White, *Wicca*, 25-29.
[39] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 207-208.
[40] White, *Wicca*, 27-28.
[41] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 208-210.
[42] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 204-205; White, *Wicca*, 31-33.

Gardner continued to gain notoriety throughout this time by giving numerous newspaper, radio, and even television interviews, such as his 1957 interview with Daniel Farson.[44] In this interview Gardner called it "nonsense" to think of witches and covens as an excuse for "sexual orgies," instead arguing that witches would rather cast some magic if they so choose, eat some dinner, and dance.[45] When pressed as to what traditional witch dancing garb would be, Gardner initially replied simply with the word "skin," and then when further pressed, admitted that witches would be naked, and therefore clothed only in their own skin.[46]

Slowly but surely, due to his various connections with other occult leaders as well as his frequent appearances in the news, Gardner gained followers. He initiated each into the coven he had founded, the Bricketwood Coven, starting in 1949 and continuing until his death in 1964.[47] The Bricketwood Coven generated the formation of many other covens that hived off, or split, from it, eventually leading to what is today the tradition of Gardnerian Wicca.

Following Gardner, many others, including Alex Sanders and Robert Cochrane, also claimed to have been initiated into ancient traditions of the witch cult, Alex Sanders would eventually form what is known as the Alexandrian tradition of Wicca, while Cochrane would help found one of many movements known as "Traditional Witchcraft," which reject any connections to Gardnerian, Alexandrian, or other modern forms of Wicca and claim older, more "traditional" roots.[48] Despite their differences, nearly all of these figures laid claim to similar histories and narratives as Gardner, with some even claiming to be members of other branches of the same witch cult.

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[43] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 225.
[44] Daniel Farson and Gerald Gardner in IOMvids. "Gerald Gardner Interview - Daniel Farson," YouTube, April 25, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN0fUikv88g, accessed May 10, 2019.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] White, *Wicca*, 28-31.
[48] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 309-315, 320-339.

During the 1950s and 1960s, communication between these self-identified Wiccans and witches as well as their communications with the press became incredibly important to the nascent religion. Gardner's own fame and status as the "founder" of Wicca stems in part from the numerous public communications he made. Gardner published numerous books, including a fictional novel called *High Magic's Aid* in 1949, in which he includes his religious beliefs, arguably in a form that might have been less risky and more palatable in a context in which witchcraft was still illegal.[49] He continued with his books *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959), in which his beliefs became increasingly clear.[50] But his literary works are far from his only communications. Doreen Valiente, perhaps Gardner's most famous High Priestess, and herself often called "The Mother of Modern Witchcraft," provides two particularly clear examples of how important communication has been to the growth of Wicca. Valiente was a well-read occultist long before she met Gardner, but was intrigued when she learned of the man in the newspaper calling himself a witch. She contacted Gardner via letter, and the two corresponded for months before meeting, upon which she was initiated into his coven and eventually became one of his most favored High Priestesses and subsequently, after a falling out, his greatest rivals. Many Wiccans, particularly Valiente, grew to disdain Gardner's frequent tabloid and news appearances.[51]

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[49] Gerald Brosseau Gardner, *High Magic's Aid*, (Louthe: I-H-O, 1999).

[50] Gerald Brosseau Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (York Beach: Weiser Publishing, 2004) and *Witchcraft Today* (Louthe: IHO, 1999).

[51] Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* (London: Robert Hale, 2007), 174-180; Doreen Valiente, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* (London: Robert Hale, 1978), i-ix.

Ultimately, seeing Gardner's, as well as others like Alex Sanders', communication with the press as publicity-seeking, or at the very least as unwise and indiscreet, Valiente and others split with Gardner, helping pave the way for numerous other forms of Wicca and witchcraft, including solitary practice, which I will discuss further in chapter four.

In this sense then communication is what has helped Wicca not only survive, but continue to grow: it fueled Wicca's early growth with Gardner, and his communication with followers like Doreen Valiente. Communication was responsible for the fragmentation of Wicca and splits from Gardner because of disagreements over how/where/when to do it, and it has also fueled the growth of solitary and other non-traditional Wiccans due to the internet. Despite this history, or perhaps because of it, communication between Wiccans as well as with the outside world has only increased. With the advent of the internet age, communication with other Wiccans is easier than ever, with emails, blog posts, and instant messaging replacing letters and newspaper interviews. But more than that, the internet has given more Wiccans than ever before to have the platform and ability to tell the world about themselves, just as Gardner and Sanders did, for both better and worse. Together these numerous forms of communication grant us as scholars greater insight into Wiccans today.

Correcting History: Hutton's Historical Analysis

Wicca continued to grow after Gardner's death, and today it, and contemporary paganism in general, is sometimes, particularly by Wiccans and contemporary pagans themselves, seen as the fastest growing religion in America. However, there was very little academic work done on Wicca for years after Gerald Gardner's death in 1964, and even less work done by non-Wiccans. In 1999, British historian Ronald Hutton wrote *Triumph of the Moon,* one of the most extensively researched and foundational academic texts discussing the history of Wicca, and in many ways providing the definitive account of Gardner's and Murray's contributions.[52] Hutton described the contributions that western esotericism, Aleister Crowley, the Romantics, and other influences made to the formation of Wicca, but also pointed out instances where Gardner and Murray were not only mistaken or even misleading, but also how their narratives were intrinsically tied together. Hutton concurred with earlier historian Aidan Kelly, who argued that it was unlikely that the New Forest Coven that Gardner claimed to have been initiated into ever existed, and that Gardner only made this claim to give his tradition historic authenticity and legitimacy.[53]

Indeed, Hutton followed many who made a point of critiquing Margaret Murray's ideas. Murray's theories in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* were met with mixed reviews: while a surprising number of scholars gave it favorable reviews when it was first published, historians of the witch trials challenged her from the beginning, and critiques of her work continued throughout her life.[54] By the 1970s, Murray's "witch-cult hypothesis" was completely rejected by the academy, and it continues to remain a discredited theory in nearly all corners of academia today.[55] Critiques of Murray's work are focused largely on the fact that there is very little historical evidence to support her ideas, and that her arguments were largely the work of conjecture and supposition. As stated by historian Jeffrey B. Russell and Brooks Alexander:

> That this 'old religion' persisted secretly, without leaving any evidence, is, of course, possible, just as it is possible that below the surface of the moon lie extensive deposits of Stilton cheese. Anything is possible. But it is nonsense to assert the existence of something for which no evidence exists.[56]

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[52] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon,* 223-225.
[53] Ibid., 207.
[54] Ibid., 194-199.
[55] Ibid., 198-199.
[56] Jeffrey B. Russell and Brooks Alexander, *A New History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 42.

However, Hutton also argued that it was possible that the New Forest coven did exist, but in all likelihood was formed sometime in the 1930s in response to Murray's ideas.[57] Wiccan scholar-practitioner Phillip Heselton, who recently wrote multiple biographies of Gardner, argued that the coven did exist, and identified some whom he believed to have been members, but concurred that in all likelihood the coven's origins were modern and not ancient.[58] Hutton and other scholars have since rejected most of Gardner's claims about Wicca being an ancient religion, and as Hutton says, "no academic historian has ever taken seriously Gardner's claim to have discovered a genuine survival of ancient religion."[59]

This is not to say, however, that Hutton and other scholars of Wicca and contemporary paganism are critical of contemporary practitioners or of the traditions themselves. Hutton argues that Wicca is as real and as significant as any other religion.[60] But not all Wiccans appreciate or even condone scholarly research on their tradition. Ben Whitmore is the paradigmatic example of Wiccans who oppose the work of scholars they see as invading their purview.

Correcting the Correctors: Wiccan responses to Hutton, and each other

As more and more work has been done in contemporary pagan studies, so too have criticisms been made of this work. Ronald Hutton, like all scholars, has had his work challenged, sometimes successfully, and appropriately Hutton has made updates and corrections to his work as more research has become available. However, not all Wiccans think this is enough. Ben Whitmore is one such Wiccan. A New Zealand-born Wiccan High Priest, Whitmore attacked

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[57] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 207.
[58] Philip Heselton, *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration: An Investigation into the Sources of Gardnerian Witchcraft* (Somerset: Capall Bann, 2003).
[59] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 206.
[60] Ibid., 415-416.

Hutton's work in 2010 with his own multi-subtitled self-published work *Trials of the Moon: Reopening the Case for Historical Witchcraft: A Critique of Ronald Hutton's The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft.*[61]

As with many books, Whitmore's work is an ambitious project that seeks to correct what he feels to be incorrect information. He views Hutton as the archetypal closed-minded scholar who has come to conclusions before he looked at the evidence and let his preconceived notions guide his scholarship.[62] Whitmore thus hopes to provide his readers with evidence that not only were Hutton's conclusions about the origins of Wicca wrong, but also that Wicca is indeed an ancient Murrayite witch-cult.[63]

Whitmore's book employs two main strategies to prove his points. First, he repeatedly attacks Hutton, both personally and professionally, all but accusing Hutton of being a modern day witch-hunter. He repeatedly calls Hutton's own objectivity into question with statements such as, "we are obliged to rely upon Hutton's own interpretation of the data…but can we rely upon his interpretation to be fair?"[64] Indeed, according to Whitmore, one cannot rely on Hutton at all. Whitmore is not entirely critical of Hutton, acknowledging the sheer amount of work Hutton was forced to do simply to compile his book, and stating that "Hutton's ultimate aim is laudable: he is trying to clear aside the old myths of Wicca and Neopaganism and establish a solid foundation on which future research can be built."[65] But as impressive as Whitmore finds the volume of Hutton's work to be, he views it as inherently flawed: "This seemingly superhuman feat [*Triumph of the Moon*] was, I found, marred by some rather odd errors, which made me dig deeper; and as the errors multiplied I began to wonder how familiar he really was with his material."[66] For Whitmore, Hutton's work is ultimately marred by his anti-Wiccan and academic biases.[67]

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[61] Ben Whitmore, *Trials of the Moon: Reopening the Case for Historical Witchcraft: A Critical Response to Ronald Hutton's Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Auckland: Briar Books, 2010).
[62] Ibid., 3.
[63] Ibid., 1-4.
[64] Ibid., 51.
[65] Ibid., 4.

For example, Hutton discusses the identity of "Old Dorothy," the woman Gardner claimed initiated him into the New Forest Coven. Initially it was believed that this "Old Dorothy" was fictional or was a pseudonym.[68] Eventually, some Wiccans claimed that they had discovered "Old Dorothy's" true identity: Dorothy Clutterbuck, an upper-class woman of the New Forest region.[69] However, Hutton is suspicious that Dorothy Clutterbuck is "Old Dorothy," for not only was Ms. Clutterbuck an avid churchgoer, she was also openly politically and religiously conservative.[70] Furthermore, Ms. Clutterbuck kept public diaries, a common practice at the time. As with normal diaries, these diaries contained thoughts, feelings, poems, and the daily occurrences of Ms. Clutterbuck's life, though unlike the practice with modern diaries today, these were kept out in the open so that any visitor of her home might view them. These diaries, though they speak of a fondness for nature, lack any sense of occult beliefs or practices, especially any explicit mentions. In short, Hutton argues that every aspect of Ms. Clutterbuck's public life was so antithetical to being a High Priestess and witch of a secretive coven, that if true, she led one of the most incredible and successful double lives ever imagined, and thus is unlikely to have been the true identity of "Old Dorothy."[71]

Whitmore, however, disagrees with Hutton's analysis. Instead he argues that one must look deeper. Whitmore compares his reading of the diaries with Hutton's and finds Hutton's reading too shallow. He claims that if one reads between the lines, Clutterbuck's diaries are far more pagan than Hutton realized.[72] Commenting on a passage in which Clutterbuck seems to find some kind of spiritual presence or feeling in nature, Whitmore writes:

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[66] Whitmore, *Trials of the Moon,* 5.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon,* 210-211.
[69] Ibid., 209-212.
[70] Ibid., 211.
[71] Ibid., 210.

> Is this really the Church stalwart Hutton has portrayed? "Simple, kindly, conventional and pious"? True, witchcraft is never explicitly mentioned in the diaries, but then, Dorothy intended them to be viewed by her visitors. I think their "relevance to paganism" is worth a more careful look. We may possibly gain a further insight into them by comparing them with the writings of Katherine Oldmeadow, who lived near Dorothy and was her best friend. Dorothy always intended the diaries to be given to her, and she received them upon Dorothy's death.[73]

Whitmore argues that by looking at the greater context of Clutterbuck's diaries, such as the fact that they were always meant to be viewed by others, they are not the conclusive evidence Hutton claims them to be.[74] Indeed, Whitmore argues, if one *was* living a double life, the last place one would put evidence of this double life would be in public journals.

Ultimately, Whitmore argues that Hutton is blinded by anti-Wiccan prejudice, which includes an overly orthodox and Christian-influenced understanding of history. Whether or not Whitmore is correct in his analysis, he is speaking back, not only to Hutton, but to the academy and the world at large, about where Wicca, in his view, truly comes from.

But not all Wiccans share Whitmore's views. Peg Aloi not only disagrees with Whitmore's arguments as a Wiccan, but also as an academic. Although Aloi recognizes him as a fellow Wiccan and a well written author, she makes it clear that she views his work as academically suspicious at best. "By his own admission Whitmore is not an historian, nor even an academic. And this shows in his failure to observe the most rudimentary rules of objectivity and neutrality of stance."[75] She goes on to provide a point by point critique of Whitmore's book.[76] She argues that he relies far too much on conjecture and supposition, which she points out is ironic considering Whitmore maintained the same criticism of Hutton. Speaking back to the diaries of Clutterbuck, Aloi criticizes Whitmore for "saying we should read into Dorothy's diaries, inferring things that aren't there, by assuming what is written in her best friend's diary is somehow closer to what Dorothy actually meant to say."[77] Aloi critiques Whitmore for relying too much on his beliefs and rooting too much of his work in maybes, somehows, and what-ifs. [78]

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[72] Whitmore, *Trials of the Moon*, 50-54.
[73] Ibid., 52.
[74] Ibid., 51.

But it is not just academics and scholar-practitioners that take part in this debate. It is a debate that remains alive and well in many Wiccan chatrooms and message boards, particularly when either Hutton, Whitmore, or both are discussed in other ways and in other articles. In one Wiccan news article announcing the publication of Hutton's article "Revision and Counter-Revisionism in Pagan History," numerous commentators use the announcement to both critique and defend Hutton. User MacMorrighan writes "I wish that Professor Hutton was more of an objective Historian (sic) rather than a polemicist…" before claiming (without evidence):

> …it has been discovered that [Ronald Hutton] has misrepresented the authorities he was relying upon, occasionally misunderstood them, as well as refusing to legitimize the wealth of data from Continental Europe concerning the survival of Paganism since antiquity into the identity of "The Witch" figure.[79]

MacMorrighan argues that Hutton is politically and socially motivated in his stances, and that he is ignoring crucial evidence. But more interesting is the latter statement, in which MacMorrighan is apparently referring to a common Wiccan and contemporary pagan argument that contemporary paganism and Wicca are survivals of older forms of paganism, like Murray argued, but instead of direct survival, arguing that parts of pre-Christian European pagan religions survived in folklore, folk-beliefs, and folk-traditions, or what Orsi would call lived religious practices. In a similar vein, fellow Wiccan commenter Apuleius Platonicus writes:

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[75] Peg Aloi, "Trials of the Moon: A Brief Critique," *The Witching Hour* blog, Patheos.com (2010), https://www.patheos.com/blogs/themediawitches/2010/11/trials-of-the-moon-a-brief-critique/, accessed May 23 2019.

[76] Peg Aloi, "Review: The Trials of the Moon." *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12, no. 2 (2011): 74-78.

[77] Peg Aloi, "Trials of the Moon: A Brief Critique."

[78] Peg Aloi, "Review: The Trials of the Moon," 74.

[79] Jason Pitzl-Waters, "Pagan Community Notes: The Pomegranate, Ronald Hutton, Witch School, and More!," *The Wild Hunt* blog (2013), https://wildhunt.org/2013/01/pagan-community-notes-the-pomegranate-ronald-hutton-witch-school-and-more.html, accessed May 23 2019.

> Today, anyone who wants to be taken seriously must acknowledge the religious continuity between ancient and modern Paganism. Fortunately, there is still plenty to discuss and disagree about. That Hutton chooses to emphasize these disagreements is actually rather unfortunate. He could be playing a far more constructive role.[80]

Not only is Platonicus criticizing Hutton for not including this idea of pagan survival, but they are also voicing a common critique of Hutton's tone and research. Indeed, numerous Wiccans and pagans condemn Hutton for what they see as an unfair standard and contemptuous tone. In response to another article discussing Peg Aloi's criticism of Whitmore's work as academic and biased, user Sara Amis comments, "I don't think Whitmore is any less neutral than Hutton is, who has unkind things to say about several people."[81] Likewise Crystal Kendrick writes, "My problem with Hutton, or the reason I always saw him as anti-Pagan, was less the points he was making but rather the derisive language he used."[82] Indeed, these commenters seem to view Hutton's work as a personal attack on them as Wiccans, claiming repeatedly that he is dismissive and condescending toward Wicca. Yet as these Wiccans do not point out specific examples of what they view as Hutton's condescending or discriminatory text, these individuals seem to be critiquing his tone. Instead, it appears that the substance of his critiques are seen as dismissive to Wiccans and pagans because of the challenge they present to these traditions' historical claims.

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Jason Pitzl-Waters, "Two Interviews of Note: Ben Whitmore & Arthur Hinds," *The Wild Hunt* blog? (2011), https://wildhunt.org/2011/02/two-interviews-of-note-ben-whitmore-arthur-hinds.html, accessed May 23, 2019.

[82] Ibid.,

But not all Wiccans share these criticisms of Hutton, though they are not as defensive of his work as Aloi is. For some, Hutton and Aloi are in the right, and Whitmore's work is self-serving. As one user named Nonsuch states: "I just started reading *Trials of the Moon*. It seems to be a religiously motivated critique. [Whitmore] seems to not like the direction that the Wiccan community has taken since *Triumph of the Moon* was published." For Nonsuch, Whitmore is unfairly basing his criticisms of an academic text on religious arguments. Nonsuch also comments, "Perhaps some are expecting Hutton to be infallible rather than expressing his ideas at a point in time?"[83]

Others defend Hutton by arguing for the differences between academic and non-academic writing standards. As a Wiccan user named Star Foster states, "My impression of Hutton is that he must have been extremely frustrated. My own intuition is that he did find evidence [for the existence of Wicca pre-Gardner], but if you can't publish your evidence it doesn't exist academically."[84] In other words, as a historian, Hutton has made it clear that he is only including evidence that will stand up to academic scrutiny, while the suppositions and conclusions Whitmore reaches, while one might personally agree with them, are not academically sound. As such Star Foster seems to argue that it is unfair to critique Hutton for being bound by academic standards of evidence and proof, for as an academic, he must operate within the standards of his discipline.[85]

Others go even further, arguing that Whitmore and his supporters are reading more into Hutton than is fair. Mononymous user Scott enters into a debate with the previously mentioned Apuleius Platonicus on this point, arguing that Whitmore and Platonicus are falsely claiming that

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[83] Jason Pitzl-Waters, "Two Interviews of Note: Ben Whitmore & Arthur Hinds."
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.

Hutton completely disregards pre-Christian history and the theory of the survival of ancient paganism in Wicca and other contemporary paganisms. “It seems to me, though, that a substantial part of the debate around this issue is a matter of where one draws the line as to what constitutes a ‘pagan survival,’” Scott says, arguing that in a sense both sides are correct.[86] For Scott, Hutton is correct that Murray’s witch-cult hypothesis is wrong and there was no secret tradition of witchcraft that continued unbroken from premodern times. Yet at the same time Scott appears to agree with Platonicus and others that there is evidence that pagan beliefs survived through scraps of writing and cultural beliefs and practices. But as he argues with Platonicus, Scott concludes that the problem is that academics like Hutton are unwilling to count such anecdotal evidence as historical fact, and Wiccans such as Platonicus are unwilling to accept anything less than a claim of historical fact.[87]

Hutton himself has weighed in on this debate, stating in one interview that:

> I have no interest in contesting the claims of modern Pagans to represent a secretly surviving tradition, as long as the practitioners do not attack me or offer any actual historical evidence for scrutiny. If they do neither, then they are effectively standing outside history and are not the concern of a historian. I regularly read articles by contemporary witches, expounding one system or another which they say has been passed down through their family or their initiatory tradition for centuries, and offering no evidence to support this claim. They are no concern of mine, and it is open to others to believe or disbelieve them as they will. Gerald Gardner’s Wicca was, however, based on specific historical evidence, above all the early modern trials, and academic framework of interpretation of it, which were very much the business of historians.[88]

That is, Hutton argues that he finds Wiccan claims about survivals irrelevant to his work as a historian, so that when Wiccans, or any religious individuals, disagree with him, it is their right to do so. In order for a historian like him to address, or more bluntly, even care about these criticisms, they should be rooted in historical analysis, not in personal religious beliefs or traditional lore.

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[86] Jason Pitzl-Waters, "Two Interviews of Note: Ben Whitmore & Arthur Hinds."
[87] Ibid.
[88] Jason Pitzl-Waters, “Ronald Hutton Answers His Critics,” *The Wild Hunt* blog (2011), https://wildhunt.org/2011/05/ronald-hutton-answers-his-critics.html, accessed May, 10, 2019.

For Hutton, as for Aloi, Whitmore's work is by no means an academic work, though he might view it as such. However, its value in my project is as a Wiccan voice in conversation with academic ones. And while I ultimately side with Aloi and Hutton in this debate, the historical accuracy of Wicca's origins is not my primary concern. Rather than whether or not Wicca is truly a continuation of an ancient religion, my argument in this thesis is that at least some Wiccans view the sphere of academia as within their domain and feel compelled to be in discussion with it, not just to correct what they view as misinformation, but also to uncover new information about their tradition.

Illegitimate Research?: The Legitimacy of Contemporary Pagan Studies

As mentioned earlier, within the academy Wicca is studied under the rubric of contemporary pagan studies, which includes a host of other similar traditions such as Asátru, Druidism, and others. Wicca however is one of the larger and more recognized traditions in this field. The field of contemporary pagan studies also overlaps with the subfield of new religious movements, a broad category in religious studies, which as its name implies includes religious traditions and organizations that have their origins in relatively recent times, such as Scientology, Mormonism, and the broader New Age movement.

As a still developing field, contemporary pagan studies has its fair share of both defenders and detractors. But the field of contemporary pagan studies is not just relevant because of the nature of my focus on Wicca, it is also home to a debate about Wicca and other contemporary pagan religions' legitimacy and identity. One particular detractor of note is the scholar Markus Altus Davidsen. In his aptly named article “What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?”, Davidsen argues that the field possesses some inherent and dangerous flaws. Davidsen’s argument that contemporary pagan studies is in need of critique is fourfold. First, he argues that scholars working from a “purely insider” or what he terms a “religionist” view in the field outnumber those working from a “positivist” or “purely critical” view.[89] Second, he claims that the number of what he calls “pagan loyalists” so outnumbers the critical scholars that it effectively has isolated the field from more legitimate forms of inquiry.[90] Third, the number of insiders makes it difficult for outsiders to identify “excellent and academically sound publications.”[91] And finally, he argues that contemporary pagan studies is paradigmatic of what he sees as wrong with religious studies as a whole – namely, that too many religious individuals and religious apologists are in the field and not enough ‘unbiased’ scholars.[92]

Davidsen identifies several scholar practitioners that he sees as exemplifying these problems, separating their work into two categories. The first group, which includes scholar Peg Aloi, he terms “descriptive” and claims that they aim to present “ethnographies and historiographies,” which he seems to view as inferior to his “critical-naturalist” approach.[93] The second group he characterizes as more theoretical, theological, and philosophical, and says they are useful “mostly as source material.”[94] Ultimately Davidsen’s argument is that the voices of scholars who “have gone native” or “gone native in reverse” as he identifies them, are unacceptable within the field, or at least not to the degree they are presently.[95]

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[89] Markus Altena Davidsen, “What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24 (2012): 184, 187-88.
[90] Davidsen, “What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?,” 184.
[91] Ibid., 184-185.
[92] Ibid.,185.
[93] Ibid., 185-186.
[94] Ibid., 187.
[95] Ibid., 186.

However not all agree with Davidsen's critique. Wiccan scholar Ethan Doyle White so disagreed with Davidsen that he directly responded to him in his article "In Defense of Pagan Studies: A Response to Davidsen's Critique."[96] White agrees that contemporary pagan studies, which includes the study of Wicca, is perhaps overly saturated with scholar practitioners, and that at times this research can be too "descriptive," to use Davidsen's own terminology. However, White argues that one's positionality should have no bearing on whether or not one's research is valid, and he points out that Davidsen's own theoretical and personal biases color his critique of pagan studies in the same way as he accused others of letting their biases inform their work.[97] White argues that "there are independent [openly Pagan] scholars … who have written excellent, balanced historical and biographical accounts," so that "to derogatorily label [scholar practitioners] 'religionists' and accuse them of being too favorable to Paganism, as the Davidsen approach would lead us to do, would be doing scholarship a real disservice."[98] For White, Wiccan scholar practitioners such as Aloi do important scholarly work, and to shut them out would be to unfairly limit research in the field.

Regardless of whether one agrees with Davidsen or White, it becomes clear that there is indeed a larger ongoing discussion about Wicca and other contemporary pagan religions, involving both insiders and outsiders of these traditions. In both Davidsen's and White's articles we see a concern over the status of contemporary pagan studies as a field. To Davidsen the field is losing its legitimacy, or rather never had it, due to the sheer number of scholar-practitioners within the field. After all, Davidsen argues, if contemporary pagans, including Wiccans, engage in academic research, their work will be tainted by their pro-pagan biases. If that is so, how can we take their work seriously? How can biased research and analysis be legitimate?

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[96] Ethan Doyle White, "In Defense of Pagan Studies: A Response to Davidsen's Critique," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 14 no.1 (2012): 5-8.
[97] Ibid., 10.
[98] Ibid, 10-11.

On the other hand, White recognizes that the field of contemporary pagan studies has its particular issues and flaws, as does any academic field or subfield. However, the legitimacy of contemporary pagan studies should be based on the work and research within it, not on who performs that work and research. While White agrees that at times the field can be overburdened with certain theological elements or faulty arguments that need to be 'shaken off,' this in no way diminishes the legitimacy of the field as a whole.

Speaking Back: Analyzing Wiccan-Academic LRCs

In this chapter we have seen two debates in the sphere of contemporary pagan studies that are not only about Wicca, but include Wiccan voices both inside and outside the academy talking back to the field more broadly. Both of these debates fundamentally concern a key issue that remains a major part of Wiccan identity for insiders and outsiders: the question of legitimacy, both the legitimacy of the historical claims made by Wiccans and the legitimacy of contemporary pagan studies as a field. The issue of Wicca's historical narrative is clearly viewed as central to the legitimacy of Wicca as a religion, and shapes not only how Wiccans view themselves but also how they are viewed by others, both integral parts of Wiccan identity.

In the first part of this chapter, we saw how three authors, Hutton, Whitmore, and Aloi, confronted Wicca's history and the complications regarding the historicity of its origin claims. Underlying the work of all three authors was a discussion of Wicca's identity and particularly its legitimacy. For all three authors, it was necessary to describe Wicca's origins through cataloging and detailing the history of what they all view as a legitimate religion; Hutton and Aloi do this through a traditional historical lens, and Whitmore through a religious lens. Yet despite this agreement, Whitmore still sought to attack Hutton's work because it rejected the mytho-historical origin story that he himself accepted, and thus the question shifted from whether or not Wicca is a legitimate religion to "why is Wicca a legitimate religion?"

Obviously, for Aloi and Hutton, Wicca is a legitimate religion *despite* the historical inaccuracy of its own origin story; its academic legitimacy is independent from its historical narrative. However, for Whitmore, it is clear that on some level at least, Wicca's legitimacy as a religion is at least somewhat dependent on, or supported by, the scholarly validation of its origin story. This is particularly true when it comes to the matter of its age, because Whitmore, by adopting the Murrayite belief, seems to believe that if Wicca lacks a premodern past, and is *merely* around a century old, it is somehow less legitimate than other traditions, or will be viewed as such. Lamenting that Wicca is the victim of those who dislike complicated histories, Whitmore claims that "to make untidy areas of the past just disappear is not 'cleaning up history'; it is creating a new myth to replace an old one. I feel it is high time that Wicca and Paganism be permitted to have not just myths but a history as well."[99] If Wicca's historical claim to its origins is wrong, Whitmore seems to worry, will scholars ever take it seriously? To him the answer is no, it will be seen as a myth. For Whitmore, treating what he views as history as little more than myth not only delegitimizes Wicca, but also indicates that that history must be wrong.

On the other hand, to Aloi, and to a lesser extent Hutton, the argument of whether or not Wicca is a legitimate religion is not a matter of the religion's historical age, but rather the claim of its existence by those who identify with it and the real religious work taking place within it. Thus in very concrete ways, both Aloi and Whitmore are Wiccans communicating with the greater field of contemporary pagan studies and religious studies. Both are staking a claim on Wicca's legitimacy, with Whitmore arguing that it is legitimate due to the Murrayite survival theory he has adopted as both religious and academic truth, and because Wicca deserves and requires a history, not just "myth." On the other hand, Aloi argues that Wicca is legitimate even though she disagrees with Whitmore and adopts the academic historical view of Wicca's origins.

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[99] Whitmore, *Trials of the Moon*, 4.

Wiccan voices in these scholarly debates seek to shape or influence the debate about their tradition, and while I have no doubt this occurs with respect to many other traditions in religious studies as well, I argue that Wiccans have a particular interest in being part of the conversation: namely, to ensure that Wicca as a whole gains some level of academic legitimacy and by extension political and social legitimacy, and thus to shape Wicca's place in the worldview of not only its practitioners, but those outside of it, particularly scholars. While the Wiccan contributions to this debate that I have surveyed in this chapter may seem like academic, or pseudo-academic, papers and works, these works can also be understood as Lived Religious Communications, springing from practitioners' desire to take part in the shaping of a contemporary religion's place in the popular imagination, or in this case the academic imagination.

Much of this discussion involves Wiccans navigating a world in which their beliefs and elders are often called out and criticized by others, including by academics. As we can see in the responses to the Hutton-Whitmore feud, many Wiccans feel threatened when their beliefs about their own history are critiqued by scholars such as Hutton. Others see their beliefs as always in flux. As a Wiccan who goes by the username Cernowain Greenman states:

> Since Wicca was launched by an amateur anthropologist, I think it is fitting that Wiccans especially embrace the learning that can come from scholars. And if we dare to build our

> religious beliefs, in part, upon scholarly finds then we also must be ready to change our beliefs when the majority of scholarship disprove those beliefs. That is a hard thing to do when a belief has helped you to make meaning in your personal life. But, it is part of the Pagan dance that we do in an ever-changing universe.[100]

But to others this kind of susceptibility is dangerous. Responding directly to Cernowain Greenman, user Genexs replies, “True. But it's also true that we should be thinking people. Just because a certain academic says something should not make our belief systems melt and drip out our ears.”[101]

It seems clear that in both perspectives, Wiccans focus on what scholarship and academic debates about Wicca mean for Wicca and Wiccans. For some, academic research, particularly the kind that contradicts long held beliefs, is seen as a threat to Wiccan identity and legitimacy. In this context, the papers and articles discussed here, including those written by non-Wiccans, can all be understood as Lived Religious Communications insofar as the debates these writings entail can and do influence the lives of individual Wiccans. No dogma or orthodox practice encourages these Wiccans to engage with scholarship on Wicca, yet many Wiccans do feel compelled to participate, such that doing so becomes second nature and a part of their identity. Both Whitmore and Aloi shape their religious identities in part by their responses to Hutton’s academic work, and both authors’ works are in conversation with each other’s as well as other scholars. Ultimately both Whitmore and Aloi, as well as White, Hutton, and even Davidsen, all are actors in making and unmaking each other’s religious worldviews, as well as the worldviews of those who read their works, because each text is meant, in part, to shape how the reader views Wicca and contemporary paganism. Again this is not to say one scholar or one Wiccan is more correct than the others, but to show that the disconnect between them itself is effecting the world-building and reifying of their identities.

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[100] Pitzl-Waters, Jason. "Pagans Studied: The 2013 Conference on Current Pagan Studies." The Wild Hunt blog. (2013.) https://wildhunt.org/2013/01/pagans-studied-the-2013-conference-on-current-pagan-studies.html. Accessed May 10, 2019

[101] Ibid.,

However, not all Lived Religious Communications take place in such official or academic ways; others take place through the news media, blogs, and internet forums. Further, the question of legitimacy is not the only focus of this intersection between Wiccans and academics; questions of feminism, sexuality, gender, power, social class, and many other issues all provide avenues for Wiccans to interact within the sphere of academia. However, it is through the concerns around legitimacy that the world-building and identity-forming functions of Wiccans' Lived Religious Communications become clearest.

We will see this in the next chapter as well. Whereas the authors considered in this chapter were both Wiccan and decidedly not Wiccan, in the next chapter we will look at an unambiguously Wiccan-dominated conversation about witches and Wiccans in popular media. Just like the sphere of academia, the sphere of entertainment also generates questions about the legitimacy and authenticity of Wicca, but these debates also shape the worldviews of Wiccans, how they are seen, and how they believe the world views them.

CHAPTER III:

Wiccans Talking to Popular Culture

It is in the realm of popular media that I first realized that Wiccans were creating Lived Religious Communications. Like many, I was unconvinced that television, movie, or book reviews could lend insight into a religious tradition. However, as we will see, in these reviews Wiccans not only share real concerns over how they are viewed in television and media, but voice those concerns in a way that allows scholars to gain deeper insight into their lives.

With Netflix's 2018 *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the return of the 1990s show *Charmed* in 2018, and continuous fantasy themed media being produced in the United States, it is unsurprising that witchcraft has once again become a popular culture and media phenomenon. For decades witches have been the focus of media, from folktales and ghost stories to classic films such as *The Wizard of Oz*, and from classic sitcoms like *Bewitched* to more terrifying fare such as the 2015 film *The Witch*. But just as television series and movies provide particular interpretations of witches, so too do modern Wiccans analyze and react to the media that portrays them and their beliefs and practices.

Witches, Wizards, and Warlocks, Oh My!: Definitions and Context

Between the sheer amount of witch-oriented media and the American love of media, it should come as no surprise that Wiccans frequently watch witch-oriented media, if only out of a semi-academic interest. After all, it seems only natural that a religion of those who identify as witches would have a keen interest in media in which the characters too are identified as witches, and consequently have much to say on the matter.

In this chapter I will analyze two very different kind of witches: Wiccans, who have been the subject of this project, and the witches of popular media. In order to eliminate confusion, I will use the term Wiccan to refer to self-described religious witches, which includes both Wiccans as well as contemporary pagans of similar beliefs and practices. These witches, or Wiccans, will be the focus of this chapter, particularly their reactions, critiques, and other Lived Religious Communications to popular witches.

I am coining the term *popular witch* as a way to refer to witches in popular media, regardless of the portrayed character's gender. This category, as I use it, only applies to those identified within the media they appear in as a witch or warlock, regardless of how the media defines these terms, whether the portrayal is positive or negative, or even whether or not the media connects these terms to any form of contemporary religious witchcraft. It does not apply to characters in media who have supernatural or super-heroic powers but are not identified as a witch or warlock.

There are numerous witches portrayed in media, from the Wicked Witch of Oz to the character Thomasin in *The Witch*. These portrayals vary, but generally follow certain trends and tropes, some of which I hope to briefly identify. Popular witches are usually depicted as female, and sometimes even as a symbol or metaphor for feminism.[102] Likewise, the vast majority of popular witch portrayals have witches possessing supernatural magic powers, either in obvious ways such as flying and transforming enemies into animals, or in subtler and less obvious ways, like curses or prophetic visions. Negative media portrayals depict popular witches as wholly evil, unholy, or in league with supernatural evils such as the Christian tradition's devil. Other portrayals have witches appear as either wholly good or wholly evil, with good and evil witches in conflict with each other, and use terms such as “white witch” and “dark” or “black witches.” Finally, another common trope is to portray witches as non-human species, or as possessing their powers through special bloodlines, so that their magical powers are innate as opposed to religiously or spiritually derived. These tropes of popular witches are certainly not universal, nor is every trope listed here, but these are common ones that appear in several forms of media.

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[102] Sarah Lyons, "Why Using Witches as Pop Cultural Shorthand for 'Feminism' Is Problematic," *Teen Vogue* (2017), https://www.teenvogue.com/story/witches-pop-culture-feminism-problematic, accessed January 8, 2019.

But what does all of this have to do with Wiccans? Wiccans, though they claim to be witches, do not fly or shoot fireballs from wands, nor do they have green skin or melt when exposed to water. (If so I am clearly doing it wrong.) It should be obvious, then, that witches portrayed within the realm of popular media are not the same as either those historically condemned as witches or contemporary Wiccans. Fantasy media is just that, fantasy. Yet at the same time it is also undeniable that Wiccans themselves lay claim to their identity as witches, ultimately providing the term “witch” with three completely separate definitions: the witch of history, myth and folklore, the witch of popular media, and Wiccans. It should not be surprising then that this word, and the identities associated with it, can mean radically different things to different people, but also that these definitions can often blur.

To wonder why Wiccans care so much one about popular media, one needs only to look online. On October 17th, 2018, entertainment media group BuzzFeed posted the video “A Real Witch Reviews ‘Sabrina’ and Other Witches from TV and Movies.”[103] This was one of a recurring series of videos in which professionals or members of specific communities or cultures review pop culture representations of something they are an expert in. In this case, the video featured a Wiccan priestess named Sarah Lyons being shown clips of the *Chilling Adventures of*

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[103] “A Real Witch Reviews ‘Sabrina’ and Other Witches from TV and Movies,” BuzzFeedVideo (Oct. 17, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYNoT8-PRtw, accessed May 19, 2019.

Sabrina as well as other movies and shows depicting witches. However, my focus here is not the video itself, or its content, but the reactions to it. The title and subject of the video instantly brought ridicule from the internet community, creating a series of comments that dominated the page, such as "Scooby Doo reacts to real life dogs," "A(sic) yes, a real witch, what's next a real leprechaun reviews 1993's *Leprechaun*?," and "A real lion react(sic) to lion king."[104]

These comments clearly indicated that such users viewed Sarah Lyons' identity as a witch as illegitimate, and from the tenor and content of the jokes, they seem to also view witches as fantastical and fictional characters. This example shows how Wiccans must navigate a world in which their religious identity is viewed as fictional and comical by some outside of the religion. By identifying witches as fictional, these commenters delegitimize Sarah Lyons' religious identity and view her as a pretender to an identity they reserve for fictional characters.

Thus it should be no surprise that Wiccans often react very strongly to popular witch media, as it clearly shapes how others view them, and to such commentary. Indeed, it has been my experience both personally and in my research for this project that Wiccan responses, or LRCs, to popular witch media are frequent and passionate, and sometimes unexpected.

They Worship Satan Don't They?: Negative Responses & Negative Stereotypes

With these ideas in mind, I turn to specific examples of Wiccans engaging in LRCs in response to popular witches. Criticisms are common, and unsurprisingly are usually in response to what Wiccans see as negative witch stereotypes, such as the idea that witches worship the devil, are evil, eat or kill children, etc.

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[104] Ibid.

One of the most well-known such responses is the official statement of *The Witches' Voice* in regards to the 1996 film *The Craft*. *The Witches' Voice* is an online forum and community for religious witches and contemporary pagans.[105] The site acts as an essay archive, a newsletter, a social media platform, and a personal ad platform. In 1997, Wren Walker, the chairperson of *The Witches' Voice*, wrote an op-ed and official statement for the site in response to the film. She stressed that she was not writing a film review, as other members of the site liked the film, instead choosing to focus on the potential harm of the film for religious witches, including Wiccans. She claimed that Pat Devin, who was apparently the "witch consultant" for the film, was a token figure chosen to "lend credibility to an otherwise inaccurate portrayal of Witches."[106] Walker argued that the film had missed an opportunity to correct these inaccuracies and negative portrayals near the middle of the film by presenting accurate representations of Wiccan theology, or at least her understanding of it. Instead, the film doubled down on its negative portrayal. Ultimately, Walker warned:

> By linking the terms "Witches" and "Witchcraft" with murder, mayhem and destructive acts, there is a great potential danger. That danger could create encouragement for a resurgence of public mistrust and suspicion of the contemporary religious belief sytem known as Witchcraft or Wicca. This unfortunate linkage of Witchcraft and evil may impact the lives of thousands of Witches across the nation.[107]

Thus, she did not view *The Craft* as a useful or good film, but instead as a direct threat and assault on her religion and that of other religious witches, as well as their lives, for to Wren Walker, and others like her, there appears to be a real fear of a return to burning witches.[108]

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[105] Wren Walker. "Sony's The Craft," *Witchvox* (1997), http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=usfl&c=media&id=1906, accessed January 8, 2019.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid.

To Walker, then, the issue is not just a matter of a bad or inaccurate film; the film is dangerous because it creates, or at least contributes to, a negative image and stereotype of religious witches. As this mental image of a witch is what many Americans associate with the term, it links Wiccans to that archetypal negative image, and thus delegitimizes the religion, even suggesting that it may be an enemy to society. While some might find such worries a bit extreme, Walker is not alone in her fears.

This concern is repeated by several others, and not just in response to the film *The Craft*. For instance, in a review of *The Witch* on the pagan news site *The Wild Hunt*, Heather Greene gave a rave review of the film, but followed her praise with the admonition: “However, with all that said, there is one caveat here. To be free and embrace the wild, Thomasin [the protagonist] must sign Satan’s book. Modern witches may find discomfort with the film’s very stereotypical depiction of witchcraft as defined within Christian terms.”[109] That is, similar to Walker’s worry about *The Craft*, Greene worries that *The Witch* ties religious witches to negative and possibly dangerous stereotypes in the minds of the film’s viewers.

The Craft and *The Witch* are examples of media that often provide more human (positive, but not necessarily positive) portrayals of witches. Rather than depicting witches as either always ugly, green skinned crones who are wholly evil, or as Glinda the good witch, beautiful, pure and kind on the side of good, these more recent representations depict witches as human, or at least humanlike, capable of both goodness and evil, but ultimately flawed beings. Many religious witches find this trend admirable, but at the same time they find the portrayals problematic as they all too often reinforce negative tropes of witches, even with this humanizing aspect. In her film review of *The Witch*, titled “Mother Nature’s a Bitch and So am I,” Peg Aloi writes that the film depicts “the witch as healer, as magic-worker, as rabble-rouser, a scapegoat, a lover, a killer”; she is more than just a villain or a hero.[110] Other Wiccans share these views, and seem to suggest that these portrayals are positive as they do more than make witches black and white, good and evil.[111] According to these Wiccans, by portraying witches as humans, these films make their religion seem more human as well, which make Wiccans themselves seem more human to outsiders.

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[109] Heather Greene, "Film Review: The Witch," *The Wild Hunt* (2017), http://wildhunt.org/2016/02/review-robert-eggers-the-witch.html, accessed January 8, 2019.

However, Amelia Quint, a Wiccan quoted as sharing this view about *The Witch*, also notes that “while there are some witches who worship Satan or practice Satanism, the two are completely separate. Unfortunately, when you conflate the two, it can trigger Satanic panic-style fears that in no way resemble what we do.”[112] Sarah Lyons, who also starred in the BuzzFeed video, appears to agree with this view, arguing that “[Wiccans] have to be wary of who gets to tell witches’ stories.”[113] This issue—who gets to tell witches’ stories—seems to be the root of all concerns and praise Wiccans direct toward popular media: not just a concern that others are telling their stories, but a concern over how Wicca is shaped in the minds of the public as a consequence.

Is Harry Potter Wiccan?: Mixing Fantasy and Religion

However, it is not just negative stereotypes that concern Wiccans about popular witch portrayals, as there is also the problem of fantasy and its associations with Wicca. Fantasy remains a popular genre, and as we have discussed, many forms of fantasy media have witches and magic as a particular focus. However, since these are fantasy media, often these witches and the magic they perform are depicted as pure fantasy, with often striking visual effects. From fireballs to killing curses, such media portrays witches as capable of extraordinary supernatural ability, much to the joy of the audience. However, to some Wiccans this is a problem, particularly when the ties between this kind of fantasy magic and their religion are further reinforced by the adoption not only of the word witch, but of Wiccan terminology and beliefs.

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[110] Peg Aloi, "Mother Nature's a Bitch and So am I," *The Arts Fuse*, February 20, 2016, http://artsfuse.org/141076/fuse-film-review-the-witch-mother-natures-a-bitch-and-so-am-i/, accessed December 22, 2018.

[111] Christopher Rosa, “Real Witches Explain What Movies and TV Get Wrong (and Right) About Witches,” *Glamour* (2016), https://www.glamour.com/story/real-witches-explain-what-movies-and-tv-get-wrong-and-right, accessed December 22, 2018.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Sarah Lyons, "Why Using Witches as Pop Cultural Shorthand for ‘Feminism’ Is Problematic."

In his own op-ed piece, simply titled "Witchcraft and Television on *The Wild Hunt*," Jason Pitzl-Waters, a Wiccan, discusses the problems with this. To Pitzl-Waters it seems that the writers, creators, and producers of this media adopt such terminology to legitimize their creations and make them seem more realistic, which is an understandable motivation in his eyes. However, Pitzl-water argues that "today we exist in a world where Pagan religions and Witches are a reality, not a fantasy."[114] As such, when one creates a work of fiction, particularly fantasy, one must be aware that when using Wiccan terminology, one is "treading into theological waters."[115] That is, one is appropriating a real culture and religion, practiced by real people in modern society, and anything one does or says with that portrayal reflects on the religion and the lives of those who practice it. Frank Muse, another Wiccan, has this to say in a comment on Pitzl-Waters' piece:

> I was always a big Buffy fan, but would get annoyed when they called Willow a "Wicca." Were they trying to use the word "Wiccan?" I'm not sure, but I've never met a Wicca (or Wiccan) whose eyes turned black and who could summon temples of evil to destroy the world.[116]

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[114] Jason Pitzl-Waters, "Witchcraft and Television," *The Wild Hunt* (2011), http://wildhunt.org/2011/08/witchcraft-and-television.html, accessed December, 28, 2018.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

In another, much more negative article and review, Pitzl-Waters reacts to a popular show portraying religious witchcraft. Reacting to an episode of the fictional, but non-fantastical, crime drama *The Mentalist*, Pitzl-Waters points out that Wicca was represented in the episode by a murder suspect. While the show used numerous terms and beliefs that were accurate, such as the term Wicca, identifying a horned god and moon goddess, and more, Pitzl-Waters found that it portrayed the religion both inaccurately and offensively.[117] However, instead of merely complaining and sharing his distaste with his readers online, he provided a link for other Wiccans “if [they] want to give CBS a (polite) piece of” their minds.[118] Ultimately, Pitzl-Waters argues, “let Samantha [of *Bewitched*] be Samantha (or let Willow be Willow), and let us decide what her magic means to us.”[119] That is, he argues that as wonderful as popular witches and their shows can be, and as helpful as they can be for Wiccans, it is better for all involved that popular witches be explicitly differentiated from religious witches. He and other Wiccans encourage media networks and production companies to avoid appropriating their culture, and he encourages other Wiccans to join their criticisms. It should be clear that these critics are not calling for shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Bewitched,* and *Charmed* to be censored, for they are not critiquing the shows themselves, but rather the appropriation of their religion in these shows. In fact, they encourage media like *Harry Potter* and its Hollywood magic, recognizing it as useful in the ways mentioned above, so long as these popular witch portrayals do not appropriate Wiccan culture and identity.[120]

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[117] Jason Pitzl-Waters, "Killing Spells, Underage Covens, and Bad Stereotypes," *The Wild Hunt* (2009), http://wildhunt.org/2009/01/killing-spells-underage-covens-and-bad-stereotypes.html, accessed December 28, 2018.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid.

Television Recruitment: Tangible Effects

Wiccans do not concern themselves solely with critiquing such shows for how they might negatively influence Wiccan identity and legitimacy. They also concern themselves with more tangible and practical benefits, such as membership. In an interview, Ashley Mortimer, a 47-year-old Wiccan, states:

> I think it's part of our culture to exploit "trends." We've seen in the past 20 years explosions of interest [in witchcraft] through popular media and culture, for example the Harry Potter phenomena, which always brings a wave of new interest to the genuine practice of the Craft. I've found that when these waves of interest subside we are often left with some very good and committed new practitioners and without newcomers to the Old Ways then they won't survive.[121]

That is, for some Wiccans like Mortimer, as problematic as it can be to have such media portrayals, when all is said and done, these portrayals attract converts to their religious traditions. This is especially important as Wiccan traditions are typically opposed to proselytization, and while they will freely accept converts they deem appropriate, they do not missionize. As such, media portrayals of popular witches are important because they increase media attention and attract converts that otherwise would not be gained. But this too plays into questions of legitimacy and identity, as not all Wiccans are accepting of such converts or of what they mean to the religion as a whole. As one Wiccan, going by the name Moon states:

> Since the new season of "True Blood" began, I've seen an increase in new members who are in their teens and may be easily impressed by Marnie's [a popular witch character] display of power. It's dangerous when viewers think witchcraft, as Marnie does it, is so easy.[122]

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[121] Kashmira Gander, "What Pop-Culture Gets Wrong about Witchcraft According to a Witch," *The Independent* (2016), http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/witchcraft-pop-culture-myths-wicca-magic-witch-ashley-mortimer-a7487636.html, accessed January 8, 2018.

[122] Coeli Carr, "Real Witches Cry Foul at Portrayal on True Blood," Reuters (2011), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-trueblood-witches/real-witches-cry-foul-at-portrayal-on-true-blood-idUSTRE77B54Q20110812, accessed December 22, 2018.

As one can see then, such media portrayals are a bit of a double edged sword. While they may generate new converts, these new members may also, at least in Moon’s opinion, be misguided about what it means to be Wiccan. Moon worries that they are attracting the wrong kind of convert, the wrong kind of Wiccan. This implies that there are more appropriate converts, at least in her view, and these misguided converts then pose a threat to Wicca, in that their beliefs and identities may be dangerous. On the one hand, as both quotes show, such portrayals increase interest in and converts to religious witchcraft traditions. On the other hand, such portrayals may give unrealistic visions of what witchcraft is, which can be dangerous in several ways, both spiritually as Moon states, but also as a delegitimizing force.

Living Witches & Media Darlings: Wiccan Identity and Media

Finally, I turn to the question of Wiccan identity and Wiccan anxieties over media. Identity is a complex concept, with numerous definitions and interpretations from a variety of scholars. Here I will follow the definition of media studies scholar Lynn Schofield Clark, herself influenced by sociologist Anthony Giddens.[123] This approach is sometimes referred to as the ‘tool kit’ approach. To Schofield Clark, identity is “understood as the way in which we adopt certain strategies of action to maintain a connection with others, with our past, and with our own aspirations.”[124] That is, we as human beings possess strategies that function like a tool kit, filled with self-identities and definitions, that we use to understand ourselves, our place in the world, and our relationships with others. We act and react in ways that are informed by our identities, and in turn those actions construct and maintain our identities.

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[123] Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York, 2005), 11-12.
[124] Ibid., 11.

Portrayals of different aspects of our identity help us as human beings discover what our identity means, as well as what our identities mean to others. Like Schofield Clark, I recognize that this metaphorical approach is limited, but for the purposes of this thesis, I believe it is the most useful way to approach the concept of Wiccan identity and LRCs. With that in mind, in this chapter I have intended to examine how the portrayal of popular witches might interact with and inform the identities of Wiccans, and in particular the responses of religious witches to such media.[125]

Certainly one can see that the question of identity occupies a large role in this practice of media engagement amongst religious witches. Not only has the self-identity of these religious witches informed their sense that the various popular witch portrayals were wrong in some way, but the identity of religious witches also drives them to react to such media because of concerns about outsiders' perceptions about Wicca and Wiccan identity. In Schofield Clark's book *From Angels to Aliens,* she describes how popular witch media and a religious witch family, whom she calls the Gardners, intersect. This family identifies as Wiccan, and consists of a mother, a father, and two teenage daughters, Katie and Annae. Schofield Clark points out that for the Gardners, their Wiccan identity, and indeed their cohesiveness as a religious minority group, is in part dependent on the belief that "persons of their belief system are often harassed, misunderstood, and even threatened."[126] While interviewing this family, Schofield Clark discusses with them the film *The Craft*. Predictably, the parents are frustrated with the film, as it portrays unrealistic views of what their religion is, and they must constantly explain to their daughters and outsiders that the film is not an accurate representation of their religious beliefs.[127] On the other hand the daughters quite enjoy the film, and point out that though it is inaccurate in many ways, it does possess some degree of accuracy. Likewise, the film helps the two daughters navigate their teenaged world and informs their identity to some extent. Katie, the elder daughter, loved and indeed “reveled” in the idea that she was like the witches of the film, while the other daughter talked of becoming an “expert,” at least to her non-Wiccan friends, on witchcraft, magic and the like.[128]

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[125] Ibid., 13-14.
[126] Ibid.,125.
[127] Ibid., 128-131.

Just as there are numerous Wiccans who concern themselves with popular witch media because they view it as delegitimizing, there are those who find affirmation and guidance in such media. One notable example is from a mononymous blogger known as Morgan, who maintains a personal blog focused exclusively on Wicca and witchcraft related topics. In one post, Morgan reviews the movie *The Good Witch* and the spinoff television show of the same name. Morgan makes it clear that the film and show are not portraying Wicca, nor do they appear to claim to do so, and they use supernatural magic. But Morgan is incredibly impressed by both the film and its spinoff show, giving few if any negative comments and ultimately concluding that “Cassie [the titular good witch and protagonist] is a television witch for a modern age, but she is also the ideal of what we all could be.”[129] Morgan clearly sees the show as exemplary, but more than that, Morgan’s views Cassie, the protagonist, as a model for Wiccans, a character that they all may identify with and emulate.[130] Not only are Wiccans negatively influenced and shaped by witch media, therefore, but they are influenced positively as well.

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[128] Ibid., 128-130, 232.

[129] Morgan, "The Good Witch: Redefining Witches on TV and Defining the Witch I Want To Be," *Living Liminally* blog (2017), http://lairbhan.blogspot.com/2017/04/the-good-witch-redefining-witches-on-tv.html, accessed January 8, 2019.

[130] Ibid.

That Wiccans might use such media for positive identity formation has been seen already in the statements from Mortimer and Moon, who focused on the aspect of recruitment from witch media, pointing out that many converts, particularly younger teens, become attracted to the religion due to the influence of these characters.[131] The younger Gardners likewise exemplify this attitude, insofar as Katie Gardner is described as "reveling" in the attention and new relationship status she has with some of her friends, in part due to what they know of witches from the media.[132]

While Schofield Clark focuses on the effect such films have on the identities of teenagers, I argue that these media representations help shape the identities of all religious witches, young and old alike, veteran and newly converted, as well as outsiders. Not only do these portrayals inspire or enrage religious witches, but they constantly inform Wiccans' perceptions of what they are, what they can be, and most of all, what they are not. Such media, as we can see by the responses, are often viewed as inaccurate depictions by religious witches, and yet, due to the constant engagement of these sources, religious witches are also using them to reinforce their identities by constantly emphasizing what they are not. They are not popular witches, they are not Willow from *Buffy*, they are not Thomasin from *The Witch*, and they are not Nancy from *The Craft*. This work is a major part of contemporary Wiccan identity and who they are religiously.

We see this work taking place, not through dogma or religious texts, but through the Lived Religious Communications of Wiccans who devour such media. These Wiccan LRCs may seem innocuous; after all, these witch-focused television shows and movies are fiction, but before we dismiss them as *mere* entertainment, we must remember the work of scholars like Schofield Clark, or Charles Taylor who described identity thus:

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[131] See Carr, "Real Witches Cry Foul at Portrayal on True Blood," and Gander, "What Pop-Culture Gets Wrong about Witchcraft According to a Witch."

[132] Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens,* 128-130.

> To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done or what I endorse or oppose.[133]

In this sense, our identity is defined in part by the cultural symbols we engage and the judgments we make as we try to make sense of the world and our place within it. Popular media undeniably feeds the the process of identity formation for all people, Wiccan and non-Wiccan alike.

For Wiccans, popular witch media informs, consciously or not, a cultural understanding of what a witch is, or is not. To Wiccans this is a primary concern, not only due to questions of their religion's legitimacy, as the academic LRC's mentioned in the previous chapter indicate, but also a concern over relational identity and worldview. Wiccans, whether they enjoy these popular media portrayals or not, are forced to relate their own understandings of what it means to be a witch to depictions of witches in popular media. As we saw in the comments on the BuzzFeed video, many non-Wiccans *do not* view Wiccans as "real" witches, seeing them as crazy, strange, or even pretenders to a title that only fantasy characters can claim. Wiccans must navigate a world that does not always recognize their religious identities, or associates their self-proclaimed identity with something altogether different and often negative.

The responses and communications in this chapter show, once again, a concern with authenticity and legitimacy. When Wiccans praise and critique popular media in blog posts, videos, and chatrooms, they are addressing, or at least calling attention to, their concerns that popular media gives false, misleading, and unrealistic views of their religion to outsiders. We see in Wren Walker's response to *The Craft* that she and others believe that by having witchcraft featured in a horror movie, the film connects witchcraft, and by association Wicca, with Satanic worship, murder, and evil—elements likely to reinforce a poor public image.

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[133] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 27.

Likewise, in Pitzl-Waters' piece and others like it, we see that Wiccans are concerned that by connecting witchcraft to fantasy, this delegitimizes Wicca and other witchcraft-oriented religions. As the BuzzFeed video comments show us, this worry is not unfounded. After all, if all you know of witchcraft is from Harry Potter, Sabrina, and the odd horror movie, your understanding will be colored by that knowledge, and you can hardly be blamed for scoffing or laughing when you meet another individual who claims to be a witch. At the same time, because Wiccan identity is tied to witchcraft, they can hardly be blamed either for having passionate responses to media that portrays witches as wholly unreal. For Wiccans, this makes them also seem unreal, or illegitimate, or inauthentic in the eyes of others.

This Wiccan media anxiety is only made visible when one examines how Wiccans live their lives and communicate with each other through their Lived Religious Communications. In both the preceding chapter and this one, Wiccans used LRCs of various formats to speak to each other and to speak back to those they see as delegitimizing forces. Within these LRCs in the spheres of media and academia, Wiccans demonstrate common concerns over their self-identity, concerns not only about who they are, but perhaps more importantly, about how they are seen by outsiders; they worry they are not being taken seriously. Both chapters focused on how Wiccans have employed LRCs to engage outsiders, revealing anxieties over identity, authenticity and legitimacy. In the next chapter I will explore an example of how Wiccans use Lived Religious Communications within the tradition to engage each other, again revealing a major and frequent concern over legitimacy.

CHAPTER IV:

Witches Talking to Each Other

Scholars have tended to describe Wiccans as non-orthodox and pluralistic. For example, Hugh Urban states that Wiccans "disagree wildly on theoretical and metaphysical questions such as reincarnation, the number and nature of the gods, and even exactly how magic works, but they typically do agree that ritual practice is central."[134] But despite this, or perhaps because of it, Wiccans also have theological debates, and since Wicca has evolved in the age of the internet, many of these debates happen in cyberspace. In this chapter I will show how investigating these online debates sheds more light on contemporary Wicca, focusing on two debates in particular.

Voices of the Past: Who Gets to Be Wiccan?

Both of these internal debates are dogmatic, ironic considering the anti-dogmatic nature of Wicca, and ultimately both debates are debates over authentic identity. The first is an older debate that has its roots in Gardner's early work within Wicca. For many traditions of Wicca, particularly Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wiccans, the question of who counts as a Wiccan or a witch is a matter of prime importance. Such traditions, mostly stemming from England, are often called Traditional Witchcraft or Traditional Wicca, sometimes even further British Traditional Wicca. Followers of such traditions argue that only followers of established traditions such as theirs are “true” Wiccans, and as a result initiation into a coven is necessary to claim the identity. These traditionalist Wiccans cite Gerald Gardner, who frequently said “only a Witch can make another Witch.”[135]

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[134] Hugh B. Urban, *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements*, 166. It is also a common joke within Wiccan communities to say, "ask any three Wiccans a single question, and you will get nine different answers." This reflects the idea that Wicca on the whole is highly pluralistic, and as a practice, Wiccans are open to many forms of seemingly contradictory theologies, even at the same time. Many Wiccans fluctuate between hard polytheism and soft polytheism, as well as even pantheism and panentheism. And while several other religious traditions have similar jokes, I believe the maxim is definitely true of Wicca.

Such traditionalist Wiccans are disturbed by recent trends amongst Wiccans, and contemporary pagans in general, to claim the Wiccan identity without being initiated into a traditionalist coven, or worse, being self-trained and self-initiated, if at all. To these traditionalist Wiccans, solitary Wiccans who claim the identity improperly not only misrepresent their religion, but make claim to an identity they have no right to.

In recent years, particularly in the United States, attitudes on this issue have shifted significantly over time, with many abandoning the traditionalist viewpoint, though it still remains. This traditionalist viewpoint appears to be rooted in Wicca’s origins as something akin to a mystery cult, largely due to the influence of Gardner and Sanders, two of the earliest Wiccan and Witch leaders. When Gardner claimed that only witches could create more witches, he meant that in his view of the witch-cult he viewed himself as continuing, which would eventually become known as Wicca, only one already initiated into a coven could initiate another into the group, and only those initiated could be considered members.[136] While some might argue that Gardner did this to maintain a level of control over his nascent religion, such a claim is outside the purview of this project. This traditionalist and coven-focused understanding of what it meant to be a Wiccan continues to the present day.

Janet and Stewart Farrar, a married and respected pair of Wiccan elders, sympathize with both the traditionalist and solitary Wiccan views and describe Alex Sander’s own views. According to the Farrars, soon after writing one of their books, as well as beginning to initiate their own followers, Alex and his wife Maxine Sanders repeatedly instructed them to return for more training.[137] To the Sanders it seemed that the Farrars had no right to initiate new Wiccans, and were actually damaging Wicca by initiating "false" Wiccans and supporting the practice of self-initiation and solitary practice of the religion.

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[135] Janet Farrar and Stewart Farrar, *A Witches Bible* (New York: Magickal Childe, 1984), 16.
[136] White, *Wicca*, 128.

Such views on the part of Wiccan elders are not alone, and many view the rise of solitary Wiccans and the decline of what they see as traditional coven-based practice with regret, anger, and sadness. In their book *Keepers of the Flame*, editors Morganna Davies and Aradia Lynch interview numerous respected leaders and elders within prominent Wiccan traditions on a variety of subjects. However, one recurring theme is a disappointment expressed by several leaders about what they see as younger, naïve, and insincere or even illegitimate Wiccans and witches. Priestess Trivia Pager argues that the internet has damaged Wicca for this reason. In her day, she says, "it was hard to find books; you had to go to specialized shops. Now all kinds of people read three books, self-initiate, and start groups."[138] To her this has only damaged Wicca, and lessened the wisdom and truth of the tradition.

Similarly, Wiccan priest Joe Wilson argues that today "we have a large mass of people who think all they need [to be a Wiccan] is in a couple books and they really don't have to work for anything."[139] Furthermore, he argues that American consumerist culture has much to do with this, much to his disapproval. For priestess Dana Corby, this is problematic because she sees such Wiccans as learning improperly, and thus inferiorly. Calling non-traditionalist and solitary Wiccans "seekers," she argues that much of this is due to them "learning" but not "experiencing"

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[137] Janet Farrar and Stewart Farrar, *A Witches Bible*, 17.
[138] Morganna Davies and Aradia Lynch, *Keepers of the Flame: Interviews with Elders of Traditional Witchcraft in America* (Providence, RI: Olympian, 2001), 104.
[139] Ibid., 107.

Wicca; that is, to her, Wicca is an experiential religion, and part of that experience is traditional coven work and initiation.[140]

Above all else, one of the most frequently cited opinions is the claim that, as Wiccan Hans Holzer states simply, “If they [individuals claiming to be witches or Wiccan] are Wiccans they had to have had somebody initiate them. If they are not Wiccans then whatever they are, they are. But the term Pagan does not mean the same thing as being Wiccan.”[141] That is, while these non-traditional Wiccans may hold similar beliefs, and may identify as Wiccan, to Holzer and indeed many of the elders interviewed, without an initiation, one is not Wiccan, end of story.

But as with other Wiccan LRCs, this debate does not take place solely through books and interviews, it also takes place on the internet, particularly in blog posts and chat rooms. Wiccan Jason Mankey does not seem to fully agree with the traditionalist view, but sympathizes with it. In his blog post “When Wicca Isn’t Wicca,” he criticizes how expansive the term Wicca is, and how it is often used to describe things he feels are not Wiccan at all, such as the “trappings of Christianity.”[142] Mankey makes clear that in his opinion, priests and priestesses of Wicca are “made, not self-appointed.”[143] This is notable because within the Wiccan tradition there exists no laity, as to be Wiccan is to be a priest or priestess.[144] Thus we can conclude that Mankey believes that tradition and initiation are important to Wicca, and self-appointed priests and priestesses, particularly those who claim to be high priests or priestesses, are on some level illegitimate unless they prove their “Wiccan-ness.”[145]

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[140] Ibid., 122.
[141] Davies and Lynch, *Keepers of the Flame*, 142.
[142] Jason Mankey, "When Wicca Is Not Wicca," *Raise the Horns* blog, Patheos.com (2015), https://www.patheos.com/blogs/panmankey/2015/01/when-wicca-is-not-wicca/, accessed May 19, 2019.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.

Not all Wiccans who support this traditionalist and coven-based Wicca view it as the only way to be Wiccan, but many see it as superior to solitary Wicca. Wiccan priestess Lola Stardust in her online essay “Coven vs. Solitary” takes up this view. To Stardust, who states she has been both a practitioner within a traditional coven as well as a solitary practitioner of Wicca, it is the more traditional craft that served her best. Citing her own experiences, she states, “I can practice with a group; I can practice alone. Either way, I am getting something amazing out of it,” and while she argues that both forms have been useful to her, she feels “more powerful when I am amongst other witches and I can always continue to practice solitary in my home however I choose.”[146] That is, as beneficial as solitary practice can be, it should be in conjunction with more traditional Wiccan group practices. To further support her argument, Stardust shares an anecdote about a solitary and non-traditionalist Wiccan woman who attended a public ritual with Stardust’s coven. According to Stardust, this solitary woman opened up immediately within the ritual and was somehow more energetic and powerful. While Stardust acknowledges the benefits to non-traditional and solitary practice, to her it is best when undertaken in addition to, not as a replacement for, traditional coven practices.[147]

On the contemporary pagan and Wiccan website “The Celtic Connection,” one can also find this traditionalist vs. solitary debate continuing to take place. In a forum post titled “Is it possible to be a solitary Wiccan?,” a guest user with the username Siochain asks:

> On three other boards, I have been told that I can't be a Wiccan, because I am solitary (due to being the only Pagan for miles and miles in any direction), and you have to be in a coven to be a "real" Wiccan. So which is it? Can you be solitary and still be a Wiccan or not?[148]

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[146] Lola Stardust, "Coven vs. Solitary," Witchvox (2014), http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=uswa&c=words&id=15737, accessed May, 19, 2019.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Siochain, "Is It Possible to Be a Solitary Wiccan?," “The Celtic Connection” (2006), https://wicca.com/forums/index.php?topic=2046.90, accessed May, 19, 2019.

This question immediately sparks debate within the forum, with posts and commentary lasting four years after the initial question from Siochain. Members and guest commentators on the site take numerous opinions both in favor and against the traditionalist view. One of the more controversial and debate provoking comments is by a member of the site with the username Blacksaber, representing a highly traditionalist view. Blacksaber states in response to Siochain:

> If you have been properly initiated into a Wiccan coven, and thus are an actual, lineaged Wiccan - then yes, just because you move away or what ever [sic] circumstances change, you are, and always will be Wiccan. However, if you have just read a couple of books about it and looked at websites then no! Wicca is an initiatory tradition, and unless you are initiated into it by a properly lineaged coven then no amount of reading will make any difference.[149]

That is, for blacksaber, Wiccan identity is entirely dependent on whether or not that person was initiated. Like other traditionalists, blacksaber here makes a specific and clear distinction between those who may and may not stake a claim about their identity as Wiccan. In this case Blacksaber, in the same vein as Gardner and Sanders, bases this distinction on whether or not an individual has been initiated into what Blacksaber calls a “lineaged coven.”[150]

Voices of the People: Solitary Wiccan Voices

Obviously, not all who identify as Wiccan or as witches agree with this traditionalist view. Many view the traditionalist perspective as not only elitist, but dangerous, unrealistic, and unfair. Immediately responding to Blacksaber’s post is another user, Draconis Rex, who disagrees, at least in part. Draconis Rex sympathizes with those who hold the traditionalist view, as “they have worked hard within their covensteads to achieve their degrees.”[151] But ultimately

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[149] Ibid.

[150] Ibid. A lineaged coven is one which traces its origins back to Gardner, or before in the minds of its adherents, and are the covens that such traditional thinkers believe all Wiccans should belong to qualify as Wiccan.

[151] Ibid.

Draconis Rex argues for the non-traditionalist view, stating that ultimately such distinctions are impractical, because “when it boils down to it, many who want to be Wiccan cannot do so for varying reasons, most commonly because there is no coven nearby.”[152] That is, as ideal as the traditionalist model might be, it is often impractical and difficult, and for the sake of their shared religion’s continued growth and survival, they should allow solitary or uninitiated Wiccans to claim the identity.[153]

Such non-traditionalist Wiccans argue that those who follow their gods and basic beliefs are free to lay claim to the identity, using a myriad of reasons for this attitude. On the one hand, many of these Wiccans argue that Wicca is a non-dogmatic religion, therefore it is hypocritical for any within the religion to apply dogma about who constitutes the best type of witch. On the other hand, such Wiccans view the traditionalist side as problematic on a practical level. After all, Wicca has spread far geographically, but it remains numerically small, and in geographically large countries such as the United States, access to a Wiccan coven that one can train with and be initiated into is limited, and can often require hours of travel, which can be an insurmountable obstacle to many. Ultimately however, those who oppose the traditionalist view of Wiccan identity believe in a far more open understanding of their own religious identity, and also recognize the validity of others’ self-identification with Wicca.

The history of this solitary tradition in Wiccan literature goes back decades. In 1988 Wiccan priest Scott Cunningham wrote *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner*, a guide for a form of Wicca that requires no coven.[154] Arguing that coven-based Wicca is impractical particularly in the United States, and that “the gods can be served just as well” via a solitary or non-traditional practice as by more traditional Wiccan practice, Cunningham claims that Wicca is "for those who have become enchanted by the moon shining through the trees; …for those through choice or circumstance, meet with the Silver Lady and the Horned God alone."[155] For Cunningham, Wicca is for any who believe and have a relationship with its gods "alone," not just in the setting of a coven. Controversial at the time, Cunningham's book appears to be a major influence on many Wiccan elders, such as Doreen Valiente and Raymond Buckland.[156] Indeed, in his own book *Wicca for One*, Buckland cites Cunningham repeatedly in his own case for solitary or non-traditional Wicca.[157] Likewise, many modern Wiccans, such as Draconis Rex mentioned above, mention it specifically.[158]

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[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid.,

[154] Scott Cunningham, *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2006), 3-5.

One such Wiccan, a blogger whose username is YatPundit, argues that non-traditional or solitary Wicca is just as valid as more traditionalist Wicca. YatPundit cites Cunningham's book specifically as not only inspiring but also informing his own Wiccan practices, going so far as to identify himself as a "Cunningham Solitary."[159] To YatPundit, covens and traditional Wicca are becoming even less necessary, as "gone are the days of the 'secrets' of Wicca"; that is, as covens have served to provide religious education and reveal religious secrets, they are no longer as necessary since much of this same information and education can be achieved through individual practice and reading books such as Cunningham's.[160] Furthermore, he argues that covens are filled with interpersonal conflict and politics that distract one from religious matters, and he criticizes more traditionalist and coven-focused Wiccans as often being unnecessarily rude and condescending, because they do not recognize Wiccans like him as equals or at times even as Wiccan.[161]

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[155] Ibid., 86, 2-3.

[156] Raymond Buckland, *Wicca For One: The Path of Solitary Witchcraft* (New York: Routledge. 2006); Valiente, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow*, page number?

[157] Buckland, *Wicca for One*, 16, 28, 128.

[158] "Is It Possible to Be a Solitary Wiccan?"

[159] YatPundit, "Thoughts on "Solitary Wicca," *Daily Kos* (2011), https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2011/3/26/960351/-, accessed May, 19, 2019.

[160] Ibid.

As Wiccans like Draconis Rex and YatPundit claim that solitary Wicca is its future, they are not alone. Pagan priestess and scholar practitioner Helen Berger argues the point more generally for contemporary paganism as a whole, noting that "solitaries," as she labels those who practice any form of non-traditional or solitary Wicca or contemporary paganism, are increasingly common. Using numbers from the Pagan Census and the Pagan Census Revised, which she helped produce, Berger claims that between 2003 and 2018, the number of "solitaries" within contemporary paganism as a whole has increased from 51% to 79%.[162] To Berger this is evidence that solitary or non-traditional practice is coming to dominate contemporary Wicca, and that while traditional forms of Wicca continue to gain adherents, they are quickly becoming a minority in contemporary paganism as a whole.[163]

Ultimately then, this sphere of Wiccan LRCs indicates yet another concern over Wiccan identity, in this case how to define it internally, and who has the right to claim that identity. Traditionalists make exclusive claims to Wiccan identity out of concern as to how others might misrepresent them, as well as concerns over what they see as irresponsibility and disrespect to the tradition's history. More than that, they are concerned that without control over Wiccan identity, it becomes a slippery slope. If anyone can claim the identity of Wiccan or Witch, how is it transgressive? What meaning does the word have? Without some kind of standard for what Wicca is, then anyone, even those whose beliefs and practices are completely alien, can make claim to the identity, thereby stripping it of its meaning and value. After all, what is the point of becoming a witch, if anyone off the street can be one too?

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[161] Ibid.

[162] Helen A. Berger, "Are Solitaries the Future of Paganism?," Patheos.com (2010), http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Solitaries-The-Future-Of-Paganism.html, accessed January 09, 2019.

[163] Ibid.

Yet as we have seen before with Wiccan LRCs, this concern is two sided. Whereas traditionalists worry that their identity will be stripped of meaning if anyone can lay claim to it, non-traditionalist Wiccans worry that Wiccan identity will be meaningless if it dies out. To such non-traditionalists, this is a case of evolution and diversity. They do not necessarily oppose the traditionalist viewpoint outright; for example Doreen Valiente, who supports the non-traditionalist view in her own book *Witchcraft for Tomorrow*, herself was a High Priestess of Gardner's tradition.[164] Rather, such non-traditionalist Wiccans oppose the exclusivity of the term. If it is practically difficult for most Wiccans to meet with, train with, and become initiated into traditionalist covens, then Wicca, or at least the narrower form of Wicca identified by traditionalists, will likely die of attrition. It is better then, at least to these non-traditionalist Wiccans, to expand the understanding of Wicca to include more than just those who were initiated into traditionalist covens, not only for the sake of survival, but also to add more complexity and diversity to a growing and evolving Wiccan identity.

This debate then strikes at a fundamental question: who is Wiccan? Who qualifies? Who has the right to define Wicca, and who is not Wiccan? This is not unique, as many religions have internal debates as to who qualifies or not, who is legitimate and who is not. Even within Wicca itself, this is not a unique debate; when we discussed popular witch media in the previous chapter, we saw how Wiccans defined themselves in part by what they were not. In this case, so too do many Wiccans define themselves against what they see as "false" Wicca.

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[164] See Valiente, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow*.

Are you a Good Witch or a 'Real' Witch: A Debate about Authentic Witchcraft

One other particularly salient internal debate concerns what many Wiccans call "fluffy bunnies." The term "fluffy bunny" is a derogatory one within the tradition, with numerous definitions. The term is often synonymous with such terms as "white-lighters" or "white witches," but "fluffy bunny" appears to be the most common form. It is so common in fact that the term is found on popular non-Wiccan websites such as Urban Dictionary, which defines it as follows: "A fake wiccan [sic], usully [sic] in their teens, with little or no information about the religion."[165] But that is far from a useful or academic definition. As I will define it, a "fluffy bunny" is a self-described witch or Wiccan who is seen by other witches or Wiccans as overly naïve, foolish, and lacking in both skill and knowledge. Likewise, a "fluffy bunny" is often seen as compounding these problems with closed-mindedness and a refusal to admit one can be wrong. They typically focus on more traditionally positive aspects of Wicca and spells or rituals for healing, and avoid traditionally darker aspects of Wicca or witchcraft. For the sake of this project, "fluffy bunnies" are those who self-identify as Wiccan, regardless of whether or not all Wiccans recognize them as peers.[166]

The origins of the term "fluffy bunny" are unclear, but similar pejorative terms have been used for decades. The term "fluffy bunny" gained popularity during the 1990s, though its origins may be older. Its rise in popularity stems, at least in part, from the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as an episode of the show used the term pejoratively to describe a coven of Wiccans that were depicted in ways similar to the stereotype. In the episode "Hush," which has served as the focus of many academic articles due to the unique monsters and storytelling involved, one sub-plot involves the character Willow, a witch, joining a college Wiccan group, only to become upset upon realizing all of the girls in the group (save one, Tara, a likeminded witch who ultimately becomes Willow's romantic partner) are "fluffy bunnies" as she refers to them, meaning that she viewed their witchcraft as weak, submissive, and in a very real sense, fake. .[167] Once again, we see the importance of popular media for Wiccan LRCs.[168] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* popularity itself generated "fluffy bunnies" when it brought a lot of new, and young, converts to the tradition, and at the same time it developed an entire storyline, with a new major character, to mock those same converts. This clearly shows how religions can and are affected by popular media. In a very real sense, Wicca gained popularity, recognition, and a new level of status from television shows like *Buffy* or *Charmed*, notably from numerous new converts.[169] Yet these same converts are also denigrated by more established and traditional Wiccans. For the sake of inclusivity and respecting how they self-identify, I will include "fluffy bunnies" as part of the Wiccan community in this thesis. And while the term "fluffy bunny" is derogatory, I use it in this project for two reasons. First, it is a commonly used term within the tradition, and I have made a point within this project to use Wiccans' own terminology. Secondly, because most of the primary sources I will discuss in this section use the term, I seek to avoid confusion by not adding yet another term into the debate. Despite my use of the term, it should be noted that I am in no way attempting to take sides in this debate or provide one side of the debate a level of legitimacy and advantage over the other.

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[165] "Fluffy Bunny," Urban Dictionary, https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fluffy+bunny, accessed May, 19, 2019.

[166] Catherine Noble Breyer, "Wicca for the Rest of Us - Fluffy Bunnies," *Wicca: For the Rest of Us* (n.d). http://wicca.cnbeyer.com/fluffy.shtml, accessed March 16, 2019; Jason Mankey, "Be Nice to the 'Fluffy Bunnies,'" *Raise the Horns* blog (2015), https://www.patheos.com/blogs/panmankey/2015/04/be-nice-to-the-fluffy-bunnies/, accessed March 16, 2019.

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[167] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "Hush," Season 4, Episode 10, December 14, 1999.

[168] Angela Coco and Ian Woodward, "Discourses of Authenticity with a Pagan Community: The 'Fluffy Bunny' Sanction," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36, no. 5 (October 2007): 479-504.

[169] Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*, 120-122.

To those outside of the tradition the "fluffy bunny" debate may seem strange, as I can think of few other traditions that possess members that disdain each other for being too positive. However, within Wicca the debate is an important one, one that goes to the heart of what it means to be Wiccan. To some, "fluffy bunnies" are not just Wiccans of another stripe, they are not Wiccan at all, or worse, a threat to the religion and the very identity of Wiccans. To others, "fluffy bunnies" are a sign of Wicca's growth and evolution. Such Wiccans often find the term not only offensive but counterproductive and distracting from larger issues facing the religion, if not symptomatic of more major problems.

Wiccan priestess and blogger Catherine Noble Breyer in particular has an axe to grind with "fluffy bunnies." In her own words, they are "those people who, most broadly categorized, give the rest of us [Wiccans] a bad name."[170] Furthermore, they are not just demeaning Wicca, they are not even Wiccan to begin with:

> Wiccans will say that everyone is allowed to follow their own beliefs, and that any form of belief, whether another person agrees with it or not, counts as religion, and I agree. However, it does not necessarily make the practitioner a member of my religion, and I for one would prefer for them to stop embarrassing the rest of us with their antics.[171]

To Breyer, "fluffy bunnies" cause outsiders not to take Wicca seriously, which means that no matter their intention, they help create a false view of what Wicca is to outsiders, which in turn shapes how non-Wiccans view and ultimately interact with them. Breyer's post, entitled simply "Fluffy Bunnies," describes what she sees as "fluffy bunny" attributes and behaviors, listing them not only to criticize those who participate in such behavior, but to encourage policing within Wiccan communities to stomp out or rectify this behavior.[172]

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[170] Catherine Noble Breyer, "Wicca for the Rest of Us - Fluffy Bunnies."
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid.

But just as many Wiccans disdain “fluffy bunnies” and see them as a major problem, others disagree. For some, “fluffy bunnies” are just as Wiccan as any other Wiccan, to others they do not even truly exist, and to still others, it is simply a derogatory term used by bullies or people just as closed-minded as the “fluffy bunnies” they claim to oppose.

The Importance of Fluff: Pro “Fluffy Bunny” Voices

Jason Mankey, who I mentioned in context of the preceding debate over solitaries, defends “fluffy bunnies” in his article “Be Nice to the ‘Fluffy Bunnies.’” Mankey recognizes that there are Wiccans who can be identified as “fluffy bunnies,” and likewise that such individuals can be quite annoying. He ultimately argues, though, that the term is outdated, misleading, and does more harm than good.

Mankey says that he and indeed many Wiccans and contemporary pagans have gone through phases that might qualify them as “fluffy bunnies” at the time. However, he argues that in most cases this is just a phase that many new, and particularly young and passionate, Wiccans go through at the beginning of their religious lives. “Fluffy bunnies” should not be condemned for this, but recognized as individuals who are passionate and perhaps temporarily over-enthusiastic about their religion. As he states:

> Those we label with this term are a lot like I was back then: excited! And yes that excitement often comes across poorly, but people who flaunt the Craft in their early years aren’t intentionally trying to damage it, they are just so caught up in it that they can’t help themselves. Instead of deriding them we should be happy that they’ve discovered something that brings them so much joy.[173]

Instead of deriding or mocking “fluffy bunnies,” Mankey argues that his fellow Wiccans should embrace them and admire them, because if they remain within the religion, they will likely lessen their enthusiasm, and if they leave the religion, he would rather they have positive experiences so that they remain allies.[174]

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[173] Jason Mankey, "Be Nice to the ‘Fluffy Bunnies.’"

But for many Wiccans, one of the biggest problems with "fluffy bunnies" is what is seen as their lack of knowledge and a level of hardheadedness and arrogance. Mankey also recognizes this as a problem, and even adds an addendum to his initial blog post to expand on his ideas. Ultimately, he argues, "who cares?" For Mankey, while know-it-alls and hardheaded people can by annoying and give Wiccans a bad name, ultimately these "fluffy bunnies" are not worth the effort, and anyone, Wiccan or not, will ultimately recognize them as such.[175] "Fluffy bunnies" are at worst temporary problems that solve themselves, but it is also an offensive term that means little, and can describe any Wiccan another Wiccan finds annoying. For those few "fluffy bunnies" that remain, Mankey sees no problem with them claiming the same identity as him, saying, "There are many shades to [witchcraft & Wicca], and if one shade happens to be made out of rainbows that should be OK too."[176]

In his appropriately titled article "Fluffy Bunny Witches," Mat Auryn also defends "fluffy bunnies" and sees them not as dangerous, but as having an important place within Wicca as a whole. To Auryn, criticism of "fluffy bunnies" is ridiculous for a few reasons, first because the term is a derogatory one that implies a lack of talent and knowledge. On the contrary, Auryn claims that many so-called "fluffy bunnies" are "mad powerhouses," that is, they possess an impressive level of magical and spiritual abilities.[177] For Auryn, "fluffy bunnies" are just as capable and knowledgeable as more traditional Wiccans.[178]

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[174] Ibid.

[175] Ibid.

[176] Mat Auryn, "Fluffy Bunny Witches," *For Puck's Sake* blog (2019), https://www.patheos.com/blogs/matauryn/2017/06/11/340/, accessed May 19, 2019.

[177] Ibid.

[178] Ibid.

Second, Auryn describes “fluffy bunny” as “a derogatory term usually described as those in the witchcraft community who are generally more focused on positivity, healing, doing good deeds, steering clear of the darker deities and spirits and have an ethical code following the Wiccan Rede.”[179] To Auryn, there is nothing wrong with such things; these are positive traits and it seems ridiculous to even suggest that someone is not truly Wiccan for possessing them. After all, he argues, what does that say about Wicca if its “true” members condemn their peers for being too moral and too positive? Auryn argues that the religion itself would be better off if more Wiccans were like this.[180]

Finally, Auryn argues that, particularly in relation to those outside the tradition, “fluffy bunnies” can actually prevent real harm. He recognizes that for many Wiccans critical of them, “fluffy bunnies” are seen as “sanitizing” or “watering down” Wicca by providing a wholly positive and innocent form of the religion. This accusation is particularly directed at popular Wiccan authors such as Silver Ravenwolf.[181] To Auryn this actually works in the favor of other more traditional Wiccans, as the books and works of “fluffy bunnies” are most often the viewpoints that are seen, heard, or experienced by those outside of Wicca, thus providing a more positive, if misleading, public awareness of Wicca. Likewise, since “fluffy bunnies” tend to be newer converts to Wicca, and thus not as experienced, the positive and moral aspects of being a “fluffy bunny” can protect them and those around them from negative or dangerous aspects of magic such as curses, which Auryn believes in. Thus he claims that “fluffy bunnies” are not only as powerful as other Wiccans, but they practice a safer, more moral witchcraft that works in the favor of all Wiccans, “fluffy bunny” or not.[182]

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[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid.

Finally, Wiccan blogger Phoenix Lefae writes in “Fluffy Bunny Witchcraft is Good” that “anything that brings someone to Witchcraft or Paganism is great.”[183] As her title suggests, Lefae argues that “fluffy bunnies” are positive and important for two reasons in addition to the claim that they can bring more individuals into Wicca or Wiccan-like religions. First, Lefae argues that Wicca and contemporary paganism in general are in a state of discovery and growth. As part of this discovery and growth, Wicca will evolve, or it will die. “Fluffy bunnies” are a part of this evolution. She dislikes the term, as to her it implies that Wicca is meant to be “stiff, difficult, unyielding, or cruel,” which is, as she so artfully puts it, “utter crap.”[184] “Fluffy bunnies” are a sign that Wicca is, or is becoming, more inclusive and thoughtful, and they are allowing Wicca to evolve and survive by attracting new members.[185]

Likewise, Lefae dismisses concerns that “fluffy bunnies” are too commercialistic. Sure, she argues, “many folks go through a phase of wanting to have the right tool, the new deck of tarot cards, the cool witchy dress or tattoo. Wanting to have things does not make one a pawn of capitalism.”[186] Indeed, she argues that this desire is a useful thing, as many new Wiccans feel alone and unsure of themselves, and buying into the commercialism of Wicca can give many individuals a feeling of confidence or power, at least for a short time, until they learn confidence and no longer feel the need for such things. Thus she sees “fluffy bunnies” not as lesser Wiccans, but perhaps nervous, younger, or newer Wiccans who are unfairly targeted due to their taste and inexperience.[187]

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[183] Phoenix LeFae, "Fluffy Bunny Witchcraft Is Good," *The Witches Next Door* blog (2018), https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thewitchesnextdoor/2018/09/fluffy-bunny/, accessed May 19, 2019.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid.

This debate over “fluffy bunnies” and whether or not they are “truly” Wiccan shows a deep level of concern over Wiccan identity. By engaging in this debate, Wiccans constantly reify what Wicca means to them. Though it is not the purpose of this project to decide whether or not “fluffy bunnies” are Wiccan, the LRC debates over their claiming of the identity merit scholarly attention. Indeed, more recent popular opinion amongst Wiccans has seem to change, with many now seeing the concept of “fluffy bunny” as outdated and referring to a more contentious time in the tradition’s history.

The “fluffy bunny” debate is not just a concern over who or who is not a Wiccan, but it is also a debate over the future of what it means to be Wiccan. As Lefae and Mankey both recognize, Wicca is a religion that is growing and evolving. “Fluffy bunnies” are often, rightly or not, seen as young newcomers to Wicca, and thus play a key role in Wicca’s future. Thus as Wiccans debate “fluffy bunnies” and whether or not they are Wiccan, Wiccans also debate what they want the future of Wicca to look like, based on concerns about what, or who, it is now.

More or Less Wiccan: An Analysis of Internal LRCs

Both debates in this chapter focus on the controversial issue of dogma, or sanctioned belief and practice, in Wicca. They are debates about the fundamentals of being a Wiccan. While the standard scholarly representation of Wicca identifies it as anti-dogmatic, sometimes aggressively so, when we examine Wiccan LRCs we are able to discover that not only do dogmatic perspectives exist within the tradition, but also that such dogmatic or theological debates, like many of the LRCs in this project, reveal real concerns over what it means to be Wiccan.

In these debates we can see that Wiccans not only fight over what it means to be Wiccan, but we also once again see that identity is a focal concern of many Wiccans. In this case, Wiccans who take part in these debates are forming their own identities. They define what they believe as a Wiccan, but they also define who they see as a peer, and who they see as theologically incompatible or inferior. By taking part in these debates, each Wiccan signals to every other Wiccan not only what they believe, but their receptiveness to the beliefs and identities of other Wiccans. They signal whether they will even recognize others as fellow Wiccans or mere pretenders. Doing so signals how they will treat others and in turn shapes how they will be treated by other Wiccans who may or may not share these opinions.

Whereas in the previous two chapters Wiccans were concerned about matters of identity due to how the outside world may perceive Wicca, in this chapter we can see how Wiccans concern themselves with identity because of how they see themselves, how they see other Wiccans, and how other Wiccans see them. This aspect of identity is also a matter of authenticity. For many Wiccans, the only authentic Wicca is that which one has been initiated into. For many Wiccans, “fluffy bunnies” practice an inauthentic form of witchcraft.[188] And for many other Wiccans, such distinctions about authentic witchcraft are not only false, but harmful.

Authenticity has been mentioned previously in the discussion of Wicca and academia, and there too it is coded as legitimacy. To be an authentic Wiccan, whatever that means, is to be a legitimate one. To be inauthentic is to be a pretender at best, and at worst dangerous to the tradition. Authenticity becomes a measure of one’s identity to fellow Wiccans, and it has real consequences, as to be inauthentic will result in not being taken seriously by other members of one’s own religion and not recognized as a peer, something which can have clear and devastating effects. Thus, as we can see in these debates, the power to decide who is an authentic Wiccan or not is a great one, which is why it is being fought over by contemporary Wiccans.

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[188] Catherine Noble Breyer, "Wicca For the Rest of Us - Fluffy Bunnies."

Throughout these chapters I hope to have shown the importance of Lived Religious Communications in Wicca, communications that not only show a lived religious practice of engaging with outsiders, but also demonstrate real and understudied concerns, attitudes and opinions of contemporary Wiccans. Now it is necessary to turn to my conclusion to tie these aspects together and show why they are important.

CHAPTER V:

Conclusion

In this project I hope to have demonstrated a new model with which one can study Wicca and Wiccans, as well as many other religious communities. I hope this project leads to further research and inquiry into the subject matter. Rather than studying Wicca by justifying its value, I intended to justify the value of Wicca by actually studying it. That is to say, while many scholars of Wicca have focused on why Wicca as a religion is worthy of study by academics, and while I agree this is important, it is also clear to me that the most effective method of proving this point is not to become enmeshed in historical and theoretical debates about Wicca's legitimacy, but instead to promote deep and serious research and analysis of the religion. It is my hope that I have done something like this with this project.

Throughout this project I have looked at numerous examples of what I call Lived Religious Communications, that is, various forms of communication by, for, or between individuals in a particular tradition, communications that often take place in that blurred space between the religious and the secular. In chapter two we looked at debates in the sphere of academia, consisting of various communications between Wiccans and non-Wiccans, professional academics and non-academics. We saw Wiccans of various viewpoints responding to historian Ronald Hutton's academic history of Wicca. In turn we saw how Wiccans and non-Wiccans responded to Markus Altus Davidsen's piece "What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?" In both cases, we see a major Wiccan concern over academic legitimacy and what it means for Wiccan identity. Through these LRCs we see anxiety over what it might mean if Wicca's own self-history were shown to be historically false, or at least unlikely. Does a "false" history make

Wicca less of a “real” religion? These are questions that both Wiccans and non-Wiccans must ask themselves after interacting with these texts.

In chapter three we explored numerous Wiccan LRCs in response to popular witch media. With new shows like *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and the 2018 reboot of *Charmed*, witches once again are a focus of popular media, as these new shows are continuing a tradition of using witches as characters in fantasy and horror media. Numerous blog posts and internet comments, when analyzed as Wiccan LRCs, provide a view of how Wiccans navigate the tricky road of claiming an identity that is understood in fundamentally different ways by those outside of the religion. These LRCs show both positive and negative reactions by Wiccans to this media, but also enable us to see what these media portrayals mean for individual Wiccans and their religion in more pragmatic ways, such as membership recruitment. Most importantly, these examples demonstrate that Wiccans are concerned about how they can be viewed as a legitimate religion if television shows, books, and movies tie their religion to fictional magic and fantasy.

In chapter four, via blog posts and chatroom comments, we explored LRCs within the Wiccan community, with Wiccans speaking not to outsiders, but to each other. Considering two internal theological debates within Wicca, we see how Wiccans argue over the right to claim Wiccan identity, with some viewing it as applying only to those who have been initiated into a coven, while others view any practitioner who shares some of the same beliefs and practices and claims the title as Wiccan. We also see Wiccans worried about so-called “fluffy bunnies,” Wiccans who are criticized for being too positive, naïve or inexperienced to be “true” Wiccans. In both of these debates we see Wiccan anxieties over identity, particularly who gets to claim it and why.

In all of these LRCs, we see a major concern over identity, particularly related to concerns over legitimacy and authenticity. By examining the LRCs within these three broad spheres of inquiry—academia, popular media, and community—we see a recurring theme, namely that many Wiccans are concerned not with only how their fellow Wiccans see them, and how they in turn see their fellow Wiccans, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how non-Wiccans see them, and ultimately treat them. In chapter four, one major concern over "fluffy bunnies" was that they make other Wiccans look bad, specifically to non-Wiccans. Perhaps this is not a unique worry, as it can be argued that many other groups and individuals, particularly minority and marginalized religious communities, have similar concerns. Yet we found that this concern was a recurring and major one within Wicca, but not one that is expressed in official texts or institutional documents. Instead we discovered this recurring anxiety through examining and analyzing numerous Wiccan Lived Religious Communications.

As mentioned by Schofield Clark, part of Wiccan social cohesiveness is a sense of being under attack, a sense that as a community, Wiccans are under siege by unfriendly forces. Whether or not this sense of besiegement is accurate, we saw evidence of it in all three chapters, in a frequent internal concern as to how Wiccans are perceived by outsiders. Whether or not Wiccans are truly as discriminated against as they feel themselves to be, this shared anxiety not only acts to maintain group cohesion, as Schofield Clark suggests, but also seems to be a central part of the lived religion of Wicca.[189]

This suggestion is further supported by what scholar Gwendolyn Reece calls "stigmatized identity." In her article "Contemporary Pagans and Stigmatized Identity," Reece uses quantitative polling from contemporary pagans of all stripes, including Wiccans. Those interviewed overwhelmingly cited feelings of stigmatization due to their religious identity, supporting the idea that Wiccans experience anxiety about how they are seen and treated by the non-Wiccan world.[190] While Dr. Reece's work focuses on measuring the practical effects this feeling has on contemporary pagans, she also discusses the Wiccan concept of the "broom closet."[191] As mentioned briefly in the introduction, the "broom closet" or the phrase "coming out of the broom closet" are euphemisms for how Wiccans and other contemporary pagans refer to the act of disclosing their religious identity. Similarly for some LGBTQ+ individuals, contemporary pagans often possess a degree of "passability," that is, the ability to pass as, in this case, a "normal" non-pagan individual. Such pagans are repeatedly faced with the choice to disclose this identity, and thus "come out of the broom closet." Reece argues that the polls pointing to a sense of stigmatized identity might explain the prevalence of the "broom closet."[192]

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[189] Clark, *From Angels to Aliens,* 125.

I concur with Dr. Reece's results, but argue further that LRCs might also be an important avenue for studying this phenomenon. Just as Reece's research indicates that a majority of contemporary pagans possess a sense of "stigmatized identity," Wiccan LRCs likewise indicate a similar degree of anxiety over religious identity.[193] But when examining LRCs we can further trace *why* Wiccans may feel stigmatized, by analyzing the very texts which seem to generate such anxieties. By examining LRCs regarding academia, popular media, and internal theology, we can see a consistent existential anxiety amongst Wiccans, one that is consistently grounded in questions of legitimacy and authenticity. That is, Wiccans are repeatedly concerned, in different ways and forms, that they do not feel authentic or feel others are less authentic, that they are legitimate, but are not seen as legitimate. In a sense they demand respect, and yet struggle to figure out what it means to them and others. Thus, the study of LRCs allows us to use the words and beliefs of religious adherents to understand not only how such individuals view the world, but how and why their underlying anxieties and emotions might motivate their lived religious practices.

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[190] Reece, "Contemporary Pagans and Stigmatized Identity."
[191] Ibid., 61-63.
[192] Ibid., 62-64.
[193] Ibid., 89-91.

This is not to claim that this is the only thing that can be uncovered by studying Wiccan LRCs. Wicca, like other religions, is diverse and intersects with adherents' everyday lives in complicated ways which exceed the supposed divide between the religious and secular spheres. There are numerous such intersections of influence and study, each revealing its own debates, anxieties, and foci, such as the sphere of politics. Indeed, numerous Wiccans and other contemporary pagans are currently participating in an online Twitter community called #MagicalResistance.[194] These Wiccans and their allies continuously, and quite comically, hex, curse, and magically bind conservative American politicians, particularly President Donald Trump. Likewise, in her recent work, Sarah Pike has explored the intersection of Wicca and contemporary paganism with radical environmental activism.[195] It is my hope that such efforts continue. My work is by no means complete, and like all academic scholarship it is simply part of a conversation, one I hope will continue both within the subfield of contemporary pagan studies and the field of religious studies more broadly.

In the introduction to this thesis I stated that studying the lived religion of Wicca and other contemporary traditions, such as I have done here, can help expand our understanding of the contemporary religious landscape. On the one hand, Wicca and other contemporary pagan traditions are part of this same landscape, and thus as worthy of study as any other traditions. But on the other hand, this approach has yielded evidence of numerous discussions, debates, and anxieties shared by diverse Wiccans online. I have no doubt that we can find parallels within many other traditions, parallels that can be understood not only on their own, but in conversation with and in comparison to Wiccan LRCs.

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[194] Michael N. Hughes, "Binding Trump: Looking Back on One Year of #MagicResistance . . . And Looking Ahead," Medium.com (2018), https://medium.com/@michaelmhughes/binding-trump-looking-back-on-one-year-of-magicresistance-and-looking-ahead-46c1f46a264c, accessed March, 1, 2019; Michael N. Hughes, "Hex the NRA: A New Spell for the #MagicResistance," Medium.com (2018), https://medium.com/@michaelmhughes/hex-the-nra-a-new-spell-for-the-magicresistance-5be06f113c41, accessed March 1, 2019.

[195] Sarah M. Pike, *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

Lived Religious Communications are only one tool for studying religion, but an invaluable one that I feel has often been ignored in favor of a focus on traditional ethnography, scripture or official institutional documents. Rather than claiming that the study of Lived Religious Communications is superior to these other methods, it is my intention to have introduced the study of LRCs as a way to supplement and expand upon other methods of academic inquiry, to help us remember that often the “official” claims of or scholarly facts about a tradition can differ greatly from what is said and done by individuals elsewhere within a community, and that religious communities can engage in everyday practices that are informed as much by factors outside the tradition as within.

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