2010

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Available at: https://idun.augsburg.edu/honors_review/vol3/iss1/10

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EXAMINING ONLINE COMMUNITIES THROUGH WICCA

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In the last few decades the world has witnessed a technological boom, during which long-distance communication has become virtually effortless. Recent technological developments have allowed electronic devices that were once elements of science fiction to become commonplace in every home; among these is the Internet. Although this invention is a great benefit in regards to convenience, there are those who have become so consumed by it that they have created entirely new identities on the electronic plain; it is now possible for entire lives to be lived in front of a screen. Groups of people are also able to form communities online for a variety of reasons, one of the most common being shared religious beliefs. Wicca (or Witchcraft) is one particular religion that has benefitted from the members’ ability to utilize the communications of the Internet for networking with other Wiccans, sharing religious information and experience, and even conducting online rituals. However, this spread of Wiccan resources on the Internet has fueled the debate among people of many faiths over whether or not religious ceremonies and gatherings online qualify as a substitute for assembling in person. Herein resides the controversy which I will address by taking a closer look at the Wiccan community on the Internet and exploring the differing viewpoints of this topic. Can these electronically mediated communications truly compare with face-to-face interactions? There are many who would assert that online connections do not provide an adequate substitute for relationships formed in person; however, after exploring the issue further, I find this stance to be too limiting as it excludes a variety of circumstances, which we will examine later on. Therefore, in the end I am compelled to argue that although face-to-face contact may be preferable when possible, social networking sites are a perfectly acceptable way for Wiccans, and those of other faiths, to connect with others.
In order to discuss the online interactions of Wiccan practitioners we must, first of all, gain a general understanding of Wicca itself. The religion known as "Wicca" (or Witchcraft), relatively new in the public spectrum has been growing steadily in popularity since the early 1900’s (Clifton 7); in a few short decades it has gone from near obscurity to becoming mainstream enough to be recognized by the United States army in 2001 ("Wicca/Witchcraft, Jenson). Wicca is often categorized as a Neo-Paganist tradition, a term heard with increasing frequency but with which not many people are familiar. As defined in the preface to the book *Wicca's Charm* by Catherine Edwards Sanders, Neo-Paganism is an over-arching term referring to beliefs and practices that have recently revived a nature-focused, polytheistic worship of ancient gods and goddesses, which includes the Wiccan tradition (xiii). Although many people believe this religion to be akin to the New Age spiritual practices, most Wiccan practitioners argue that witchcraft (or simply The Craft) is the revival of a centuries-old tradition dating back to pre-Christian Europe (Buckland 1-7).

A definition of the word "witch" is crucial to an understanding of Wicca because many practitioners of Wicca prefer to be referred to as witches. Others have rejected the word due to its stereotypical negative connotations. A witch was once considered to be someone who was involved in a satanic covenant bestowing him or her with magical powers that could potentially harm others (Gibson 13). However, the authors of *Cults and New Religions* argue for a modern definition. They assert that a witch is anyone who identifies with an eclectic religious tradition whose beliefs include such precepts as, "belief in the sacredness of nature, belief in the immanence of divinity, and belief in the ability to interact with the processes and energies by which the universe is established," (Cowan and Bromley 194-194). Other beliefs and practices that set
Wiccans apart from other Neo-Paganist practitioners include: the Wiccan Rede, the coven, esbats, and sabbats (Beehner). The Wiccan Rede (or Reid) is at the core of Wiccan beliefs and states, “An it harm none, do what ye will”. In other words, one can do anything that he or she feels is right as long as it does not hurt anyone (Zimmerman 14).

One basic structure in the Wiccan tradition is that of the coven. The coven is a basic gathering structure in the Wiccan tradition. In his book entitled *Witchcraft: Exploring the World of Wicca*, president and found of the Apologetics Information Ministry Craig S. Hawkins defines coven as “the basic social unit of witches who regularly meet in groups,” (69). “Coven” is a variation of the word “convent” which stems from the Latin word conventus meaning “assembly” or “gathering”. Covens can have any number of members, but most average around thirteen. Leadership also varies from coven to coven, though in most one or two people may be appointed as high priest or priestess for the purpose of leading the group in ritual ceremonies. Initiation into the coven is decided by each group independently and thus can range from a strict initiation process to an open circle in which all are welcome (70). Whether in covens or as individuals, Wiccans celebrate a number of festivals throughout the year. Sabbats are festivals of the Wiccan calendar that take place in eight equal intervals throughout the year. Each festival represents a certain aspect of the natural season with which it coincides, and for each unique rituals are observed. Esbats are ritual days that occur thirteen times every year in recognition of the full moon. Many Wiccans also celebrate the new moon throughout the year (Buckland 89.) Having now established a basic working knowledge of the Wiccan religion, we will now take a look at the Internet’s development over time, and how this evolution has impacted communication, later focusing specifically on online Wiccan communities.
The Internet is "the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication" (DiMaggio 307). The precursors of this invention were developed in the 1960's, and around 1975 the U.S. military used the Internet for communication. The Internet became available to the public in 1982 and, as it became more commercialized, its popularity grew steadily up through the 1990s. In 1995 the number of Americans who used the Internet was about 25 million, 3% of the population. As the versatility of the Internet grew to include more methods of mass communication including email, chat rooms, and social networking websites, the number of Americans using the Internet doubled in five years. In 2000, nearly 55 million Americans were logging on every single day (The Pew Forum for Religion & Public Life). Email refers to an electronic mail system, which allows people to send messages in a digitalized letter format by typing the message and sending to the email address of the recipient. Chat rooms are digital gathering points that allow users to adopt a screen name (the identity under which their messages will be sent) and communicate instantaneously with other people in the same chat room by typing and receiving messages continually. Social networking sites refer to websites that focus on building online communities of people who share interests or activities or who are interested in connecting with others. These sites allow users to create online profiles through which they may share information, pictures, blog entries, music clips, etc. (DiMaggio 308-309). The widespread access to the Internet has led to a new dimension in human interaction. Many sociologists have noted and studied the implications this development has had on how groups and communities form over the Internet and how these relationships differ from those in the same proximity to others. We will now the debate sparked by these advancements in communication and how it has
played out in online religious communities, specifically exploring these issues in terms of the Wiccan religion. There are a multitude of reasons for which online communication is preferred by Wiccan practitioners. Due to avid stereotyping and misunderstanding based on cultural myths that Wicca or Witchcraft has encountered in society, many Wiccan practitioners (or witches) prefer a certain amount of privacy and even secrecy with regards to their religious views (Jensen, Gibson 142). Although some truly prefer this solitude, this presents a great deal of trouble for those who wish to connect with other Wiccans. Because of this desire to locate fellow Wiccans, the art of networking is included in most Wiccan instructive books (McSherry 38). Networking provides advice on how to locate other Wiccans as well as stay connected to the Wiccan community as a whole. Before the Internet, this was done through newsletters or other group mailing systems, but today thousands of Witches, Wiccans, and other Neo-pagans are connecting online through social networking sites such as Youtube, Facebook, or Twitter. There are also a plethora of sites designed specifically for the aforementioned religious groups including: The Witch’s Voice and The White Goddess: Pagan Portal, (Sanders 40, McSherry 4).

As it struggles to be recognized on the public stage, Wicca’s increase in popularity has been aided greatly by the convenience of the Internet, forming a “relationship with technological innovation” as these online Wiccan communities grow (Bittarello 215). The tension lies in the skepticism of relationships formed on the Internet and whether or not these communities can provide the same legitimacy as face-to-face relationships. Can online Wiccan communities and relationships truly create the same solidarity as those formed within the same physical proximity as other people? In answer to this question, there are roughly three primary responses. The first viewpoint states
that online communities are in no way an acceptable substitute for face-to-face contact with other people. Those who take this stance support the idea that because relationships formed over the Internet are created in a virtual environment, the relationships themselves are also virtual, and therefore not as substantial as those formed within the same physical proximity as another person. Many who share this viewpoint also believe that online socializing is unhealthy because it promotes obsessive behavior and takes place in an environment where information is easily manipulated and therefore unreliable.

There have been several studies and surveys conducted particularly in the early stages of the Internet’s development that studied potentially unhealthy effects of online socialization. In 1995 such surveys indicated that individuals who spent excessive amounts of time socializing online (more than four hours a day) seemed to exhibit a decline in other outside forms of socialization, spending less time going out with friends or other social activities. Some attribute this to the idea that social networking sites “…induce anomie and erode social capital by enabling users to retreat into an artificial world,” (DiMaggio 314-315).

Another reason many people consider online socializing detrimental is the possibility that it reinforces socio-economic gaps. Those who have examined the issue attribute this gap to the fact that only individuals who can afford it have access to the Internet therefore creating what has been referred to as the “digital divide”. This is supported by reports from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration in 1995, 1998, 1999, and 2000, which showed that trends in Internet access favored the upper class, particularly wealthy educated whites (DiMaggio 311).

With regards to Wiccan communities online specifically, there are also religious standpoints that come into play. First is that of the Wiccan community itself. Al-
though largely in favor of using social networking sites to communicate with other individuals that share their beliefs, there are some Wiccans who feel that using the Internet to further one’s path is contradictory to Wicca’s fundamental belief in the sacredness of nature. Because the Internet is a manmade technological device, using it in place of face-to-face gatherings undermines one’s ability to commune with nature (Nightmare 54). From a biblical perspective, many Christians look at the Wiccan world, particularly the information found on the Internet with a skeptical eye. A large portion of Christians assert that the Bible clearly forbids any occult practices, most clearly summarized in Deuteronomy 18:10 which states, “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells…” Based on this passage as well as on Leviticus 19:26, 2 Kings 17:10, Acts 13:6, and several others that condemn occultism, many Christians fear that the spread of this information via the Internet is dangerous (Hawkins 96-97). Many Christian parents worry about what kind of religious information their children have access to on the Internet, especially in social networking environments where there is no way to determine the reliability or trustworthiness of the other people involved. Therefore, they believe that access to religious communities online should be limited or monitored (Russo 172-173).

This viewpoint ignores the fact that the Internet can be a useful resource, especially for those with limited mobility. And although there are still individuals who do not have access to the Internet, most public libraries and schools across the country now include free internet access which is available to the public.

The second stance on this issue states that online socialization is always completely and utterly acceptable in place of gathering face-to-face. Individuals who support this standpoint maintain that relationships formed over so-
cial networking sites are just as substantial as those formed in person and that Internet communication is crucial, especially for individuals with limited mobility.

In support of this viewpoint, many sociologists, including Manuel Castells, believe (in contrast to those of the previous viewpoint) that the Internet does not hinder social capital, but rather represents a natural reorganization of society. Castells believes we are in the “information age”, moving toward a new social structure based on networking and Internet communities simply provide the basis for this expansion. This will speed communication and expand the access of information, therefore ultimately augment socialization with others (DiMaggio 309). This is supported by studies conducted in 1998 which indicated that individuals who frequently engaged in online social interaction through chat rooms, email, or social networking sites, seemed not only more likely to engage in face-to-face social interaction but also more likely to read and play sports, *(The Pew Center for People and the Press).*

A secular standpoint states the exact opposite of the previous view. Rather than strengthening a social divide, those who support online community socialization claim that the beauty of the Internet is that it creates arenas for more voices to be heard, making it a testament to free speech and diversity of opinion. Internet communities also allow those who are immobile or who have limited mobility, whether chronic or temporary, to connect with other people and virtually participate in group activities that they would otherwise be unable to attend (DiMaggio 313).

To examine a religious perspective, we once again go to ideas about the Wiccan community as an example of Internet communities at work. Wiccans in favor of Internet communities combat the idea of the Internet as controversial to nature by stating that it is simply another realm of energy. Therefore, since energy is a natural occurrence, using the internet is just another plain on which to connect with
others. Wiccans or witches who embrace the net say that it has helped the growth of the Wiccan community immensely and is every bit as good as communicating in person. One Wiccan woman from Tennessee summarizes this viewpoint in saying, “Computers do not seem odd or unnatural to me...Being in a chatroom is the next best thing to having the person with you live—you can still read their auras, moods, and energy state through the network, just like you would if they were sitting next to you,” (Nightmare 55). Additionally, many other religious groups also post their resources online. Most churches at least have a website, if not a forum or chatroom, and there are now some churches that are completely on the web, holding online services and classes. Even the Vatican updates its Internet usage by experimenting with sites like Youtube and Facebook (Diamont).

The trouble with unconditionally accepting Internet communication as a substitute for face-to-face interaction is that this viewpoint does not directly address the issue of safety, reliability, or regulation of information on the Internet. It also does not account for the idea of social responsibility because unlike in face-to-face contact, online communication allows the person to simply log off when they do not want to deal with others in their online community.

After examining the evidence and cases for the previously explored stances, my own view takes the middle ground of these two sides. Although it would appear that excessive online socialization can have negative repercussions, when used as a complement to face-to-face communication, it is apparent based on the Pew Center studies that online socialization can actually enhance one’s community experience. However, there is still the issue of danger on the Internet. In response to the reliability of Internet communications, individuals in favor of the view that I take, would largely state that dangerous, untrustworthy situations are just as likely to happen in person. However, one learns
to take measures to avoid such situations (Lipshultz 145, Cucereanu 35). In regards to social responsibility, it is clear that face-to-face communication does not allow the luxury of complete disassociation with the click of a button. From this, there is obviously something to be said about the level of connection that goes along with being physically part of a community. Of course, there is always the issue of individuals who are isolated, whether by mobility or geography, from others who share their views and with whom they wish to connect. Therefore I would argue that although face-to-face contact is preferable when possible, social networking sites are a perfectly acceptable way for any group, including Wiccans, to connect with others to discuss and perform religious beliefs or practices.

When analyzing these approaches, one can see that there are many interesting observations to be made. Religiously, there is a conflict between many Christians and Wiccans who are both struggling to support their views in today’s electronic plain, the Internet. Many Christians consider Witchcraft to be evil, misguided, and a negative influence on young children who have access to its online resources. On the other hand, Wiccans who are isolated wish to share their beliefs with others and connect with those who share these beliefs, taking the second stance. Still, within the Wiccan religious circle there is another debate over whether or not the Internet is against the fundamental beliefs of The Craft. From a secular perspective, the legitimacy of relationships is what comes into play. The first viewpoint focuses on the idea that online relationships are virtual; therefore, this view makes the assumption that there is something about physical proximity to another person which cannot be duplicated in a cyber world. However, the second viewpoint states the exact opposite of this one in claiming that relationships and communities formed via the Internet have the exact same legitimacy as those in person, assuming that it is not physical proximity which is most
important and that relationships can be formed perfectly well without it. However, this ignores the fact that being online allows individuals to terminate these relationships instantaneously. Therefore, we must recognize the middle ground where I believe that although face-to-face contact is ideal in forming communities, the Internet can provide a perfectly acceptable way for Wiccans (and other groups) to connect when circumstances prevent physical proximity.

Regulating Internet communication and examining the legitimacy of the relationships formed there is a difficult line to walk, and clearly requires more exploration. There are both secular and religious debates that inform the three main approaches to the question of whether or not Internet communities provide relationships that are equal in legitimacy to those formed in person. This has been continuous struggle for the Wiccan community, as well as other religious practitioners who want to share their beliefs and connect with others. After touching on the primary three approaches to this debate, it appears obvious that extreme first and second viewpoints (aside from conflicting with a few of my personal values) ignore key conditions of Internet use such as its availability to those with limited mobility as well as the potential dangers of false information. Therefore, it is clear that although face to face contact is preferable when possible, social networking sites are a perfectly acceptable way for Wiccans (and other groups) to connect with others.
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