By knot of one, the spell's begun: Finding the Wiccan Path. An investigation of conversion practices within the Wicca community.

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Abstract

This thesis offers a sociological interpretation of the change in religious beliefs among members of the Pagan branch called Wicca, arguing that the process of joining Wicca is characterised by a process of religious conversion as well as a process of religious affiliation. This distinction involves a challenge to the analysis of Wiccans as to be found in much contemporary literature. Through the analysis of Adler's (1979) "coming-home experience", I suggest that it is possible to analyse neophytes as either converts or affiliates. The thesis argues that the two distinctive groups, Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans, need to be analysed separately. One main reason for this is that the coming-home experience is founded on too generalised assumptions which undermine the multifaceted ways of becoming a Wiccan. Secondly, conversion and affiliation, although mostly used interchangeably, are different processes because they presuppose a different level of engagement. Using this analogy, I argue that analysed separately Traditional Wiccans show characteristics of a conversion process, whereas Solitary Wiccans show characteristics of an affiliation process. Finally, through this distinction, my aim is to show that there is a more productive way of analysing and looking at members of the Wiccan community. By offering a new perspective on the ways in which individuals join Wicca, this thesis enriches not only the on-going debate supported by contemporary Paganism scholars whether a process of religious conversion is present or not in Wiccan members, but also the more general aspects of secularisation, desacralisation and the re-enchantment of the world, and the implication of religiosity and spirituality in postmodern communities of practice.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The following thesis addresses the process of conversion to Wicca between Traditional practitioners and Solitary practitioners. This thesis discusses the dynamics of engaging in magical practices and becoming a member of the Wiccan community. It analyses primarily Margot Adler's (1979) Coming Home Experience alongside side other conversion careers to show how 'occulture' emerges among contemporary Wiccan practitioners. Using empirical data from thirty-two interview studies with contemporary Wiccan practitioners, this research shows that multiple dynamics can become complementary elements during the process of religious change. The thesis emphasises the importance of extrasensory perceptions, personal extraordinary experiences, personal motivations and individual biographical aspects as containing important evidence. As such, the journey to becoming a magical practitioner has a deeper meaning than simple generalizations of conversion processes. Continuing the effort of understanding religious and spiritual change to Wicca, this study challenges the universal understanding that all individuals *convert* to Wicca and shows hidden facets and clear delimitations between practitioners. My arguments support the idea that there are two distinctive processes between adherents, one of conversion for Traditional Wiccans and one of affiliation for Solitary Wiccans.

Who are the Wiccans?

Wiccans are members of the modern Pagan (or Neo-Pagan) religion or spirituality called Wicca. Wicca was developed in England in the early twentieth century and was popularised

in 1954 by Gerald Gardner's book *Witchcraft Today*. Wicca is an eclectic spirituality that draws upon and took inspiration from various ancient pagan religions alongside twentieth century motifs. Scholars in the religion field characterise Wicca as part of the New Age movement or as part of Western occultism and esotericism. Regardless of its claims as being an ancient religion, Wicca probably best fits the characteristics of New Religious movements.

Wicca was supposedly presented as a religion that has no authoritative figure. The ritual practices, traditional core beliefs and theological structure were promoted to the public by Gerald Gardner and his initiated follower Doreen Valiente through books and oral teachings that were further passed down to their initiates. Wicca grew not only in terms of members but also in terms of its core structure, adapting to various interpretations and variations proposed by Wiccan adepts. Wicca has a couple of different denominations and lineages which are called traditions – the Gardnerian Tradition being the first. Each tradition has a different organisational structure and their practices and principles vary slightly from the original tradition (Hutton, 2001). Wicca is also a decentralised movement, a fact which could explain the variation in traditions. This decentralisation also contributed to disagreements over which traditions should be part of Wicca. Some traditions that follow the initiatory Gardnerian lineage consider themselves as portraying the rightful Wiccan tradition, and believe that newer and eclectic traditions, like Solitary Wiccans, should not be considered as part of Wicca.

Wicca is characterised as a duotheistic system of belief, in which the adherents worship the Moon Goddess (female deity) and her consort the Horned God (male deity) (Doyle White, 2015). Wicca has a couple of seasonal celebrations that include the cycles of the Moon

(which are correlated with the Moon Goddess and are called Esbats) and cycles of the Sun (which are correlated with the Horned God and are called Sabbats). Although Wicca is best characterised as duotheistic, other variations of Wicca present a mix of monism, polytheism or Goddess monotheism. Since the Moon Goddess and the Horned God are the two key figures, these deities could be considered in a henotheistic way, because the two Gods are not set figures, they take the form of many Pagan deities from various historical pantheons. Thus, Wicca takes the aspect of a flexible system of belief.

1.1 Research Statement

There are three major trends that have been identified as being the most common ways of explaining conversion/affiliation to Wicca: the coming-home experience (Adler, 1979), the interpretative drift (Luhrmann, 1989) and the seven conversion motifs model (Harrington, 2002). These have been of great importance in attempting to tackle the reasoning behind one's choice of joining Wicca. Opposing traditional, mainstream forms of religion, the 'alternative' or 'new' religions, as Hunt (2003) would refer to them, seem to have materialised themselves out from disenchantment and a need of re-enchantment of the alienated, secularised late modern Western world. They are established on both personal and collective value-ridden status of transcendence phenomena. This view characterises the Wiccan movement very well.

Most studies on Wicca conversion come from a traditional religious conversion analysis or from a cult, sect or alternative religions one. What makes both analysis processes questionable and problematic is that Wicca's nature as a cult, religion or neither is still debatable, because it entails different perspectives on the otherness of existence and how

this is perceived by its members. The Wiccan individual identification with divinity prejudges the assertion of the humanly religious capacity. The core background in analysing conversion to Wicca is to question whether such groups identify themselves with religion or religiosity (spirituality). To experience such a relativity also brings into discussion whether there is a conversion process at all. The characterisations of conversion, whether it is sudden or gradual, should be perceived as a fragmentary note of how a particular person comprehends theological idealism. Adler's (1979) claim that Wicca is "a religion without converts" is mostly based on the assumption that it is non-dogmatic and non-authoritarian. However, this could be interpreted as being Wicca's most essential communal doctrine, just as burning sage, casting a spell circle or bringing offerings are some of its most considerable communal practices. The fact that there are elements in Wicca that might function as doctrine denotes a possibility to analyse magic practitioners as being part of a modern *cult movement* (Hunt, 2003). Moreover, this could raise further questions regarding the attractiveness or fascinations of cult on modern Paganism and magical practices. Adler also notes that what makes Wicca stand apart as a movement and not a religion is the freedom in religious practice and belief, which was one of the six most prominent answers she collected during her investigation. This again entails the fact that Neo-Paganism is not considered part of new religious movements based on the lack of institutional structure because practicing magic does not require any advocacy of a certain creed. In the same fashion, Luhrmann (1989: 337) argues that people who turn to magic are looking for strong "emotional and imaginative religious experiences", but at the same time carefully suggests that such people do not search for a religion per se. This view brings further explanations to the argument that magic and religion are two distinguishable features. Both their arguments

suggest that, as opposed to Wicca, the majority of other cults are firmly formed on explicit doctrinal structures. However, both arguments overlook the institutional-like structure of Traditional Wicca groups that follow certain semi-dogmatic ceremonial practices, such as the initiation process. Thus, in actual practice, Adler's desire to establish Wicca as a unique movement can be drawn away, as her argument of unbounded freedom can be restricted by internal group norms. This only complicates the problem, as there is a dual individuality in Wicca and in establishing whether individuals convert or not to it. On one hand, it is Adler's argument on the lack of dogma, authoritarianism or religious leaders that supports the idea of Wicca being a religion without converts. And on the other hand, Luhrmann and Harrington acknowledge a set of conversion reasons and motifs which mirror a similar conversion process present in other religious movements, such as in the Unification Church.

Bainbridge and Stark (1985) argued that new religious movements and sects will arise as a response to the secularisation process that weakens the influence that traditional religions have over the general public. Other scholars suggested that, in the West, new religious movements will enhance the importance of the individual or a limited, exclusive community (Wilson, 1979). Berger (1967: 167) commented that with the rise of a varied body of sects "history becomes biography" and "cosmology becomes psychology". The modern Pagan recognition of the individual with sanctity and divinity mirrors that tendency. Modern Paganism and the revival of wizardry of the 1900s represent innovative forms of religiosity and act as a response to the Western countries' secularisation process. As with other new religious groups, such as Mazdaznan or Unification Church, Wicca shares a common aspiration towards intense private religious experiences. And like such cults, they perceive their religious activities as contributing restoration to an imperiled world. However, unlike

other cults, modern pagans do not belligerently advertise their salvation agenda to the world or to an individual's misfortune. The contact with magical practice can be, nevertheless, a transforming experience for certain individuals. On one hand, rejecting this experience as a conversion process by some individuals can have various reasons, such as establishing and securing an identity or individuality for themselves and the group they represent. On the other hand, assuming this experience constitutes a conversion process it can have other meanings as well, such as determining a context for the practice of magic. And, therefore, Modern Paganism can be accepted and appreciated as a rightful movement.

The few but valuable studies on conversion, or no conversion as proposed by Adler and Harrington, to Wicca show that there is still more to explore and understand about conversion as a process within its members. This thesis contributes more depth to this on-going debate and brings a new point of view as presented through the understanding of thirty-two interviewees. As suggested at the begging of this section by Luhrmann (1989), I acknowledge that magic and religion are two distinguishable features, however this thesis does not discuss what magic is. This thesis examines the dynamics of becoming a Wiccan and the practices of a Wiccan. My view and analysis of the narratives presented by my interviewees suggest that conversion and affiliation, although similar and on many occasions used interchangeably, are two distinctive process with different characteristics. It also suggests that so far scholars researching Wiccan members have not looked closely at the difference between Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans. There is no doubt that each religious change narrative is different and presents different ways of engaging with Wicca and different reasons for doing so, however each group (Traditional and Solitary) presents a distinctive pattern when adherents choose to make religious shifts. This pattern

shows that Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans seek membership differently, therefore suggesting that Traditional members convert to Wicca, while Solitary members affiliate to Wicca. This assumption is mostly based one of the important components described within religious conversion studies as identity change. Whereas Traditional Wiccans experience a robust identity change when joining a coven, Solitary Wiccans only adjust their current identity to the teachings of Wicca and do not seek recognition from other members.

1.2 Study objectives and Research Question

This thesis builds on and goes beyond the argument that Wiccan do not convert, as Adler (1979) or Harrington (2002) suggested, as well as on the proposition that Wiccans do convert, as suggested by other scholars, such as Luhrmann (1989). Hence this thesis intends to show how individuals become members of Wicca. The research objective of this study is to identify whether or not there is a religious conversion process present when people join Wicca. The overall quest of this thesis can be formulated as follows: **Do Wiccans experience a conversion process?**

In order to investigate this, a couple of sub-questions were derived from the research question stated above which will further guide both data collection and data analysis. One sub-question is derived from the fact that most scholars researching Paganism and Wicca did not investigate Traditional Wicca and Solitary Wicca separately, but as one group. Although, as suggested above, Wicca is a decentralised movement, members have a couple of guidelines that teach them how to practice Wicca regardless of being a Traditional or Solitary member. However, gaining membership to Wicca is different for Traditional practitioners than for Solitary practitioners, as my data collection and data analysis show.

Therefore, one of the sub-questions was formulated as follows: How does membership to Wicca differs from Traditional practitioners to Solitary practitioners?

Following the above argument, another sub-question can also be formulated. This sub-question is derived from the literature review which, as it will be explained in chapter 7, only gives definitions for religious conversion and not for religious affiliation, although, as it will be presented in chapter 3, scholars use those two terms interchangeably. My data analysis shows that Traditional Wiccans need to be analysed separately to Solitary Wiccans because each group undergoes different joining processes. Therefore, the other sub-questions were formulated as follows: What is the difference between religious conversion and religious affiliation?; and How do those two processes characterise the two Wiccan groups?

Alongside the research question and the other sub-questions, this research took into consideration some of the influential factors, proposed by scholars (Gooren, 2010), that could facilitate religious or belief change. The factors are as follows:

1. Social factors: Analysing how proselytising strategies, social networks of friends, relative or acquaintances have influenced the individual's religious choice.

2. Contingent factors: Analysing how motivations, reasons, crisis or other circumstances have let the individual to convert.

3. Personal factors: Analysing individuals' personal background, such as personal religious experiences and childhood religious socialisation, to determine any involvement of these in the conversion process.

4. Institutional factor: Analysing any institutional characteristics of Wicca. This includes rituals, beliefs, organisation, activities, discourses or any other specific characteristics of Wicca. This factor also analyses the unpleasant characteristics of the individuals' former religions.

The overall aim of this research is to generate new knowledge about how individuals become members of this movement. In addition, it will advance the understanding of this issue by proposing a re-interpretation of Adler's (1979) concept of religion without converts through re-defining Traditional Wiccans as members who convert and Solitary Wiccans as members who affiliate. Therefore, based on the narratives presented by my interviewees, the answer to my research question shows that it is possible to affirm that Wiccans undergo a process of conversion, however it cannot be generalised to the overall population of Wiccans. This process of conversion is more likely to occur in coven members because they experience a change in identity, while Solitary practitioners experience a process of affiliation because they adjust their existing identity to the teachings of Wicca.

1.3 Importance of the study

This research is important because it covers the gaps and attempts to give a more complex answer to the research on religious conversion addressed in the first sub-section of this chapter, the Research Statement. Wicca has become a more powerful voice in the twenty-first century, especially in the Western countries, that has not received enough attention. The few studies on Wicca that try to address conversion reasoning make this research necessary. This study gives the opportunity to comprehend what older and newer generations of Wiccans are looking for in terms of belief systems, the challenges that they

have faced during this process, the outcome of their journey to become a Wiccan, and the meaning making of their new faith. This research adds value to the existing block of literature on Paganism, Wicca and religious change by proposing a differentiation between the concept of conversion and the concept of affiliation. It also adds value by separately analysing Traditional Wiccans from Solitary Wiccans because by doing so it shows that the groups, although practising and having the same belief, are different from a couple points of view, and hence, uncovers hidden aspects of (1) how membership to Wicca is gained and (2) of conversion-affiliation patterns for each group.

1.4 Overview of Methodology

My qualitative research was based on 32 in-depth interviews designed to explore and understand how individuals become Wiccan members. The outcome of this study shows that members undergo two different processes, which will be analysed further in the next three analysis chapters. The first process is that of conversion, which is typical for Traditional Wiccans and a discussion of this aspect will be fully examined in the next first chapter of analysis. The second process is that of affiliation, which is typical for Solitary practitioners and a discussion of this aspect will be fully discussed in the second chapter of analysis. The main method to study the conversion/affiliation processes was the semi-structured interview. This research had a flexible design which allowed more freedom during my data collection period. It was also flexible because the variables I was researching were not quantitatively measurable. The qualitative method was extremely useful for this type of study because it helped tracking down the entire progression of events which the adherents underwent through their transition into a Wiccan member. The qualitative method helped provide personal and explicit information about feelings, beliefs, behaviours

and opinions of individuals. Such information was effective in identifying factors which might have detrimental roles in the conversion/affiliation processes, and which otherwise might not be evident, such as the influence of social networks. Another main advantage for using the semi-structured interview was that I had the opportunity to produce a comparative conversion/affiliation analysis between Traditional and Solitary Wiccans. The fieldwork was conducted from February to July 2018, followed by a two month period of transcribing the interviews and then centralising and organising the data.

This study combines four *conversion models*: three are based on previous studies of Wiccan conversion (affiliation) (Adler, 1979; Luhrmann, 1989; Harrington, 2002) and one is a conversion career model based on changes in faith practices (Gooren, 2010). Adler (1979), Luhrmann (1989) and Harrington (2002) are important in understanding the main reasons people chose to become Wiccans. These are key studies that focus on Wicca and try to give different explanations to why individuals convert and how they experience these changes. Adler's study is important because it is the first to introduce the idea of individuals' conversions as "coming-home" experience. Luhrmann tries to explain that the belief in magic happens *accidentally* or *by chance*; and that once an individual starts to believe in the existence of a magical structure then this leads to an overall belief in magic. Harrington bases her argument on two previews studies and agrees that there is no conversion process to Wicca, but only conversion motifs that lead people to change their faith. The justification for using these three studies is based on the fact that they have drawn the most academic attention and seem to be widely accepted within the Pagan studies. Another justification is based on the outcome of my personal findings, which to a certain degree correspond with their overall arguments. Gooren's conversion career model is mainly based on mainstream

religions, but his five-level classification of religious commitment is useful as a background approach. Gooren provides a more complete model based on a summary of previous conversion process models. The classification includes (1) pre-affiliation, (2) affiliation, (3) conversion, (4) confession, and (5) disaffiliation; and includes a range of factors (such as institutional, cultural, personal, social and contingent) which are influential across the levels. I find Gooren's model highly applicable for my study because it presents itself as a multifactorial approach. The main level that I am most interested in for my study is the affiliation one because it is the most applicable to my own findings.

While I acknowledge the existence and importance of other forms of modern witchcraft (such as Hedge Witchcraft, Urban Witchcraft, Art Witchcraft, and Traditional Witchcraft), this study only focuses on Wicca and on the journey to becoming a Wiccan.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

I selected three online Wicca groups as my case studies, but I only received permission to reach out to participants from two of them. I selected these groups because they appeared to have the most active participants in group discussions and seem more open to discussing various topics. They also showed a rapid growth in member subscription as compared to other groups I was already part of. The *Wicca for Beginners!* group was founded in December 2009 and at the beginning of this study it counted 17,377 members; the *Solitary Wiccans* group was founded in January 2017 and counted 15,415 members. Within a year after my fieldwork was over the groups counted 18,335 members and 30,397 respectively. The groups are closed groups, which means one cannot read or post anything on the online group unless one is a member. Their members are from different countries, of various ages

and social backgrounds. I selected my participants based on judgemental, purposive and snowball sampling. Following this, my corpus of qualitative data is mostly based on individuals living or coming from Western English-speaking countries (such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia) and who are former members of various Christian denominations (such as Catholicism and other Protestant branches).

The study is exploratory, and its findings ought not be considered as universally applicable or exhaustive. The in-depth interviews offer rich insights about the belief in the Wiccan mythos and its possible relation to metaphysics and the data collected could suggest a definite pattern, however, the outcome of the research cannot be generalized to the population due to its limited sample size. Unlike any quantitative research, interviews as a qualitative research method give voice to individuals' meaning making of the world, however an interviewee has the ability to build a world the truthfulness of which is difficult to check, unless other methods, such as participant observation, are included. Thus, the outcome of this study is limited to the conversion narratives presented by the segment of population described above.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The following study contains of seven chapters:

Chapter 1 presents a brief introduction of the study. This chapter presents the major trends that have been identified in the study of religious conversion to Wicca, the research question and the objective(s) of this study, the importance and need for this study and a brief overview of the methodology used to address the research problem. Finally, this

chapter also presents the delimitations of the study, giving some brief details about the focus of this research.

Chapter 2 acts as a post-introduction chapter that presents in detail the roots and definitions of Paganism and Wicca. The purpose of this chapter is to trace the development of Wicca and to provide a context for the overall argument of this thesis, which is to demonstrate the difference in becoming a member of Wicca, either by converting like Traditional Wiccans or affiliating like Solitary Wiccans. By setting out the circumstances in which Wicca was formed I can demonstrate, as it will be discussed in the next chapters, that Wicca is a movement more complex than a religion without converts, dogma and authority, as Margot Adler (1979) suggested, and that although usually interchangeably used, conversion and affiliation are two distinctive processes that characterise differently the adherence to Wicca. To demonstrate those, this chapter is composed of two parts. The first part presents key historical events and accounts of witchcraft and witch hunts during Early Modern Europe. The purpose of this part is to show the early accounts from which Wicca has taken inspiration or has continued emerging from. The second part of this chapter follows up the presentation of these accounts with an analysis on the development of Wicca as set out by its so-called founding father Gerald Gardner. The importance of this section lays in setting out the framework in which adherents set their beliefs, for instance, showing the different traditions and branches of Wicca that adherents follow, such as the Gardnerian or Alexandrian Traditions. This section will also discuss the New Age movement and its links to modern Paganism and Wicca. Although it is questionable whether Wicca equates with the New Age or not, this discussion is important because it shows how Wicca can be analysed as a religious movement, as it will be shown later in chapter 5 and 6, similar to any

other cult. Setting out these characteristics, therefore, permits in my later analysis to demonstrate that if Wicca, and especially Traditional Wicca, has communal practices and dogma, as opposed to Margot Adler's argument, then Wicca is a religious movement with individuals that convert and affiliate. This chapter traces the development of Wicca in order to provide context for this thesis' argument.

Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical framework of this research and presents an extensive literature review on religious conversion, religious change and the factors and contexts that facilitate such processes. The first section of this chapter reviews the multiple definitions of religious conversion, such as the different levels (macro, micro and meso) of conversion contexts, or religious conversion as a gradual or sudden event. This purpose of this section is to give an overview of the general theoretical frameworks that are constantly applied and discussed by scholars. Accounting for multiple definitions of religious conversion is important for this thesis because it demonstrates that this process is fluid and has no set definition. This aspect of the problem is important for chapter 7, because it allows the distinction between affiliation and conversion, which is the main argument of this thesis, to be made. The second sub-section narrows down the discussion on religious conversion by reviewing diverse conceptualisations in relation to Paganism and Wicca. This section will introduce a number of theories aimed to shed light on the conversion process of Pagans. The purpose of this subsection is to introduce what scholars have studied and proposed so far vis-à-vis conversion to Paganism and lay out the theoretical framework which I will contest in the analysis chapter. Out of the theories presented in this section, Adler's (1989) perspective is of most importance because her argument about Wicca being a religion without converts stands as the basis of this thesis. Therefore, as it will be demonstrated in

the later chapters, Adler's argument is valuable and valid for just a specific type of Wiccans, but not for all practitioners. The third and last sub-section describes the major sociological and psychological components recurring in religious conversion theories. Those components are consistently discussed by scholars as being important drivers for religious change, such as social integration, the roles of religion, emotion and identity. All these components are also recurring drivers present in my interviewees' narratives. The most important component is the role of identity because it stands as a decisive factor in the later discussion found in the analysis chapter where the difference between conversion and affiliation will be made. Identifying the multiple definitions of religious conversion and components of religious conversion, alongside issues surround them provide a starting point for my argument that Traditional Wiccans convert (chapter 5) and Solitary Wiccans affiliate (chapter 6) to be accurately measured.

Chapter 4 describes the research methods used for this study. It also elaborates on the way data was collected and how data was analysed. The first part of this chapter will introduce the research design and explain how the use of qualitative methods was the most suitable for my research in order to have a better understanding and give a complex answer to the issue of religious change. The method used for this study was the semi-structured interview; this is further argued in the following section of this chapter alongside a table containing the profile of my participants. Another part of this chapter explains pre-fieldwork, and how fieldwork was conducted. It also explains some ethical issues I encountered and how they were dealt with. Finally, this chapter ends with describing the process of centralising and organising the data into major topics and sub-topics and how these were later used to delimitate affiliation narratives from disaffiliation narratives.

Chapter 5 is the first analysis chapter and will challenge Adler's (1979) category of conversion and offer alternative accounts for interpreting her model. I will argue that if interpreted in certain ways, Wicca adherents either convert or affiliate, and that conversion models can be valuable tools for investigating membership to Wicca. Nonetheless, this chapter will introduce the idea that Traditional Wiccans convert. This categorisation of Traditional Wiccans as converts is important for my analysis as it demonstrates a first step in the distinctiveness between Traditional and Solitary Wiccans. It will argue that this analytical category is, in fact, a useful component which facilitates the comparison of Traditional Wicca to other systems of belief as a response to secularisation. In this chapter I will demonstrate the probable influence of the New Age spirituality over the shared doctrine and practices of Traditional Wicca. By doing so, I demonstrate that Traditional Wiccans are individuals who convert even if Traditional Wicca's dogma is less rigid and strict than that of other cults. I also suggest that if Traditional Wiccans can be considered converts, then they can be analysed through the use of various conversion models presented in the literature review chapter. One of the challenges in understanding conversion in Traditional adherents, as opposed to Solitary adherents who affiliate as it will be demonstrated in the next chapter, is to understand what conversion itself means from the perspective of my interviewees. For the Traditional Wiccans, being part of a coven, going through the initiation process and participating in regular meetings are key features of their membership to the group. These key features suggest that Traditional Wiccans undergo a complex process of conversion, just as any other cult member.

Chapter 6 is the second analysis chapter and continues the line of argument presented in the previous chapter. The chapter argues that conversion is a diffuse process and that

Solitary Wicca and Traditional Wicca should be considered two distinctive entities that need to be analysed separately. If it can be argued that Traditional Wiccans share commonality with other cults in terms of conversion, then in this chapter I argue that Solitary practitioners do not show such commonality. Solitary practitioners affiliate to the movement because a conversion process would be meaningless to such individuals. I argue that individual agency plays a more important role in the meaning-making of solitary practitioners than the sense of community would. As a consequence, solitary practitioners re-enchant their lives through practice in solitude and any type of practice that has the slightest resemblance to organised, dogmatic religious institutions only contribute to their lapse of faith and disenchantment. Chapter five and six complement each other by analysing both sides of the conversion-affiliation process and try to give a more comprehensive and complex answer to issues regarding adherence to Wicca. These chapters' analyses show formerly hidden facets of Wicca by situating Traditional and Solitary practices in different contexts – conversion and affiliation. The purpose of this chapter is to show how different the practice of Wicca is between Traditional and Solitary adherents. By setting out the problem within Weber's theoretical framework, authority and disenchantment are core elements in analysing the structure of Wicca. The chapter demonstrates how Adler (1979) has too simplistically analysed authority within Wicca and how she has overlooked the charismatic authority that is passed down to coven *leaders*, priests and priestesses. Specifically, it argues that these leaders exercise their authoritative power within the coven and how this power restrains members' autonomy and agency. Although seeking to liberate themselves of moral constraints acquired from past mainstream churches and searching to regain spiritual agency, Traditional Wiccans seem to re-join a denomination that still

exercises authority but at a lesser level. The purpose of this chapter is not show that Traditional Wiccans are wrong in choosing what and how to practice, but to show that Adler's idea of a non-dogmatic and non-authoritative Wicca is rather more applicable in the analysis of Solitary practitioners. Also applying Weber's (1922[1978]) notion of disenchantment shows how individuals joining covens are the ones disappointed with the results of scientific progress, dismayed by the structures of organised mainstream religions and established churches, while Solitary Wiccans are those individuals joining Wicca as a movement and searching the path to sacredness on their own because they carry a double disappointment. One is similar with that of Traditional Wiccans and the other is expressed through their view on covens which reminds them of the structures of organised mainstream religions that they have tried to distance themselves from. Based on the analysis of Solitary Wiccans, this chapter has set out the problem for the following chapter that will discuss and conceptualise the difference between conversion and affiliation.

Chapter 7 represents the third and final analysis chapter and discusses the difference between conversion and affiliation, and why these notions are important in analysing Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans. In this chapter I show that, although the two notions – conversion and affiliation – can be synonyms and on multiple occasions, they are used interchangeably. For my set of data and analysis they portray religious membership to Wicca differently; and that each notion bears different understandings and show a different level of engagement to Wicca as a religious denomination. This chapter argues that those two processes, conversion and affiliation, although having almost similar meanings, they describe two distinctive ways of gaining membership to Wicca. To do so, this chapter follows up the discussion on the previous two chapters and, based on the argumentation

from these two chapters, the following chapter will argue that a process of conversion better characterises and would be more favourable to show how Traditional Wiccans become members of this movement. Basing my arguments on different religious conversion careers and religious conversion theoretical frameworks provided by a wide range of scholars and combining them with narratives collected from my respondents, I come to the conclusion that because Traditional Wiccans undergo extensive rituals and process during their spiritual journey within a community of faith. In this case is represented by the coven, those adherents not only experience a change in their belief, but they also experience a change in their identity, a core feature found in religious conversion theories. This chapter also analyses Solitary Wicca and the characteristics of the meaning of the word affiliation. Although there is little to no academic evidence to show this differentiation between religious affiliation and religious conversion, I base my argument on the description of the word affiliation as provided by the Oxford Dictionary and not on the suggested connotation provided by scholars, which is similar in meaning to religious conversion. I, therefore, come to the conclusion that Solitary Wiccans affiliate to the movement because they do not experience a change in identity, as Traditional Wiccans do, but they build on their current identity and fundamental inner and personal views by articulating a spiritual reconstruction of Wicca's teachings. In this chapter I also give a general overview of how individuals join the Wiccan movement and suggest that being either a Traditional or a Solitary member does not mean that one is more Wiccan than the other. I also discuss my theoretical background and the context I created to analyse Wicca and Wiccans. This section brings into discussion the post-structuralism and interpretivist approaches, which were used to support my arguments that there is no universal truth, but multiple interpretations, and that it is

difficult for a social scientist to discover the truth because lived experiences are created on 'situated' experiences.

Chapter 8 is the last section of this study and it represents the conclusion and final thoughts. It elaborates upon the findings presented in the analysis and shows how this study adds value and fits well with the existing literature on religious conversion and Paganism studies. This is done by showing how this study complements the current views on conversion to Wicca because it proposes a re-interpretation of Adler's (1979) argument by partly applying her theory to Solitary Wiccans, arguing that she is right to say those members do not convert, however, according to my set of data, it would be more suitable to characterise those members as affiliates rather than non-converts. This chapter will also emphasise on the importance of Harrington's (2002) study, because, as Adler, she argues that Wiccans do not convert but they present conversion motifs, which partly coincide with my findings. My findings show a regular presence of a pattern of reasons that indicate my interviewees' wish to leave their former religious groups and join Wicca. Those reasons fit well the ones presented by religious conversion scholars, described in chapter 3. However, Harrington's study, as Adler's and others alike, focuses on initiated Wiccans (i.e. Traditional Wiccans) to conclude that Wiccans do not convert but only present conversion motifs. This argument shows a limited or narrow analysis. By including in my analysis individuals from both groups, Traditional and Solitary, I was able to have a better and more complex picture of how individuals become Wiccans. Therefore, I was able to generate new knowledge and present a new conversion-affiliation facet or process to Wicca. Finally, in this chapter I also emphasise the idea that Wicca, as presented in guiding books, by scholars and by my interviewees, is a free and secretive religious/spiritual group. I suggest that Wicca holds an

interesting but almost paradoxical position of being both religious and non-religious, which makes it appealing to a wider public. I also insist again on the idea that the type of Wiccan one individual chooses to be, Traditional or Solitary, does not reflect that they are more Wiccan than the others. I thus conclude that the differentiation I made between Traditional and Solitary Wiccans throughout this study was to demonstrate that Wiccans experience different processes (conversion or affiliation) and not at all to diminish one practice from the other. I finish the last chapter of this thesis with some final thoughts and a self-reflexive exercise in which I describe the progression and outcome of this study.

CHAPTER 2
THE CRAFT – DEFINITIONS AND ROOTS

This chapter presents the background of Paganism in order to provide context vis-à-vis the emergence of Wicca in the mid-twentieth century. The purpose of this chapter is to trace the development of Wicca and to provide a context for the overall argument of this thesis, which is to demonstrate the difference in becoming a member of Wicca, either by converting like Traditional Wiccans or affiliating like Solitary Wiccans. By setting out the circumstances in which Wicca was formed I can demonstrate, as will be discussed in the next chapters, that Wicca is a movement more complex than a religion without converts, dogma and authority, as Margot Adler (1979) suggested. And that although usually interchangeably used, conversion and affiliation are two distinctive processes that characterise differently the adherence to Wicca. To demonstrate these circumstances, this chapter is composed of two parts. The first part presents key historical events and accounts of witchcraft and witch hunts during Early Modern Europe. The purpose of this part is to show the early accounts from which Wicca has taken inspiration or continued as an emerging from, and from which contemporary Wiccans establish a historical and contemporary identity. The second part of this chapter follows up the presentation of these accounts with an analysis over the development of Wicca as set out by its so-called founding father Gerald Gardner. The importance of this section lays in setting out the framework in which adherence set their beliefs on. For instance, showing the different traditions and branches of Wicca that adherents follow, such as the Gardnerian or Alexandrian Traditions.

This section will also discuss the New Age movement and its links to modern Paganism and Wicca. Although it is questionable whether Wicca equates with the New Age or not, this discussion is important because it shows how Wicca can be analysed as a religious movement, as will be shown later in chapters 5 and 6, similar to any other cult. Setting out these characteristics, therefore, permits in my later analysis to demonstrate that if Wicca, and especially Traditional Wicca, has communal practices and dogma, as opposed to Margot Adler's argument, then Wicca is a religious movement with individuals that convert and affiliate. This chapter traces the development of Wicca in order to provide context for this thesis' argument. This chapter servers two purposes. One purpose is to presents the historical context from which contemporary Wiccans draw their understanding of Wicca, and another purpose is to lay out the more formal Gardner framework that codified Wicca more strongly. This chapter establishes how the historical context of Wicca supports both a conversion, and affiliation model, which will be further discussed in the analysis chapters.

2.1 Early Modern Witchcraft

The following part discusses and analyses the concept of Paganism. Because Wicca is considered to be part of Paganism, this section will give a brief overview on the early accounts of the meaning of Paganism, witchcraft, and the decline of witch hunts.

Paganism, modern Paganism or Neo-Paganism, are umbrella terms that cover a range of religious movements that are nature-oriented and that strive to experiment with and revitalize pre-Christian polytheistic religions. Etymologically speaking, the word 'pagan(ism)' has its roots in Latin, *pagus,* meaning village or a rural area. A *paganus* was a villager, a peasant or a 'country-dweller' (Hunt, 2003: 147; Magliocco, 2013: 150; Hutton, 1999: xiv;

Stramiska 2005: 6). Thus, the word pagan initially did not serve as a religious designation; but it was just during the fourth century, after Christianity became the Roman Empire's dominant religion, that *pagan* started to have other connotations (Stramiska, 2005: 6; Pearson 2002: 18; Magliocco, 2013: 150). *Pagani* were now perceived as those individuals that had not taken part in the army of God (*militia Christi*) and who had not been baptised, thus being heretics. As Stramiska (2005) demonstrates, the Christianization of the Roman Empire, the prohibition of any other religion and the imperial support offered to Christians for establishing communities and churches in urban areas, had left the *pagus* districts (the rural areas) to be associated with the former traditional polytheistic religion. These Pagan Romans were perceived as opponents to the Roman Empire's new religion, while their polytheistic traditions were framed as hostile. The worship of any non-biblical form of deity was an abomination. Therefore, the word pagan was outlined as a pejorative term, used by Christians to define and defame "traditions that they wished to replace with their own religion" (Stramiska, 2005: 6). As nature-venerating practitioners, pagans' deities "are meant to be personifications of nature" (Pearson, 2002: 15), usually as identified within their ancient pantheons, such as ancient religions of Europe (classical Greece or Rome; Celtic or Norse), or other indigenous religions of the Americas or Africa (Egyptian mythology, Navaho, Azande). The roots of modern Paganism can be traced into an enchanted macrocosm where indigenous and ancient religions alike are blended, such as Egyptian, Roman, Ossetian, Paleo-Balkan, Inca, Norse mythologies or others alike. But to examine this macrocosm, it must be taken into account that secular and religious series of movements have constantly interrupted these traditional concepts. These practices have continued to exist in vernacular groups through customs that correlate with seasonal festivals, such as

Christmas or Easter. Sabina Magliocco (2013) argues that contemporary neopagans are in fact adherents of new religious movements that originate no later than the nineteenth or early twentieth century. She continues by arguing that modern Paganism has been studied as a revitalization phenomenon, in which new worldviews are introduced in society through social movements that emerge at certain period of times which mark social transformation. Modern Paganism expresses a new identity through a practice of reclamation, by recasting and revaluing depreciated traditions or previously rejected cultural forms.

A first attempt to revive the concept of paganism can be observed during the European Enlightenment period. Although writings about paganism have existed since Ancient Greece and Roman Empire times, modern paganism only occurred during late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, within the context of secularization during the Enlightenment era and Romantic movement (Kirby, 2013; Gaskill, 2010). These two together contributed to the increasing interest in legend, folklore and local historical texts. Sabina Magliocco (2013: 151) argues that this epoch was “a period of great religious and spiritual ferment in Europe and North America”, while Roy Porter (2001: 37) argues that the “eighteenth century marks a major stage in the secularisation of Europe”. Peter Gay (1969) subtitles one of his study of the Enlightenment period as the “rise of modern paganism”. Keith Thomas (1983) perceived the eighteenth century as a period of *disenchantment*, arguing that society will stop understanding the world as a place full of spiritual and magical powers operating within a mysterious cosmos. Thomas believed that the Enlightenment did not see an end of religious belief, but a change in religious values and a shift in religious conceptions. Michel Vouvelle (1973), in analysing the practices in the south of France, sees a decline in religious belief and describes it as *dechristianisation*.

Gay (1969), Thomas (1983) and Vovelle (1973) have all argued that the Enlightenment witnessed either a radical shift in religious context and meaning, or an absolute decline in it. This view is sustained by the analysis of Hegel (1770-1831; in Hinchman, 1984), who pinpointed religious problems as emblematic fundamental shifts in Enlightenment thought. He believed that the Enlightenment was an inherently religious movement. For Hegel (see Hinchman, 1984), the Enlightenment and Reformation served one same objective, namely human spiritual freedom. Nonetheless, Hegel believes that the Enlightenment has mistaken in arguing that credence should be evaluated by rationality. Thus, the Enlightenment failed to deliver a different set of belief that could possibly supply for the previous religious faith, but, instead, has changed the question from which is the *truth* into which is the *utility* of religion. Other voices argued critically against the whole existence of religion. Voltaire (in Porter, 2001) crusaded against any organised religion. He supported (tolerated) the idea of religion solely for its utilitarian practice of producing social stability, but never because it was true. The *religion* Voltaire envisioned was a non-dogmatic system of belief that would perceive God as a benevolent, rational entity whose utility was to act as a guarantor of morality and justice amongst men. Julien de la Mettrie (1747) argued that men[1] do not possess such a thing as a soul. He believed that the surrounding physical world is what gives men knowledge, through sense impressions. Baron d'Holbach (1771) thought religion to be an infantile precursor of science, and that men need to abandon it completely and reunite with nature. The Enlightenment presented a wide variety of answers to organised religion, ranging from the Voltairean hostility towards religion to more tamed views of a reconciliation between rationality and natural law. The argument that the Enlightenment stands at the roots of modern Paganism is considerably more complex than the anti-

[1] Here referring to both men and women.

religious thinkers' discourses. Outram (2005) argues that the legacy of this century is the attempt to promote religious creativity, new religious ideas and toleration. Two important measures for toleration that are of high importance are (1) the Toleration Act passed by the English Parliament in 1689 (this act was decreasing the legal penalties against individuals who were not part of the Church of England), and (2) the Edict of Versailles (also known as the Edict of Tolerance) signed by Louis XVI in 1787 (this act was giving non-Catholics the right to freely practice their religions, together with civil and legal status) (Outram, 2005; Baird, 2006). In addition to religious tolerance, Magliocco (2013: 152) argues that the European Enlightenment has rediscovered elements of Classical culture, such as Greek and Roman literature, deities and art. England, for instance, had various orders of druids emerge, that attempted to reinterpret the ancient priests of Gaul and Britain, who acted as guardians of secret wisdom. Although such societies were not intended to be religious in nature, they did nevertheless present a powerful spiritual element; for instance, druids conducted rituals at certain prehistoric monuments, such as Stonehenge (a monument that was thought to be a druid construction) (Magliocco; 2013: 152).

A more positive revival of witchcraft and magic can be seen during the nineteenth century. Historian Thomas Waters (2019: 150) argues that

> "during the later nineteenth century, at the fringe of respectable enquiry, scholars began to reshape and reinterpret magic. They did this by creating new, highly potent images of witches and their allies. Initially, these new interpretations of witches and devils were merely theoretical. In time though, after decades of cultural incubation, the motifs became markers of personal identity, as well as the focus of novel magical practices and religious rituals"

Witchcraft was an integral part of the medieval world and it was not until the late eighteenth century that it had been finally decriminalised. The nineteenth century's

educated society no longer feared witches, but, on the contrary, was rather fascinated by this subject (Tuczay, 2007). This is very much due to the nineteenth century's Romantic revival of nature, magic and folklore. Among the most well-known folklorists was Jacob Grimm (1835), whose utmost relevance regarding witchcraft studies is his belief that he had discovered in the witch trial materials cues of a Germanic pagan cult that dated pre-Christianity. Although he did not believe that those persecuted were surviving followers of this pagan cult, his ideas of the women killed during witch-hunt as 'wise women' were highly influential over the feminist waves that occurred 140 years later (Tuczay, 2007). Spokesman for the clerical interests, Karl Jarcke (1828) believed that the witches were indeed adherents of a Germanic nature religion, who have been unrightfully persecuted by the Church as Devil worshipers. In addition to this, German clerical polemicist Franz Mone (1839) argued that while moving south-eastwards, Germanic tribes encountered pagan cults that were worshiping Hecate and Dionysus. These cults have been introduced to the two deities by Greek slaves. When the Germanic tribes migrated westwards, they brought with them a hybrid religion that incorporated customs and beliefs inspired by the pagan cults. This hybrid religion had as its god a goat-like entity, and was engaged in anti-social practices, such as nocturnal orgies or sorcery. Mone (1839) also argues that these pagan cults managed to survive among the more rustic or rural areas up into the Christian era. They were constituted as a secret society and were only revealed through the witch trials. Another important Romantic voice that describes the practices of the so-called witches is Josef Görres in his *The Christian Mystik* (Die christliche Mystik) (1840-42). His interpretations on witchcraft and demoniacs suggest that witches did exist and described their practices, such as the Sabbaths or the night flight, as being real.

Jarcke (1828), Mone (1839) and Görres' (1840-42) works, as opposed to Grimm's (1835), suggest that the individuals persecuted during the early modern times were indeed part of a surviving pagan religion and that their practices were nonetheless acts of heresy, thus, making the persecutions somehow justifiable.[2] In response to their lack of compassion towards those persecuted as witches, the radical French historian Jules Michelet publishes in 1862 *La Sorciere* (The Witch or The Sorceress); work that achieved the greatest success at that time because it presented the *witch* as an archetypal figure. Michelet's response to Mone and Jarcke showed his belief in that witchcraft adherents were medieval peasants recoiling against feudalist oppression; and that Christianity should give way to a newer faith which would suit the new age. He argued that witches have represented spiritual freedom and believed that only *women* could have preserved the wisdom of the natural world, and only they would be suited for such knowledge. He described the woman as:

> "a creature of Enchantment. In virtue of regularly recurring periods of exaltation, she is a Sibyl; in virtue of love, a Magician. By the fineness of her intuitions, the cunning of her wiles—often fantastic, often beneficent—she is a Witch, and casts spells, at least and lowest lulls pain to sleep and softens the blow of calamity" (1904 [1862]: VIII)

Michelet's *La Sorciere* (1862) became a bestseller, not because of its academic accuracy, as his work and the other conservative Catholic German writers lacked a fundamental research on witch trials, but because he described how at the centre of the witch society a priestess

[2] The *study* of Witchcraft has dominated nineteenth century Europe, and although not discussed here, it does not mean that other works are of less importance when talking about the magnitude of witch trials, such as the ones listed below. As the purpose of this chapter is to give a brief background, the sources cited above are intended to give the shortest and most logical line of events that have led to the formation of Wicca.
Soldan W G (1843) *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse*
Hansen J (1900) *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozesse im Mittelalter, unde die Entstehung der Grossen Hexenverfolgung*
Mackay C (1841) *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*
Scott W (1830) *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*
Bancroft G (1834-74) *History of the United States*
Lecky W E H (1865) *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*

leads, and that female adherents were physicians that possessed great healing skills (Tuczay, 2007; Hutton, 1999, 2002). Michelet promoted the idea suggested by the two Catholic polemicists, Jarcke and Mone, that the witches were part of a pre-Christian nature religion, worshiping a pagan horned god of fertility, called Pan. Based on this interpretation, medieval clerics have persecuted witches because they have misinterpreted Pan for the Christian devil, and believed that such adherents were practicing *maleficium*.

Before investigating Wicca, one should inquire why witchcraft desisted and eventually stopped being prosecuted. There are multiple reasons, but none of them can provide a complete answer. The easiest answer would be to formulate a statement that considers the Enlightenment as ensuring the finale demise of witch hunting and trials for witchcraft during the eighteenth century. However, it can also be argued that individuals believed they were quite rational in the previous century when they were marching onto killing sprees to eradicate the so-believed agents of Satan and the concept of Enlightenment would have had no meaning to any inhabitant of that time. The processes that ended Witch-hunts and the persecutions of “cunning-folks” were gradual and varied. The gradual increase of urbanisation, as well as the belief in superstition that begun to weaken, especially in the non-rural areas, are important factors that led to the decline of witch-hunting (Maxwell-Stuart, 2001). For instance, judicial procedures that started during the 1640s in Paris and later spread across France, as well as the centralisation brought with it, facilitated the removal of zeal and power that officials with less importance had. Such ideas and ideals spread across Europe. German universities requested ancillary caution when fomenting witchcraft trials and forbid the use of torture as a means of interrogating. In the Kingdom of Great Britain, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth Oliver Cromwell’s judges were shocked

by the conditions found upon their arrival in Scotland. Trials were expensive and their costs were increasing, therefore places with limited number of inhabitants, such as villages, found it cheaper to not prosecute individuals on flimsy, insubstantial evidence. Moreover, the defence advocate became more conspicuous, trials were questionable, therefore individuals' chances of acquittal grew (Maxwell-Stuart; 2001: 107-108). Another example that led to a weakening in the belief in superstition is through the way in which entertainment portrayed witches and the supernatural. During the seventeenth century, dramatists and stage plays promoted a more sceptical image of the witch in which the personification of such individuals was mostly used as a general exploitation of superstition, mythical creatures and supernatural (Purkiss, 1996).

It is also the case that witchcraft, as presented in early Modern Europe, 'died out' because as Waters (2019: 52) puts it "in an age of real and perceived unrest, the eradication of witchcraft was thought of as tending towards the improvement, and pacification, of the populace". However, the late Victorian era saw witchcraft as a superstition that was not "requiring urgent eradication" but like a "species of 'folklore' – as something erroneous but also authentic, ancient and traditional" which was modernised by "further absorbing pseudo-scientific terminology and ideas from new types of occultism" (Waters, 2019: 72).

2.2 Development of Wicca

Following the discussion on early accounts regarding witchcraft and Paganism, the next part will investigate the emergence and development of Wicca. This part will also briefly discuss the New Age movement in relation to Wicca. These themes will set a context for the following chapters that will look at how Wicca can be analysed as a religion with converts,

more specifically on the different conversion careers and whether different Wiccans convert differently to this movement.

Michelet's (1862) interpretation of witch hunts was later popularised by Margaret Murray, a British folklorist, in *The Witch Cult of Western Europe* (1923) and in *The God of the Witches* (1933). Murray's work was predominantly focused on Egyptology, but also studied in parallel ancient religions. Murray (1923) believed in the existence of a pre-Christian fertility cult honouring a horned god, representing nature's powers, which at rites was usually personified by a male adherent. She described how these cults were organised as covens by thirteen men or women. They were periodically holding 'sabbats' where they would practice different rites, such as feasting, ritualised sexual intercourse, sacrifice of usually animals but also children, and the paying of homage to their horned god. She argues that such practices were performed to promote fertility:

> "The chants used by the witches, the dances, the burning of the god and the broadcast scattering of his ashes, all point to the fact that this was a fertility cult; and this is the view taken by those contemporary writers who gave a more or less comprehensive account of the religion and ritual" (Murray; 1921: 169)

Another important contribution to European paganism was presented later in 1934 when she publishes '*Female Fertility figures*', where she introduces the idea that the cravings of naked women portrayed on some medieval churches were depictions of pagan goddesses of fertility. To this Waters (2019: 218) comments that her "pagan witch-cult thesis was combined with rituals drawn from sources as diverse as freemasonry, high Victorian occultism, eastern spirituality, nudism, Malayan knife-work and domestic folklore". Murray's

interpretations were later *re-used* and *re-invented* by one who was to become the founding father of one of the modern western Paganism branches. Most authors suggest that witchcraft has been reinvented by Gerald B Gardner (1884-1964) through his development of a mixture of beliefs inspired from ancient religious practices and magic (Doyle White, 2015; Waters, 2015; Clifton, 2006; Gaskill, 2010; Maxwell-Stewart, 2000; Kirby, 2013; Hunt, 2003). In the 1930s, after retiring from Malaya where he worked as a civil servant, Gardner returned to his home country, England, where he claimed he met a local woman, called 'Old Dorothy' (Dorothy Clutterbuck), who was the leader of a group of people that were practicing a form of witchcraft and had regular meetings in New Forest, Hampshire. They claimed that they were worshiping pre-Christian deities, that they were not to be associated with Satanism or an anti-Christian cult, and that the spells they were casting had altruistic purposes. 'Old Dorothy' initiated Gardner into her ancient religion at her domicile in 1939. And later, in 1946, Gardner became part of a Rosicrucian group, *Ordo Templi Orientis* (The Order of the Eastern Temple), where he was initiated by Aleister Crowley, a highly influential figure over occultism and counter-culture. Between the two, Gardner was more interested in the former, in presenting the world his surviving witch coven he had discovered. The year 1951 marked the end of witch trails, after the 1735 Witchcraft Act was repealed. The act had stipulated that claiming to possess magical powers or to practising witchcraft was a crime.[3] Until 1951 people like Gerald Gardner, Charles Leland, Dion Fortune, and Dennis Wheatley used fiction to write about witchcraft (Waters, 2019; Gaskill, 2010; Hunt, 2003). Such works kept the esoteric religions and the occult beliefs viable for new generations. Sociologist Marcello Truzzi (1972: n.p.) argues that the "revival of interest

[3] The 1735 Witchcraft Act (passed in the Kingdom of Great Britain) proscribed witch-hunting but forbade the practice of witchcraft (to one year's imprisonment) to protect people from fraudulent fortune-tellers (Gaskill, 2010; Hutton, 1999).

in the occult and the supernatural" was of great macroscopic importance within popular culture. After 1951, the market saw an increase of more than 100% in printed books and materials about witchcraft, astrology, parapsychology, extrasensory perception, tarot, ceremonial magic and other occult related subjects. Occult novels, such as Dennis Wheatley's, were republished in new paperback editions and later filmed. Moreover, the sale of the board game Monopoly was outnumbered by those of Ouija boards[4] (Clifton, 2006). Also Hollywood studios started to explore and put more value on occult ideas by moving such films from the B-movie range (low budget) to more mainstream, high budget ones, such as *The Exorcist* (1971), *The Wicker Man* (1973) or *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) (Clifton, 2006). Another important figure that propagated witchcraft and occultism in popular culture was Paul Huson, an English screenwriter, novelist and above all a witch himself. One of his most influential work is the TV series *Tucker's Witch* (1982-83), a comedy-detective film in which one of the lead characters who possess psychic powers helps in solving police cases. The end of the twentieth century reawakened fascination with witchcraft, magic and other fantastic creatures, as people were more exposed to such matters within the media and popular culture. The idea of the witch became a visual package used to both entertain and frighten at the same (Gaskill, 2010). From books, advertising and drama, witches never ceased to be reinvented by exploiting all its possibilities; especially by portraying them as superhuman forces fighting for goodness and truth. However, stereotypical representations of the witch as an evil, old hag that seeks revenge and destruction still remains a popular figure exploited by Hollywood horror cinema (Cowan & Bromley, 2008: 193); a fact which in turn never ended the association of

[4] Ouija Board is a board with letters and numbers on it used by spiritualists to contact people who have passed away.

the concept of witches (as well as contemporary Pagan practitioners) with stories about sex and satanism (Gaskill, 2010: 119).

In 1954 Gardner publishes *Witchcraft Today* where he introduces the coven and gives a name to this ancient religion: *Wicca*. Authors like Hutton (1999), Pearson (2002b) and Crowley (1998) argue that the word 'Wicca' has Anglo-Saxon roots and stands for 'wise' or 'wise people', 'witch', and 'to bend' ('to shape'). Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* presented high similitudes to what Margaret Murray (1923 & 1933) was writing in her *historical* account of ancient Paganism.[5] It was so similar, that Murray herself wrote the preface to *Witchcraft Today*. As in Murray's thesis, Gardner's religion was a remnant of a western and northern European cult worshiping a fertility god; and that later practitioners were persecuted as Devil worshipers by the Christian church. Among others, what is added to the story is the dynamism of sexual polarity. Gardner speaks about the Goddess as much as he speaks about the Horned God.

Gardner formed his own witches' coven in the 1950s and appeared on numerous television and radio programs where he would promote his religion (Magliocco, 2013: 152; Pearson, 2002a). Wicca was initially very successful in English-speaking countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States; and later in countries where English was

[5] Murray consistently published for the anthropological journal known as Journal Man during the 1920's and hypothesized that there was a pan-European Witch cult which continued to exist from the Palaeolithic era into modern times. Murray described, in one of her articles, the hierarchical structure of such a Witch coven, in which she identified the male leader as "the divine man, the incarnate God, known to the Christian recorders as 'the Devil'" (Murray 1919: 137). Author of *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979) Margot Adler, cited a couple of authors who were critical of Murray's work; such authors are the historians H.R. Trevor-Roper and Norman Cohn (Adler 1981: 46-54). Murray's work is based on evidence and documentation collected under torture during Early Modern Europe, when Inquisition and witch hunting were at its peak. This, then, may suggest that the validity of her data is questionable. Scholars like Ronald Hutton (1999) and Vivanne Crowley (1998) argue that Margaret Murray's works, although intended to, are not historical in nature. In *Witches and Neighbours* (1996: 37) Robert Briggs refers to her work as 'complete nonsense', while Hutton (2000: 196) declares that 'she ruthlessly ignored in her sources anything which did not support her case, and, by removing it from the extracts which she printed, she was effectively altering the tone and import of documents'. However, Murray's work has been very influential for spiritual feminists and Gerald Gardner's writings alike, thus it had an important input to the Wiccan movement.

commonly used as a second language, such as the Scandinavian countries or the Netherlands (Crowley, 1998: 171). Joanne Pearson (2002: 135) describes Wicca as

> "a modern-day, esoteric, mystery religion, adopting the structure of secret, magical societies inherited from the occult revival of the fin de siècle. Wicca thus creates and maintains extremely resilient boundaries, operating through unstructured, changeable networks containing small, closed autonomous groups, called covens, with no overarching organisational structure".

There is little evidence today, besides Gardner's own testimony and his students' claims, attesting the existence of any coven pre-dating the 1950's, when Gardner founded his coven. In this fashion, Linda Jencson (1989: 3) argues that "the veracity of Gardner's claims to have found secret, organized, traditional covens are doubted today, even by most of his [followers]". In addition to this, Ethan Doyle White (2015: 144) suggests that

> "Wiccan literature regularly talks of an undefined historical period in which the veneration of pre-Christian gods continued in defiance of the governing Christian establishment, presenting this pagan survival as the ancestor of Wicca. In reality, Wicca is a twentieth century development, the creation of romantically inclined British esotericists in the 1940s and 1950s, perhaps with some earlier origins in the 1930s."

However, Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* and other Wiccan texts written by his followers were widely published and inspired people around the world to practice the teachings of Wicca, especially in England, Australia, and the United States (Farrar and Farrar 1984; Buckland 2002). Barner-Barry (2005: 36) comment that "[Gardner] founded what is now known [by practitioners] as the Gardnerian tradition, considered by many to be the dominant tradition in contemporary Wicca". For many followers, Gardner's writings and testimonies are foundational to Wiccan rituals. The end of the twentieth century not only marks the development of modern witchcraft (and herein all the other beliefs that fall under the name

of paganism, such as Heathenism, Druidism, Shamanism and so forth), but also the beginning of modern Pagan social organisations (Cowan & Bromley, 2008). The liberation of witch trials and the flourishing interest in the occult brought together like-minded people into Pagan groups and covens (Clifton, 2006; Cowan & Bromley, 2008). Some of them formed new and improved forms of Neo-Pagan Druid groups, such as the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (1964), the British Druid Order (1979) or the Secular Order of Druids (1986), while others found more comfort in the Gardnerian Wicca, thus forming the Church and School of Wicca (1968), or Faery (Fairy or Faerie) Wicca (year n.p.). And then there are other modern Pagan social organisations that try to appeal to every adept. For instance, although it took inspiration from *Stranger in a Strange Land*, a classic science fiction novel written by Robert Heinlein, the Church of All Worlds is among the oldest Neo-Pagan organisation in the United States (Cowan & Bromley, 2008). The number of Pagan practitioners and Pagan enthusiasts were growing. Ronald Hutton (1993) made a rough estimation in 1992 about the population of pagans in Britain, and speculated that there were about 10,000 initiated witches, 6000 Druids, 80,000 non-initiated pagans. In answering the question 'What is your religion?' the 2011 UK Census counted 56,620 Pagans, 11,766 Wiccans, 1,276 Witchcraft, 502 Occult. Malcolm Gaskill (2010: 119) argues that in America, Wicca is a recognized religion, and that the 2001 Religious Identification Survey estimated the population of Wiccans at 134,000, as compared to a decade earlier that counted only 8000. There is no doubt that exposure to the idea of witchcraft within the popular culture during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries had a huge influence over these numbers. Contemporary witches (and implicitly witchcraft) are mainly a product of popular culture, mass media and social media efforts. The whole fantastic universe with mythical creatures

that once terrified our ancestors is now 'mainly the cultural property of children' (Gaskill, 2010: 118). Children in the 60s and 70s grew up watching *Bewitched*; during the 90s they watched *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, while those children in the 2000s stepped in the extraordinary magical world of *Harry Potter* throughout its seven books and film adaptations.

Paganism, in general, can be distinguished from other mainstream Western religious movements in a couple of ways. For instance, Pagan groups worship multiple gods and often these gods are characterised as a divine couple, in which both the Goddess and the God are equally important. The Gardnerian tradition presupposes that the interactions between the Goddess (the feminine power) and the God (the masculine power) are sacred and are also part of a complex ideology. This ideology differs among covens and practitioners. Part of this ideology is the celebration of the eight seasonal holidays. These are called Sabbats and Berger et al. (2003: 4) comments they represent Wicca's complex ideology of the Horned God's birth, death and rebirth. The Horned God is considered as the Eternal Goddess' consort, and she accompanies him throughout these celebrations. Berger (1999: 55) suggests that Wiccans choose to join covens because they learn how to practice Wicca and it offers them a place to worship together. However, Berger (2003: 4) also suggests that a large number of Wiccans practice as solitary followers "at least for some period of their lives". Solitary Wiccans are not members of a formal coven, they practice and worship autonomously. Berger (2003: 4) argues that solitary practitioners "remain connected to the larger Neo-Pagan community by attending public rituals and festivals, reading Neo-Pagan magazines [and books], and participating in online Neo-Pagan chat groups". Many scholars suggest that individuals learn about Wicca through intellectual activities or being introduced

to those teaching through a small circle of acquaintances or friends. Sloan (2007) argues that many followers learn about Wicca through reading some of Wicca's religious or spiritual textbooks. Similarly, Jencson (1989:4) comments that "a common feature in the life stories of American [Wiccans] is that the concepts of the belief system are first contacted on the library shelf". *Witchcraft Today* (1954), mentioned above, is one key text. Another important document that seeks to bind the movement together is *The Principles of Wiccan Belief* (1974)[6]. The document was forwarded in 1974 by the Council of American Witches, and it was an "attempt to create an ecumenical definition of modern Wicca that would be acceptable to many traditions" (Adler, 1979: 99). Adler (1979: 100) suggests that this document arose conflicts between covens and solitary practitioners because "a common statement of principles implied an unacceptable degree of centralisation." However, the Council of American Witches hammered out a document organised into 13 statements of belief. Because this document is not universally accepted by all followers, it therefore should be read mainly as a guiding manual. The document wishes to establish the strong bond between Wicca and nature:

"1. We practice Rites to attune ourselves with the natural rhythm of life forces marked by the Phases of the Moon and the Seasonal Quarters and Cross Quarters.
13. We acknowledge that we seek within nature for that which is contributory to our health and well-being."

It is a movement that is guided the polarity of feminine and masculine, therefore establishing its duotheistic nature of divinity.

"4. We conceive of the Creative Power in the Universe as manifesting through polarity- as masculine and feminine- and this same Creative Power lives in all people, and functions through the interaction of the masculine and feminine. We value neither above the other, knowing each to be supportive of the other."

[6] *The Principles of Wiccan Belief* extracts presented in this chapter are taken as reproduced by Margot Adler in *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979)

The document also vehemently denies that Wicca or Wiccans are related to Satanists or Devil worshipers.

> "12. We do not accept the concept of 'absolute evil', nor do we worship any entity known as Satan or The Devil as defined by the Christian tradition. We do not seek power through the suffering of others, nor do we accept the concept that personal benefit can only be derived by denial to another. "

As shown above, Wicca, as part of modern Paganism, benefited of great popularity during the 1950s after Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* was published, but also in the following decades. It would now seem appropriate to discuss the link between modern Paganism and New Age, since the 1960s was prosperous for both them, and also since Wicca is considered by some to be part of the New Age movement, although highly contested by others (Pearson, 2002; Simes, 1995). In *Children of the New Age*, Steven Sutcliffe (2003: 11) traces the origins and expansion of the New Age and describes the movement as having "no overarching purpose, no compelling agenda beyond that of expressing whatever 'spiritual' values are deemed appropriate for the moment and - through a radical tolerance - upholding the rights of others to do the same". He believes that New Age began during the 1930s, influenced by Surrealism, pop music, cinema and the spiritual changes and great interest in the occult that were present during the development of groups like the Rosicucians, the Golden Dawn, Wicca or the Theosophical Society. Sutcliffe (2003) also argues that once World War II came to an end, people started to gain more interest in alternative spiritualities and UFOs. This interest lead to the 'Age of Aquarius' during the 1960s, a period which, as Sutcliffe (2003) suggests, was also characterised by sexual freedom. In 1962 spiritual teacher Eileen Caddy, alongside with her husband Peter, move a caravan to Findhorn, Scotland and form what was to become Findhorn Foundation, a prime New Age site and of the largest alternative spiritual community in the United Kingdom

(Sutcliffe, 2003). The 1960s expansion of freedom and the importance of youth and pop culture, the term New Age was characterised by a multitude of meanings. Those meanings included alternative lifestyles and religions, drugs, hippies or nonconformity in clothing and hair styles. As Sutcliffe explains "New Age can mean just about anything" (2003: 107). As time passed, more people started following the New Age movement and so during the 1970s it began to have a more respectable image. As the twenty-first century's 'Mind, Body, Spirit' scenario was becoming a new trend, Findhorn became an important centre for alternative spirituality and excluded 'dirty hippies' that could denigrate their image (Sutcliffe, 2003). The New Age's features included alternative medicines, music cassettes of harmonious natural sounds, the virtues of relaxation, and a belief in the powers of occult and crystals. Sutcliffe argues that although the movement received bad press, it fitted well the spiritual needs of the 1990s and 2000s. Although the New Age movement has some powerful characteristics, such as enhancing spirituality within the modern Western culture, it lacks unification and cannot be perceived as a religion per se. The New Age movement is eclectic and inclusive and bases its ideas on individual formulations, however it does not have a structure. Sutcliffe (2003: 225) then argues that the movement is lacking "a viable level of collective focus and mobilisation effectively to deliver its challenge".

Returning to the discussion regarding Wicca, there are voices that suggest the New Age movement equates with modern Paganism (York, 1995). Arguably, there are some similarities between the two, for instance, using meditation and crystals or celebrating similar festivals, but there are more differences that outweigh those similarities. Joanne Pearson (2002: 7) differentiates the two by arguing that:

> "the New Age is, generally, more utopian with an emphasis on light and healing, whereas Paganism tends to be more pragmatic, recognising and appreciating darkness and death as part of life's cycle, as well as healing and light. Such distinctions belie a more transcendental attitude within New Age, whereas Paganism regards the divine as immanent. […] Both Paganism and the New Age operate across an entire spectrum of attitudes, practices and beliefs, and there are thus areas where the two overlap – where there are Pagan New Ages as well as New Age Pagans – just as there are areas where the two are wholly distinct"

In addition to Pearson's statement, Graham Harvey (1997: 51) also comments that "there are respected teachers and valued books in the Craft, but none has or claims the authority that might be expected in New Age circles or in many other religions". Graham suggests that the New Age movement lacks the sacralisation of sex, which is present in Paganism, and that its beliefs are based on "health and wealth". Such beliefs cannot correlate with modern Paganism, because Paganism's relationship with nature is definitely "not all fluffy bunnies" (Harvey, 1997: 12). He also points out that the New Age movement has too many guru-figures and therefore it could not equate with modern Paganism. In his discussion without any remarks to the New Age movement, Harvey (1997: 1-189) describes the Craft (modern Paganism) as a "polytheistic Nature religion" and a "fundamentally pluralist tradition" that is "not concerned primarily with the unusual or the supernatural, but with the miracle of ordinary life in all its facets" where the followers "may be the only people who accept the whole package (polytheism, seasonal festivals, and nature-centred spirituality and lifestyle)" and where those followers may be attracted to the Craft because "it combines the honouring of Nature with techniques for self-exploration".

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a brief account of witchcraft and witch hunting during Early Modern Europe and discussed the emergence of modern Paganism and Wicca. Focusing on

those aspects, this chapter evaluated the influence of the rise and revival of occult, witchcraft and magic, followed by the development of alternative spiritualities during the twentieth century. This chapter has also noted the interaction between modern Paganism and the New Age movement, acknowledging the similarities and differences between the two. There is a considerable overlap between the terms Paganism, Wicca and New Age, however as presented above the distinctions are often overlooked. The purpose of this chapter was to give context for the discussions and analysis that will follow up in the next chapters. This chapter has established the nature of Wicca, as a nature-based religion, inspired by folklore and myth. It is not an organised religion that was brought forward by Gerald Gardner in 1954 when he published *Witchcraft Today*. Wicca's followers are split into two categories: Traditional and Solitary. Traditional Wiccans are members who are part of and are initiated into a coven, usually formed by 13 witches. Solitary Wiccans are followers of the teachings of Wicca, but practice magic autonomously. The contexts through which members come Wicca are different for Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans. This argument showing that many come to Wicca via texts rather than via covens supports my overarching argument of this thesis that an affiliation approach for Solitary and a conversion approach for Traditional Wiccans reflects well the religious change experience of these individuals. This categorisation of Wiccans and the structure of their belief system will further be discussed in relation to conversion careers in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW ON RELIGIOUS CHANGE

Scholars, such as Freud (1928), Solomon et al. (1991), Burke et all. (2010), Rambo (1993), Hood et al. (2003), Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) argue that religious conversion is a process by which an individual relinquishes their previous religious beliefs and commits to the ones of a new religious system. The following chapter presents an extensive literature review on religious conversion, religious change and the factors and contexts that facilitate such processes. The first section of this chapter reviews the multiple definitions of religious conversion, such as the different levels (macro, micro and meso) of conversion contexts, or religious conversion as a gradual or sudden event. This purpose of this section is to give an overview of the general theoretical frameworks that seem to be constantly applied and discussed by scholars. Accounting for multiple definitions of religious conversion is important for this thesis because it demonstrates that this process is fluid and has no set definition. This aspect of the problem is important for chapter 7, because it allows the distinction between affiliation and conversion, which is the main argument of this thesis, to be made. The second sub-section narrows down the discussion on religious conversion by reviewing diverse conceptualisations in relation to Paganism and Wicca. This section will introduce a number of theories aimed to shed light on the conversion process of Pagans. The purpose of this sub-chapter is to introduce what scholars have studied and proposed so far vis-à-vis conversion to Paganism and lay out the theoretical framework which I will use to contest other approaches in the analysis chapter. Out of the theories presented in this

section, Adler's (1989) perspective is of most importance because her argument about Wicca being a religion without converts stands as the basis of this thesis. Therefore, as it will be demonstrated in the later chapters, Adler's argument is valuable and valid for just a specific type of Wiccans, not for all practitioners. The third and last sub-chapter describes the major sociological and psychological components recurring in religious conversion theories. Those components are consistently discussed by scholars as being important drivers for religious change, such as social integration, the roles of religion, emotion and identity. All these components also reflect recurring drivers present in my interviewees' narratives. The most important component is the role of identity because it stands as a decisive factor in the later discussion found in the analysis chapter where the difference between conversion and affiliation will be made. Identifying the multiple definitions of religious conversion and components of religious conversion, alongside issues surround them, provide a starting point for my argument that Traditional Wiccans convert (chapter 5) and Solitary Wiccans affiliate (chapter 6).

3.1 Theories on conversion

This sub-chapter describes religious conversion in general and gives an overview on how scholars have tried to categorise such processes in different type of conversion careers. This sub-chapter contains extracts from the relevant literature which are sources of interest, debate, and explanation within the study of religious conversion. Therefore, the following extracts are commonly and frequently used to define variance within conversion experiences, as well as to outline the characteristics of the religious conversion. The following extracts presented will look at: the different levels (macro, micro and meso) at which scholars have studied religious conversion; the temporal aspect of conversion will

also be explained, whether conversion processes as gradual or sudden events; and how religious beliefs systems play an important role in personal crisis, rationality, the self and identity of the adherent. This sub-chapter gives an overview for the conversion process that Traditional Wiccans undergo when joining a coven, and this discussion will further be developed in chapter 5 and chapter 7.

Individuals experience an elementary fear of their temporary existence and ambiguity of what, if anything, awaits them beyond life (Freud 1928; Solomon et al. 1991; Burke et all. 2010). To encounter this fear, individuals have cultivated epistemologies through which they delve to comprehend the world, mortality, themselves and possibly what lies beyond death. Those religious epistemologies share the assumption that an individual's existence is influenced by transcendent, sacred entities and that the individual's consciousness can transcend past their physical death by organising and experiencing life by having a relationship with these sacred entities (Rambo 1993; Hood et al. 2003; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). Scholars like Nock (1988), Plantinga (1995) and Trinitapoli (2007) argue that the majority of mainstream religious belief systems suggest that epistemological viewpoint on meaning and reality are uniquely true. Such a common exclusivity on their truthfulness has resulted throughout history in a competition, especially, as Nock (1988) argues, in the rise of monotheism. Religious belief systems would cease to exist without their adherents. Therefore, Rambo (1993) argues, a large number of religious groups actively search to introduce new members through religious conversion.

Kelinmann (2012) argues that there are different contextual levels of analysis when studying religious conversion. Reckoning that there are multiple levels generates a more accurate and better conceptualisation of religious conversion ways than having one singular level of

analysis, whether it is look at the individuals themselves, the community they are part of, or other social contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Theories on religious conversion look at the convert from a micro, meso or macro level. In this sense, Rambo (1993: 22) argues that these levels are "contours of context". Scholars analysing converts at a micro level look at elements that influence individuals at a personal level. Gooren (2007) argues that such a level includes elements like subjective experiences, thinking style or personality traits. These elements may influence the individual when converting to a new religious group. The micro level of conversion, or the *world-saver* model as described by Lofland and Stark (1965), analyse the immediate surroundings of the convert; these include the individual's home, family, work environment, groups they are part of and so forth (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Williamson and Hood (2012) also argue that micro level theories suggest that conversion processes are driven by the convert's individual psychology and that personality trait, like openness, psychological development, level of neuroticism, socialisation process or relationships with the others, influence the individual's religious conversion. Other theories suggest that the individual has a more active role during their religious conversion and argue that personal psychological processes, like meaning-seeking, self-change and identity negotiation facilitate the conversion. Religious conversion, as demonstrated by Travisano (1970), Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) and Pargament (1997), presupposes a radical change within the individual's identity, which results in a new construction of the convert's image of the self. Therefore, converts experience an identity change, where their old selves are changed according to the new religious belief system. Individuals adjust themselves to the new belief system's views, therefore the conversion process satisfies the neophyte's need for a new and positive identity on which the individual can comprehend their new life

and change their worldview (Rambo, 1999). Such an identity change can also be observed in conversion narratives of Traditional Wiccans, as it will further be demonstrated in the next chapters. As will be further analysed and discussed in chapter 6, the processes of secularisation, pluralisation, modernisation and urbanisation entail micro level effects on individuals and leave them with a sense of no true identity. This in turn, leads the individual to search for a religious belief system which can satisfy their religious and spiritual needs.

The phenomenological or the narrative approaches are another group of conversion theories which analyse an individual's experiences and how they interpret them. These approaches address the process of conversion at a macro level. In *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (1902) where the philosopher and psychologist William James provides details on the conversion processes experienced by Bunyan, Edwards, Tolstoy and others as an individual's sensory and subjective religious change experiences. He believed that these experiences provide valuable data when analysing religious conversion. In this fashion, Wynn (2012), basing his insights on a couple of conversion cases, argues that major changes in hedonic perceptions and personal sensations mark a process of conversion. In other words, individuals describe phenomena, like using their senses differently or feeling differently as important spiritual factors that determine their conversion path. Kellett (1993), for instance, argues that equally important for the macro level that facilitates conversion is the phenomenology of the social contexts and communication. In other words, individuals experience religious social contexts based on their own beliefs and the meaning-making renders the spiritual development and individual characteristics that the person holds during conversion process. Jindra (2014) suggests that new identities formed as a consequence of conversion will directly influence how individuals will present their

conversion experiences or conversion narratives. Reconstructing narratives of conversion, alongside the events and experiences that precede and follow the process of conversion can be built based on the individual's psychosocial experiences as a neophyte. The phenomenological or the narrative approaches listed above describe some of the stories presented by my group of study, however, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, not all narratives fall into the religious conversion category. This might be due to that fact that although such theories are helpful in studying religious conversion in general, they mostly present individual-specific experiences which vary according to their own psychosocial factors. And as much as it is useful it also not comprehensive enough to establish a religious conversion process. As well, those theories tend to be overly deterministic and simplistic because they depend too much on subjective or individual traits acting as core factors rather than concentrating the attention on the actual process of conversion. Therefore, such theories may explain some aspects of the religious conversion, but they are not sufficient. Macro level theories are best at describing the spatio-cultural environment of the convert and how elements of this environment might have been detrimental in a person's religious change (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bronfenbrenner (1977) addresses social context and temporal effects as constituting the chronosystem, which may have an input in one's life course. Bronfenbrenner (1977) argues that institutions are accounted at the macro level, such as the influence of education, economy, religion or government, alongside other factors, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status or poverty. In reference to macro level theories, Kleinmann (2012: 8) also argues that "entire cultures and societies" shape the belief system and identity of an individual during the process of

conversion. There are a variety of theories that analyse the individual's path at a macro level, such as globalisation theory or deprivation theory (Rambo, 1999).

Relative deprivation theory, for instance, argues that individuals who suffer from social resources and economic deprivation as opposed to their peers are more likely to search for advancement and meaning through a religious change (Glock 1973; Dawson 2009). Being in relative deprivation does not mean that an individual has less than another person, but it is how the individual perceives themselves. Therefore, the individual seeks to better their circumstances or environment by creating or joining a group that could potentially offer what the individual believes to be more beneficial, and in many cases such groups are religious ones (Glock 1973; Dawson 2009).

Globalisation theory, as noted by Rambo (1999), suggests that the speed of global communication, including factors such as traveling or information speed, has facilitated religious changes. Mobilisation and communication at a global scale allowed different religious or spiritual groups to reach more people and attract potential adherents everywhere in the world. As explained in the previous chapter, Wicca was initially formed by individuals inhabiting Great Britain, and later expanded to other English-speaking countries or countries where English was commonly known. The Internet, for instance, has had a great impact on transmitting information for individuals to access and learn about different spiritual or religious groups, and this is also the case with Wicca. Snow & Machalek (1984) believe that social influence (such as social networks) should also be taken into account when examining religious conversion. They believe that social networks are highly important in explaining how individuals are recruited into religious groups and how the process of conversion occurs. Snow & Machalek (1984) suggested that social networks have worked as

a means of recruiting new adherents in religions like Buddhism, Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. In this fashion, new religious movements have used online social networks to knot affective social ties. In explaining why there has been a massive growth of pagans within a small time frame, academics suggest two major factors (among others): the emergence of the Internet and the implication of adolescent paganism (teen Witch) (Lewis, 2007; Harrington, 2007; Pearson, 2002; Berger & Ezzy, 2009; Aloi, 2007; Cush, 2007; Feldt, 2015). During the end of the twentieth Century, the Internet was just starting to take off. The pagan community, more than other religious communities, is believed to have exploited the most the possibilities of this medium (Lewis, 2007; Hume, 1997). In 1997, Elizabeth Puttick was noting the existence of at least 40 British Pagan online groups, such as Dragon Environmental Group, Order of Bards, the Fellowship of Isis or the Association of Hedgewitches. Joanne Pearson noted in 2002 that a brief scan over the Internet showed 898 pagan websites. The Internet, through the increasing number of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), facilitated the communication between estranged individuals sharing the same belief system and altered the social organisation of such groups. As noted in the previous chapter, Wicca, and Paganism in general, have never been a centralized movement per se. Although covens are usually formed by a rather small number of individuals celebrating eight seasonal festivals, some Wiccan enthusiasts were unable to perform organised seasonal rituals due to the lack of a coven, resources or even information (Lewis, 2007). And as differentiated in the previous chapter, individuals who are practising their magic by themselves, are called solitary. Whether they were or were not occasionally participating in seasonal rituals, the acceleration of Internet possibilities post-1990s made solitary practice a more viable option (Lewis, 2007). In this fashion, DiMaggio et all explain that “there is much anecdotal evidence

that the Internet provides significant benefits to people with unusual identities or concerns" (2001: 318), highlighting, for instance, people with a "rare medical condition". Solely based on the nature of their spiritual beliefs, pagans obviously do not suffer of any type of medical condition, but as Jensen & Thompson (2008) propose, DiMaggio et all's observation could possibly be applied, at a stretch, to "people with unusual religious or spiritual identities" (p.755). As mentioned above, Wicca is not necessarily a centralised movement, thus individuals practising their magic in solitude might have fully benefited over the rich and robust possibilities offered by the Internet through networking with other like-minded people and/or accessing materials, such as related books or articles. Although the World Wide Web offered support for many, simultaneously it encouraged people to become more individualistic (Berger & Ezzy, 2009), by not reaching out for a coven, but keeping the practice of magic within a smaller, intimate place - their home.

Feminist theories and religious/spiritual theories are two other macro level perspectives that seek to challenge how scholars conduct their conversion studies. Rambo (1999) also suggests that feminist theories look at religious conversion from a female perspective, and that, historically, such processes have been overlooked due to patriarchal norms. Although this thesis does not consider gender as an important element in gaining membership to Wicca, it is worth mentioning such theories firstly because scholars studying Paganism and Wicca consider feminism to be an important variable and secondly because the majority of my interviewees have mentioned, in one way or another, the importance of femininity and female entity within the teachings and practices of Wicca. Susan Greenwood (1998) distinguishes between Wicca and feminist witchcraft and argues that sex polarity is fundamental in witchcraft. On one hand, Greenwood comments that Wicca has strong

Jungianism influences (the concepts of *animus* and *anima* representing counter-sexual psychological elements) and emphasises the heterosexual dynamics that harmoniously work "as in yin and yang" (pp.105). On the other hand, Feminist Witchcraft (liberal and Dianic) is influenced by feminist sexual politics. Both types focus on the female magical identity and fertility role that create a theatrical space in which the symbol of woman (the Divine Feminine) is celebrated. The main difference between the two is that while Feminist Witchcraft promotes female superiority, Wicca includes the polarity between feminine and masculine. Greenwood argues that while the historical Christian notion of witchcraft devalued women, as presented in the previous chapter, contemporary witches seek to redefine and empower women's inner nature as powerful entities. Scarboro & Luck (1997) also place emphasis on the idea of women empowerment and suggest that Modern Witchcraft (i.e. Wicca) appealed to women due to its advocacy for the Goddess spirituality and female-oriented spirituality. Wicca has seen many of its female adherents and enthusiasts to promote these ideas through their books which are used even to this day as important texts for its members. Key authors include Zsuzsanna Budapest, Doreen Valiente, Starhawk, Naomi Goldenberg, Merlin Stone, Silver RavenWolf. They have focused their work on deconstructing patriarchal authority and draw attention to the feminine as powerful and sacred.

In terms of religious/spiritual theories Rambo (1999: 264) argues that "scholars in the human sciences, almost without exception, neglect, trivialize, or totally reject the role of religion and/or spirituality in their theories of conversion" and that "religion and spirituality, like aesthetics, should be considered a domain of life and experience that has its own validity". Rambo suggests that the role of religion during conversion is hard to study

empirically, but scholars tend to ignore the 'what' people are converting to. Religions themselves have detrimental effects and make unique contributions to religious conversion, and that ignoring religion during religious conversion is scientifically ill-considered. Rambo's argument points out the fact that religious conversion processes are different between religious or spiritual groups just as individuals' conversion processes are different from one person to another. Rambo's argument does not suggest that different religious conversion theoretical frameworks ineffectual or valueless, but that religion by itself constitutes a variable which is important to consider when study religious conversion. He also suggests that religions bare their own theological explanations when describing religious conversions which differ according to their beliefs. Therefore, Rambo explains, religions validate or not a conversion according to their own criteria, and individuals' conversion processes are modelled, to a certain degree, by the beliefs of the religious tradition they are converting to. As will be shown in chapter 7, this theory demonstrates how the nature of Wicca as a religion or spiritual path shapes the conversion narratives differently for Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans; because Rambo's idea of 'what' Wiccans are converting or affiliating to is different for members of a coven, for instances, than for solitary practitioners.

So far it can be understood that micro level and macro level theorical frameworks substantially contribute to the understanding of religious conversion. However, they are insufficient to give a complex overview on religious conversion. In this sense, Kleinmann (2012: 10) argues that "if structural forces, such as social and economic deprivation, globalisation and colonisation cause religious conversion, we should expect that everyone exposed to those experiences would convert. Yet, it is obvious that some people and groups do not convert when faced with poverty, imperialism, missionaries, or globalism". It is

therefore suggested that even though an individual may experience difficulties throughout self-identity formation, it does not mean they will become a religious convert. The gap between social norms and psychological factors is explained by meso level theories, because such theories seek to examine the patterns of interaction of the individual converting and their environment (Lewin 1936). Meso level theories give a broader understanding for the reasons why a person converts and how that person does that. Rambo (1993) argues that meso level theories are usually explained by stages of conversion or models of process.

3.2 Religious change within the Pagan and Wiccan context

The interest in esotericism, occult and witchcraft is not by far a new phenomenon. The search within the tenebrous of spiritualities has seen an increase since the beginning of the twentieth century. And after the mid-twentieth century there have been various attempts to identify the number of the Wiccan population across different countries, as well as their reasoning behind conversion (Godwin, 1972; Melton, 1980; Petersen, 1982; Adler, 1986; Jorgensen & Russell, 1999; Berger, 1999; Pike, 2001; Robinson, 2001). If the previous sub-chapter gave general explanations on religious conversion, the following sub-chapter presents academic accounts on religious conversion in relation to Paganism. Apart from Adler's (1989) belief, which will further be analysed and discussed in the next chapters, that Wicca is a religion without converts, the other academics researching Paganism suggest that all members undergo a conversion process. This section is important because it lays out other studies on conversion to Paganism and Wicca and shows different academic perspectives on how people join those movements. This sub-chapter concludes with the idea that studies so far suggest, as opposed to my data collected, that all individuals joining are converting to the religious movement.

At the end of the twentieth century, Lofland and Skonovd (1983) attempted to reflect on the diverse religious experience in both traditional (mainstream) religions and new religions. They suggested that talking about conversion types is misleading, and that we ought to draw our attention towards conversion 'motifs'. They proposed six such motifs. The (1) intellectual motif refers to the way of joining a religious group as a result of information technology; the (2) mystical motifs suggests that individuals believe that some experience(s) are produced outside of themselves; the (3) experimental motif usually occurs within New Age Movements and refers to a low social pressure over a longer period of time in which the conversion occurs; the (4) affectional motif suggests that there are important bonds of affection that occur during the process of conversion which have a significant impact over the individual; the (5) revivalist motif suggests that individuals convert to a certain religious movements as a result of their experience within an emotionally incited group; and the (6) coercive motif proposes that individuals experience prolonged social pressure to join a congregation, such motif includes brainwashing. Lofland and Skonovd's (1983) conversion model stands as a key model for many conversion studies, such as Harrington's (2000) conversion to Wicca motifs which will be further discussed in the following paragraphs. Largely, Lofland and Skonovd's model describe the main reasons for why an individual would choose to change their spiritual or religious belief, and as it will be demonstrated in chapter 5 and chapter 6, these motifs are applicable to the segment of population I have studied. However, some scholars, like Adler (1989), suggest that Wiccans do not convert or that a conversion process does not take place because Wiccan practitioners return to a spirituality that was innate. In addition to Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs, Melissa Harrington (2000) added a seventh one which she named

'recognition'. She argues that "for many Wiccans the 'conversion' happens long before the religion becomes apparent" and therefore the motif she proposes "may only be relevant to minority religions such as Wicca which are not immediately available to the religious querent" (Harrington, 2000: 2-3, 6). Based on the responses I collected during my fieldwork, I discovered that while such motifs proposed by Lofland and Skonovd and Harrington characterise well the profile of my respondents, they are not sufficient to demonstrate that a conversion process takes place. While Lofland and Skonovd's study is meant to be more universal and finds its applicability to other communities of practice, Harrington based her arguments on the findings she collected after conducting a study on Traditional Wiccans. The issue in this case is that, based on her segment of population chosen for study, Harrington's 'recognition' motif is, or should be, characteristic to Traditional or coven-based Wiccans only. The motifs presented by the scholars above account for general reasons as to why individuals change or wish to change their belief or church or denomination, but do not account for whether, based on these reasons, individuals do experience a conversion process or not, or what I later in the following chapters describe as an affiliation process.

To understand why in a rational society, people start to believe in magic, Luhrmann (1989) formulated the term "interpretive drift" (ID). She then explains that:

> "I use the term 'drift' because the transformation seems accidental, unintended. The once-non-magician certainly intends to become a magician and to practise magic. But that is very different from intending to believe. Rather the once-non-magician begins to do what magicians do, and begins to find magical ideas persuasive because he begins to notice and respond to events in different ways." (1989: 312)

If individuals accept the structure and existence of a magical world, then this leads to an overall belief in magic. Luhrmann's investigation was based from an anthropological point of

view. She argues that interpretation, experience and rationalisation are the “three loosely interlocked transformations” through which an individual understands magic. She believes that there are changes in the way people perceive and analyse magic: "intellectual and experiential changes shift in tandem, a ragged co-evolution of the intellectual habits and phenomenological involvement" (1989: 315). Luhrmann’s “interpretative drift” was further applied by Orion (1995) in *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived*, an ethnography on American Neopaganism. She agreed to a level of extent that Luhrmann’s theory may possibly be applied to Pagans, but commented that

> “Although for them the predisposing factor is personal experience, such as insights or a deep uneasiness about truths that are self evident to others. In this case, persuasion is of the nature of confirmation, or explanation, rather than conversion to a new belief. In fact, confirmation by those whom they do not respect often has the opposite effect of causing them to doubt their experiences or to regard them as shameful or pathological" (1995: 53)

Orion suggested that witches’ spirituality is a form of art, and that modern witchcraft includes revived shamanism. To her, witchcraft is situated within the earlier countercultural reform movements, and adherents *convert* because they realise this is *the* belief that appeals most to their ideals. To a certain degree Orion’s (1995) view on conversion to Paganism can be associated or compared to Harrington’s (2000) ‘recognition’ motif because adherents come to realise that being a Pagan, respectively Wicca, is something that has always appealed to them and something that they might have always been unknowingly practising. Orion also cautiously uses the term conversion and seems to rather refer to Pagans as experiencing what Adler (1989) and Harvey (1999) describe as the coming home experience. In *Coming home and coming out as a Pagan*, Harvey (1999) suggests that Wiccan adherents would rather use the expression of ‘coming home’ than of a convert: "Pagans are people who ‘come home’ in two related senses, neither necessarily taking

precedence - chronological or ideological - over the other. First, Pagans come home to themselves, second Pagans come home to a sense of belonging with others or within a tradition." (1999: 239). Harvey argues that explanations like the 'interpretative drift' proposed by Luhrmann are not expressing or exposing the Magicians or Pagans' experiences but represent "assertions of academic objectivity i.e. scepticism and knowing better" (1999:239). The idea that witches are 'coming home' was first stipulated by Margot Adler in *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (2006 [1979]). She described the process as:

> "Neo-Pagan groups rarely proselytize and certain of them are quite selective. There are few converts. In most cases, word of mouth, a discussion between friends, a lecture, a book, or an article provides the entry point. But these events merely confirm some original, private experience, so that the most common feeling of those who have named themselves Pagans is something like "I finally found a group that has the same religious perceptions I always had." A common phrase you hear is "I've come home," or, as one woman told me excitedly after a lecture, "I always knew I had a religion, I just never knew it had a name." (2006: 13)

Referencing the past is a major aspect of the pagan community. Based on Adler's description, "home" stands as an imaginary or romanticised *place* to which Pagans connect spiritually. Considering that many Pagans base their belief in different Ethno-Pagan movements, the cultural heritage expressed in their belief is not as much historical in character as it is mythical. Adler also explains that pagans do not follow a certain conversion *recipe*, and called Paganism the 'religion without converts':

> "No one converts to Paganism or Wicca. You will find no one handing you Pagan leaflets on the street or shouting at you from a corner. Many people came across this book, or The Spiral Dance (or any of a number of related books), in some isolated corner of America or the world. Often they found it in a small-town library, or in a used bookstore, or stashed away on a friend's bookshelf. Upon opening the pages, perhaps they said "I never knew there was anyone else

> in the world who felt what I feel or believed what I have always believed. I never knew my religion had a name" (2006: x)

She suggests, like Lofland and Skonovd (1983), that there is a set of *motifs* that best show how and why individuals got involved into Paganism and Witchcraft. Based on her subjects, Adler proposed the following motifs: beauty, vision and imagination; freedom; feminism; growth; intellectual satisfaction; and environmental response. Adherents find in these traditions not only a spiritual fulfilment, but also a way of determining their identity. The coming home experience (CHE) has been described as a sudden realisation of the pre-Christian *roots*. Although Adler's model of (non)conversion seems a very plausible experience, there are a couple of scholars that disagree. Most of these scholars suggest that claiming to "come home" rather than to convert is due to a narrow knowledge and understanding of conversion. Eugene Gallagher (1994) suggested that the examples given in Adler's study could fit other proposed conversion models, such as the sudden conversion (James, 1958). Gallagher also compares the stories provided by Adler with similar narratives presented by some Unification Church members. Gallagher argues that members from both sides follow the same "conversion careers":

> "In each instance there was an intense early involvement with mainstream Christianity, an adolescent disillusionment with that form of religion, a self-directed intellectual quest for spiritual wisdom, a revelatory visionary experience, and an association with a broader religious community only towards the end of the quest. If one process can be categorized as conversion-and Anthony himself uses the term-it is difficult to explain why the other cannot." (1994: 859)

Gallagher suggests that the coming home experience is not limited to Pagan members, as Adler believes, but it can be found across various religions or traditions. It is also suggested that because contemporary Paganism does not have "centralized authority, invariable dogma, and unyielding con- form" (1994: 860), adherents may not want to categorise their

faith as a *cult*. The distinctive patterns of differences and similarities, however, Gallagher argues, give more nuanced explanations for the process of conversion. In their article *Coming Home or Drifting Away: Magical Practice in the Twenty-First Century* (2010), Gerhard Mayer and René Gründer also critique Adler's homecoming hypothesis. Mayer & Gründer look at both Adler's coming home experience and Luhrmann's interpretative drift, and suggest that the two should be looked at as being complementary, and not as alternative *conversion* processes. They suggest that modern Pagans do not necessarily experience homecoming but are made to believe so. To demonstrate this, Mayer & Gründer searched the term "coming, home and Wicca" on Google and found the following first five results:

"(1) ''Wicca spirituality is a process of coming home to reality, uncovering your true Self, returning to the Divine''

(2) ''For many people, the embracing of an earth-based spirituality is a feeling of 'coming home'. Often, people say that when they first discovered Wicca, they felt like they finally fit in''

(3) "the next entry contains a question-answer sequence. An 'expert' answers the question of how to become a Wiccan: ''Becoming interested in wicca is like coming home, coming back to where you (humanity) started. Welcome back. (...)''

(4) ''One is not 'converted' to Wicca, rather, the new comer feels a sense of 'Coming Home', or, more poetically, 'The Goddess calls to Her own'''

(5) "the fifth entry is provided by the table of contents of the book Wicca and Witchcraft for Dummies by the author Diane Smith. Chapter III is entitled ''Coming Home: How Wiccans Become Wiccans''."

Mayer & Gründer draw on Berger & Ezzy (2007) suggestion that mass media plays an important role in facilitating the orientation towards Neopaganism. Although Berger & Ezzy do not claim that mass media is a factor that determine people to convert, it does offer people a cultural background with positive models, such as feminism or environmentalism, that provide newcomers with a feeling of "home coming". Mayer & Gründer suggest that

the results show that the CHE acts as a theological principle where newcomers are led to believe that the Goddess only choses those who experience 'home coming'. In a social-constructionist fashion, the coming home experience also has a narrative role as it draws on self-legitimisation and the re-interpretation and re-construction of one's biography. Mayer & Gründer use one of Adler's stories to show how some individuals ascribe to themselves fictive lineages; one interviewee claimed that they have discovered that one of their ancestors was a mid-wife (goodwife), thus proclaiming their witchy heritage[7].

The main issue with studies that research Paganism, especially Wicca in this case, lays on the fact that they are too generalised. Such studies, like Adler's (1989) or Harrington's (2000), overlook the fact that there are two major groups, as described in chapter two, Traditional Wiccans which are part of a coven and follow the rules of the coven, and Solitary Wiccans which are individuals that practice witchcraft and magic in their own space. Having two distinctive groups means that there are two separate sets of reasons for why people become Wiccans. Harrington's (2000) efforts to study Traditional Wiccans show one facet of conversion, thus covering the reasons and ways in which only one group joins the Wiccan movement. Adler's (1989) study is extensive and touches on various aspects of Wicca and Wiccans. However, as it will be discussed in the following chapters, Wiccans do not just "go home" and suddenly start worshiping various Gods and Goddesses, but they go through an intellectual process, as suggested by Harrington, which, based on my reflections, separates

[7] Some legal records show that there was a substantial number of individuals who were accused and tried for witchcraft based on the occupation they had. Most of them were engaged in some sort of medical practices. Alan Macfarlane (1970: 117-118), for instance, provides a list of cunning folks that were mentioned in the legal records of Essex, United Kingdom (1560-1680) showing their occupations as astrologer, surgeon, doctor, physician or other types of unspecified "conjuror/sorcerer". Based on informal discussions and other personal experiences I had with different groups of Pagans, some members claim to inherit a witchy lineage that goes back many generations. Whether such claims are true or not is hard to establish.

coven-based Wiccans from Solitary Wiccans by their engagement with the system of belief and the members which are part of that community of practice.

3.3 Reasons for conversion/affiliation

The previous sub-chapters have presented different approaches and theoretical frameworks regarding religious conversion. Yet there are other important factors that contribute to a person's religious change that need to be discussed. This sub-chapter is important because it highlights general components which direct people to search for a new spiritual or religious path, yet the presence of such components does not necessarily mean that an individual will experience a conversion process, but, as it will be described in the analysis chapter, it could suggest an affiliation processes. This discussion is also important firstly because such components were described by both Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans when interviewed, therefore showing that these components are widely applicable, and secondly because some of these components represent important arguments for my case of arguing against Adler's (1989) view of Wicca as a religion without converts.

Conversion theories tend to characterise religious conversion into either a sudden event or a multifaceted process which is spread across a longer period of time (Lofland and Stark 1965; Richardson 1985; Gooren 2007). There are some conversion processes which appeared to have had a short temporal duration, however scholars tend to describe religious conversion as a long and gradual process (Lofland and Stark 1965; Richardson 1985; Rambo 1999). The main reason for this argument is that even if the psychological commitment might be sudden or quickly officialised by, for instance, baptism, the process that facilitated the conversion has taken a longer time than the event itself (Rambo, 1999).

Individuals might not associate the period spent looking for a new spiritual meaning as part of their conversion process, or as I would suggest part of their affiliation process because as it will be argued later, conversion and affiliation can be two similar but distinctive processes. Rambo (1999) suggests that individuals' ideologies, environment or relationships often inform the context within they take the decision to make a religious change. A large number of studies suggest that religious conversion has a high degree of personal crisis implications (Gooren, 2005; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Rambo, 1995; Snow & Machalek, 1984; Stark & Finke, 2000). These studies acknowledge that an individual who has converted to a different system of belief has previously experienced a critical period in their life, an impasse, a change or a confrontation. For instance, Snow & Machalek's (1984: 181) empirical study showed that crises related to narcotics may often generate a search for divine help, thus leading religious searching and later conversion. Although Snow & Machalek cannot fully determine how and if the role of prior inner conflict had a leading role in individuals' conversions, their study highlights that converters tend to overstate their pre-conversion tensions, especially when they were looking at their lives retrospectively. In this fashion, James (1902: 200) views religious conversion as a dislocation of one's religious ideas. He considers that those religious ideas are located at the periphery of one's consciousness and that, at one point, they become central. James believed that emotions are an important trigger in relocating these ideas, from being peripheral to becoming central:

> "The sudden and explosive ways in which love, jealousy, guilt, fear, remorse, or anger can seize upon one are known to everybody. Hope, happiness, security resolve, and emotions characteristic of conversion, can be equally explosive. And emotions that come in this explosive way seldom leave things as they found them" (p.202 -203).

Therefore, social and personal strain may result in an individual's wish to seek for a new spiritual meaning and the formation of a new identity. Wiccan adherents, as described by some of my interviewees, are no exception to this motif. A couple of the narratives presented in the analysis chapters show that interviewees have grown frustrated or tensions have occurred while building up towards a breaking point or crisis that directed them to a change of spirituality. Their tensions were characterised by an emotional and spiritual discomfort vis-à-vis the experiences they were having in their previous church. However, this was not the only explanation, nor did all individuals in my sample invoke this motif. Gooren (2007) suggests that religious conversion theories relying mostly on the crisis explanation are criticised as too deterministic. Heirich (1977) also argues that not all individuals that experience a crisis will become a religious convert, therefore crisis is not necessarily a detrimental cause that leads to religious conversion, as it will be observed later in my analysis. Another important component of religious conversion is the variety of consequences which follow an individual's conversion. Scholars point to consequences in terms of the individual's social networks, behavioural changes or mental health (Ullman 1989; Rambo 1993; Pargament 1997, Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998; Williamson & Hood 2012). There is also debate on the length of these consequences, some stating that consequences are short-lived and need to be continuously renewed, and others arguing they are permanent. Scholars like James (1902), Richardson (1985) and Paloutzian et al. (1999) viewed conversion consequences as static and irrevocable. Once religious conversion took place its effects are fixed. Other scholars like Travisano (1970) and Heirich (1997) suggest that consequences are relatively permanent, meaning that if an individual undergoes a radical change in their identity, then it is less likely that, at such a level, the

consequences will disappear too fast. There are also scholars who argue that an individual's search for spiritual truth may lead them out of a group just as fast as they were led in (Richardson 1987). For instance, if an individual experiences social pressure and later it is eliminated, the consequences of conversion are likely to exist no longer. Rambo (1993) suggests that for some individuals, their religious beliefs will only continue to exist if they have multiple commitment experiences. Conversions described by Rambo are not permanent, but they show a continuous process by which the individual is in a continuous spiritual renewal search, and therefore a complete conversion never occurs. It can be then observed that there are various viewpoints on how permanent a conversion process can be and its consequences, demonstrating again that each conversion process and narrative is different than another. This perspective on conversion consequences is also supported by my set of data and explains how some of my interviewees' narratives can be understood. Some adherents have been in a continuous spiritual search, experimenting religiosity and spirituality in different denominations before joining Wicca, and whether Wicca is going to be their final religious group is unclear.

Another important component suggested by scholars and present in my interviewees' narrative is emotionality associated with religious change. Some scholars argue that individuals experience affective involvement during religious conversion, whereas other scholars believe individuals engage in a rational process, carefully weighing the benefits and costs before joining a religious group (Gartrell and Shannon 1985; Gooren 2007). Theories suggesting that the individual takes rational choices when choosing a religious group do not deny an emotional aspect, but they suggest it to be an imbedded benefit of conversion. Therefore, these theories reject the idea that religious conversion occurs due to intense

emotional experiences. Rambo (1993) suggests that one of the reasons individuals seek to a join a new religious group is because of the expected emotional benefits. Rambo also comments that many converts report an improved emotional state, such as feeling relieved, peaceful or excitement. Some early accounts on religious conversion theorised conversion as a powerful and overwhelming emotional impels which shadowed rationality (Starbuck 1897; James 1902; Hall 1904; Richardson 1985; Hastings 2010). The revivalist conversion motif forwarded by Lofland and Skonovd (1981) describes a high emotional setting of the religious revival in which the individuals are highly attracted to the group emotion that themselves search to become members of that religious group. Lofland and Stark (1965) suggest that individuals search for love and emotional fulfilment through bonding with members of the religious group and spiritual figures, such as gods. Theories forwarded by scholars like Gartrell and Shannon (1985) and Pitt (1991) argue that the emotional component is a mechanism which is not part of the religious conversion process, but of a larger process in which the individual calculates the benefits and costs of religious change, therefore suggesting that individuals look for a cognitive balance. Such theories show that religious conversion is based on rational choices made by the individual who rationally considers whether there are any outcomes that could be beneficial if they join that religious group or not. Those theoretical frameworks take into consideration the emotional element, but do not represent the basis of religious conversion. The emotional component was more prominent in some of my interviewees than in others. As will be discussed in the chapters that follow, for some respondents the feeling of a high emotional state represented the impulse to join Wicca, whether the solitary path or seeking a coven. Other respondents,

especially former members of other multiple religious groups, were more rational when deciding whether witchcraft is appropriate for their spiritual needs.

As mentioned earlier the role of religion is an important component in religious conversion which did not receive too much academic attention (Scroggs and Douglas 1967; Rambo 1993; Hill and Pargament 2003). Rambo (1993) argues that many scholars attempting to assert testable, unbiased and empirical theories propose that the influence of religion as a variable that contributes to religious conversion can be explained using sociological and psychological factors. Elements such as the supernatural or the sacred are not readily observable, therefore it is hard to take account of them in academic study. However, the role of religion is as important as the role of the political, cultural or social components, and ignoring it may dismiss an aspect which could offer rich insights regarding religious conversion. Rambo (1993) argues that the religious group one might be interested in joining may shape the process of conversion; therefore, from a phenomenological view, the role of religion ought not to be ignored. Social networks, practices or rituals differ from one belief system to another, and those variations interact differently with individuals. The role of the self and identity is one component on which scholars have relied heavily analysing when the difference in conversion to Traditional Wicca and affiliation to Solitary Wicca. Snow and Machalek (1984) suggest that religious conversion presupposes a major change in one's identity. This is opposed to Hall (1904) who believes self-identity is likely to occur during adolescence, and Scroggs and Douglas (1967) suggest personal awareness, which is required during conversion, and more likely to occur during adulthood. Most of my respondents engaged with Wicca during their adolescence and reported being interested in it since then. While some of them begun practising witchcraft during that age, others started later during

their adulthood. However, as it will be explained in chapter 7, a more prominent change in identity is observable in coven members because these Wiccans change their identity to fit the group norms. Snow and Machalek (1983) suggest that individuals tend to dismiss their pre-conversion identities, deeming their old behaviours as invalid as opposed to their new identities formed in their new religion. They also suggest that individuals tend to change their biographical life story to match their new identity. Conversion is then a mean of self-transformation of the previous meaning system which was no longer satisfying the individual into a new identity in accordance with the sacredness of the new religious belief (Travisano 1970; Pargament 1997; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a limited variety of psychological and sociological perspective as influencers; however, it can be observed that religious conversions are convoluted phenomena which need more than a single perspective to be explained. Conversion is a complex phenomenon that hosts the perspective and description of multiple theoretical frameworks. Therefore, conversion means a process of not only religious change, but also identity change and worldview change. Conversion holds sacredness at the core of an individual's change. Each religious conversion is different, and a multitude of factors must be taken into account when analysing such processes, such as social environment, personal qualities, social and psychological factors, and religious, social and cultural contexts. The interaction of these contexts and factors affect each individual differently. Although some influencers are difficult to quantify, they are all important to the context of religious conversion because each influencer has its own unique contribution to the variance of conversion which may not be explained by other influencers. The purpose of this chapter

was set out the different contextualisation of religious conversion. The first section of this chapter presented general theoretical frameworks of religious conversion and exemplified a few similarities to my set of data which will further be discussed in the analysis chapters. The second section of this chapter presented religious conversion accounts vis-a-vis Paganism and Wicca. The purpose of this sub-section was to set out the current disputes and theories debated regarding Pagan members. So far, the majority of scholars suggest that individuals joining Pagan movements like Wicca undergo a process of conversion, except Adler's account which suggests Wicca is a religion without converts. Adler's account is important for this thesis because it represents the basis of this research, and, as it will be demonstrated in the analysis chapter, her perspective is simultaneously wrong and right. The last section of this chapter presented different factors and contexts that influence religious change which apply to both Wicca and other systems of religious beliefs. Therefore, this chapter presented an extensive account on why and how people become religiously active.

CHAPTER 4
METHODOLOGY AND STUDY DESIGN

The purpose of this chapter is to explain all the steps I followed in designing this study and present the methodology. This chapter begins with section 4.1 which introduces the suitable methodology for this research and how I designed it to be as efficient as possible. The following subchapter, 4.2 presents my fieldwork and how data was collected. It looks at the groups I got in contact with and how I managed to approach my participants. Section 4.3 provides the selection of participants; this is also supported by a table listing all 32 interviewees and their social-religious profile. This section is important because it shows a first step in differentiation between the two types of Wiccan practitioners (i.e. Traditional and Solitary). In section 4.4 I discuss the steps of preparing and conducting the interviews; this includes the designing of the questionnaire and other guidance documents, the ethics protocol I followed in order to ensure the safety of my respondents, and pre-pilot and pilot interviews which were equally important to ensure a complex and fluid interview. Section 4.5 presents the analysis of data: the major trends I have observed during my field work, and how I systemised these trends to facilitate a coherent process of data analysis. Section 4.6 present the limitations of this study. Lastly, section 4.7 will give a brief description of the costs and resources used for conducting this study.

4.1 Designing my Qualitative Research

My interest in religiosity and spirituality came a couple of years ago when I started questioning the truthfulness of my previous religion and concluded that that religion was

given to me purely based on the geographical location of my country and its customs trending at my time of birth, and not chosen by me. In 2013 I became a member of two groups *Ştiinţa, candela în întuneric* (Science, the candle in the dark) and *Atei si Agnostici Români* (Romanian atheists and agnostics). These two groups were very influential in my interest on folklore, religious beliefs and religious history (mainly European Christianity).

My first approach to alternative spiritualities and hyper-real religions (Possamai, 2005) occurred during my M.A. studies. That research did not study religion per se, but was rather designed to identify and analyse religious, fantasy and folkloric elements in online games. During that period, I joined multiple groups whose beliefs were inspired from various mythical backgrounds, such as Druidism, Necromancing, Wicca and other witchcraft inspired groups. The individuals in these groups were seeking to experience sacredness through other alternative forms, mainly through the practice of magic and religious pluralism. Even though this research did not study religious conversion, it introduced and influenced me to research certain intriguing groups of people.

The importance of studying conversion/affiliation to Wicca lies in the multi-faceted answers given by people that come from different past religious backgrounds. Also given the fact that there is a limited number of studies on conversion/affiliation to Wicca, I found it important to gain more knowledge about the subject and to contribute to the existing block of literature with a new approach. In addition, this research also represents an opportunity to contribute to my personal interest in why people believe in the supernatural.

In determining the most suitable methodology to respond to my research question, I decided that the testimonies of conversion are the best resources for comprehending such a

subject. However, like other methods, interviews may have their negative aspects. These testimonies may target only one aspect of the conversion process, which is the experience of the conversion. Such testimonies may be short and disregard certain aspects of their life experience which would be important for understanding religious change. As presented in Chapter 3, religious change is a rather long process which involves different key factors that influence the individual over time. This suggests that it might be an ambitious and challenging task to track an individual's entire journey towards Wicca without missing certain aspects of their process.

Thus, in an attempt to avoid missing important aspects of my interviewees' testimonies, I decided to use Gooren's (2010) conversion career model. The conversion experience, as religious participation, has to be part of one the five levels of the conversion career (pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation). Gooren's model proposes that several factor must be taken into consideration in order to have a thorough understanding of conversion and religious participation. Those factors include: cultural context, personal factors, social factors, religious factors, and contingent factors.

The rationale behind using this model lies in:

1) Its multifactorial approach acknowledges multiple factors that lead to religious change. As shown in Chapter 3, there are multiple studies on religious conversion which present various factors. This way of systemising the data makes the analysis more complicated to reconstruct and understand individuals' narratives of conversion. Gooren's model juxtaposes these factors into larger and clearer categories, which are more useful in analysing the narratives without omitting essential elements.

2) Gooren's model is a dynamic process which shows that the degrees of commitment can vary. His model does not present a unilinear process but proposes religious variety in terms of factors influencing religious activity, religious identities, intensity and sorts of religiousness. Such a model, that considers multiple affiliations and disaffiliations, promotes inclusiveness and is useful in analysing the conversion narratives of individuals who have been part of more than one system of belief.

3) It is an appropriate approach due to its high applicability and relevance to my group of study, Wicca. Gooren takes into consideration two other important elements that emphasis on the condition of individual religious change. These elements are the geographical and institutional dimensions. Gooren wishes his model to be inclusive in terms of spatiality and also globally applicable. Most of the previous wave of conversion literature had its main focus on North America and Western Europe, while Gooren dedicates an entire chapter on the study of conversion in Latin America. Such a universally applicable model is extremely useful for this research as Wicca is a sparse phenomenon, with sporadic members across regions. In terms of my study and Gooren's geographical dimension, Wicca is a diffused Western religion, common for English-speaking countries and countries in which English is a common second language. The institutional dimension is relevant to show how covens act as organised religious groups which contribute to the conversion process of Traditional Wiccans. The lack of institutional dimension is also important because it supports the argument that, because Solitary Wiccans are not part of a group of practice, then they do not convert to Wicca, but they affiliate.

Following this conversion career model, I decided that the research design for this paper should be based on a qualitative methodology. The use of this methodology is key in the

process of gathering subjective and robust information about the individual's conversion experience. For this research I used the qualitative interview, more specifically the semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview has the advantage to provide a balance between openness and structure. Its structure refers to the fact that the same questions were asked to all interviewees. This ensured equivalent coverage. While openness refers to the format of questions, which were open and direct. This type of format is referred to as open-ended questions, because they leave the interviewees free to answer the question in whatever way they want to (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015: 47). Another characteristic and advantage of the semi-structured interview was that in multiple occasion it was to my ability to ask further questions according to the responses or to what I believed to be significant replies (Bryman; 2012: 716). The sequence of questions or issues varied according to the interview flow. This means that I have adapted or changed questions on certain matters which seemed of interest for my study and which helped me grasp a better understanding vis-a-vis their narratives. Thus, although I was working from an interview guide and had the interview structured in a specific order, I was not restricted by it. This characteristic allowed me to explore interesting or even unexpected issues that rose during the interview. Using qualitative research provided a better kind of depth and insight into the reasoning behind becoming a Wiccan, that probably could not have been obtained as richly through quantitative methods. Therefore, my rationale for choosing semi-structured in-depth interviews was as Ritchie (2003: 141) argues they "are the only way to collect data where it is important to set the perspectives heard within the context of personal history or experience". In-depth interview allows for the interviewee's own voice to materialise and show new facets of a certain topic. Goode and Hatt (in Cicourel, 1964: 75) argue that the in-

depth interview can be understood "as a process of social interaction" or as Webb and Webb (1932: 130) suggest as "a conversation with purpose" where the interviewer and the interviewee actively participate and in which the intervention of the researcher is "determined by the participant's answers" (Ritchie, 2003: 141).

Although important in structuring and conducting this study, the way I collected and analysed the data was not limited to Gooren's model. Moreover, I would I argue that this study followed the principles of the Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Collecting the data and analysing the data occurred in parallel. Instead of applying specific theoretical frameworks to studies from my outset, I preferred to look for any type of relationships between my data and building theory. This was an important choice to make because initial decisions were still necessary to make regarding the direction of my study. Therefore, I started this chapter of my study by contextualising and exploring the decisions that have later contributed to this study's agenda.

4.2 Fieldwork and Data Collection

To achieve the objective of this study, it was necessary to get in contact with a wide range of individuals and the community they are part of. Dower (2001: 158) comments that "when working with a community, it is important to obtain a range of backgrounds in the selection of respondents". Bearing this in mind I used a purposive sampling and non-probability rationale when selecting my respondents, by which:

"Units are deliberately selected to reflect particular features of or groups within the sampled population … to ensure that all key constituencies of relevance to the subject

matter are covered … some diversity is included so that the impact of the characteristic concerned can be explored" (Ritchie, 2003: 78)

The pre-fieldwork time was a highly important moment for the success of the study. During this time, I ensured that I have access to participants through the most feasible routes. My first option was to directly approach Wiccan online groups, ask for permission and then start interviewing members. I did not considered the option of presenting myself as a non-affiliated, non-converted or newcomer because conducting fieldwork in such closed groups without the knowledge ("blessing") of the administrator or moderators would most certainly have negative consequences (e.g. being expelled or even banned from the group). Therefore, I paid close attention in checking all possible ethical issues before starting the fieldwork.

My second option was to recourse to my social network (e.g. Pagan or Wiccan friends) to gain access to some Wiccans. By doing so, it suggests that I have applied the snowball sample technique. This technique is suitable in research when members of groups are challenging to locate. The snowball sample technique implies identifying and gathering information from one or two Wiccans, followed by asking those members to further indicate other Wiccans who may be willing to participate in the study.

The fieldwork was conducted from February to July 2018: this five-month period was for gathering information from interviews. Following my initial plan, I identified a couple of Wiccan Facebook groups and approached their administrators. I sought entry to the online group by asking for the administrator's permission to post an invitation message to reach for possible interviewees. Although I was already a member of such groups, acquiring

permission means acceptance within the group and the group's rules. If members acknowledge that the administrator accepts my proposal, they may be more willing and more open to participate. For each group that I sought permission, it took about two to seven days to get a response. During this time, I continued to act as a regular member of the group.

I sent the same message to all administrators, in which I was presenting myself and giving an overview about my research[8]. In the end, I received permission to two out of three groups: "Solitary Wiccans" and "Wicca for Beginners!"[9]. The permission to conduct my research in *Wicca group 1* was immediately denied due to their negative attitudes towards "researchers and journalists". Their reply stated that they do not wish to be part of a "school project". Whether the group had previous internal or external issues, I am not aware. Shortly after this, I had to leave the group[10]. This incident was not a surprise for me, and I was prepared for such reactions as there are a few Wiccan groups and Wiccan websites where they specify who is accepted to join and who is not. This group did not contain such a message in their rules page. In addition to this, according to my experience with fringe groups and to the responses of some of my interviewees, Wiccans do not like to draw attention to themselves and do not like to be "exposed" due to constant stereotypes and misinterpretations that portray them as "Satan worshipers".

[8] The message is included in the Appendix.

[9] I also sought for permission to write the name of the two groups in which I have conducted my study. For this action I did not encounter any issues. For the other group, to which I was not granted access to potential participants, I did not ask for permission to mention their name. Therefore, I shall refer to this group as "Wicca group 1" as it was the first group I approached.

[10] Although I was not kicked out, or directly told to leave the group, they made it very clear that such individuals (researchers or journalists) are not welcome and that for the "overall wellbeing of the group" they hope there are no others like me in the group because they do not tolerate "such practices".

Permission for *Wicca for Beginners!* took about a week. At the time I started my fieldwork, the group listed six administrators. I sought to speak with the administrator I felt was more active on the group (i.e. posting, commenting and replying more often than others). The person directed me to a different person who was the owner of the page. The initial response was negative, giving the explanation that the page was an "all age group". After reassuring that I am bound to ethical formalities that forbid me to interview underage individuals, the owner granted me access and mentioned that it will be my responsibility to verify their ages before conducting any interview. Initially the owner agreed to take the interview first before reaching for others, however due to personal reasons the interview never took place, but I was given permission to post the invitation message on the forum.

Permission for *Solitary Wiccans* was less difficult. This group listed one administrator and three moderators. For this group, I reached directly for the administrator, who responded promptly and granted me access immediately. I first contacted *Wicca for Beginners!* in February 2018. Because there were not many individuals willing to participate from this group, in March 2018 I made the decision to contact *Solitary Wiccans*, which proved to have a positive impact, as most of my interviewees originate from this group.

Scheduling the interviews was another important aspect, as most of my participants lived in the United States or in Australia, therefore for interviews to be synchronous, meaning that our dialogue take place at the same successive instants of time, meetings had to be adjusted to the different time zones. The interviews were recorded using *OBS Studio*, which is a screen capture software that allowed me to record both sound and image.

4.3 The Profile of Participants

The study consisted of:

- Qualitative interviews with 32 participants analyse the reasons for leaving their former belief and converting/affiliating to Wicca (Paganism). The interviews took place in three different settings: 23 of them were conducted via Skype and Facetime, 5 were face-to-face, and 4 written. The duration of each interview varied, the shortest lasting approximately 40 minutes and the longest 120 minutes. There were 24 female participants and 8 male participants aged between 19 and 62. They originated from 7 different former religions[11]: 14 Catholics, 3 Orthodox Christians, 1 Protestant, 3 Baptists, 3 Presbyterians, 1 Evangelists, and 3 not specified Christians.

- Informal discussions with members on the forums to obtain information about reconstructing conversion/affiliation narratives, transformation of the individual's life and dissatisfaction stories with former life (religion). This included members who were signed up in the groups. Because there was no consent between me and the members I was interacting with in the groups (these were open discussions where every member could participate, by commenting or just reading), no material included in those conversations will be reproduced here under any form. Such information was used to help me have a better understanding of the information provided by the interviewees.

[11] Except one participant who was a second-generation Wiccan, and 3 participants who did not specify.

Table 3.1: List of Participants

Name*	Age	Sex	Conversion Age	Previous Religion(s)	Type**
Alberto	57	M	30	Catholic	S
Alisha	37	F	25	Protestant	T
Anna	50	F	38	Catholic	T
Ashley	19	F	16	Catholic	S
Brendan	37	M	13	N/S	S (ex. T)
Clarissa	40	F	37	Baptist	T
Denise	31	F	31	N/S	S
Dominic	28	M	17	Baptist	S
Evelyn	62	F	14	Presbyterian	S
Isabelle	44	F	40	Evangelist	S
Isaiah	28	M	20	Catholic	S
Jade	39	F	30	Presbyterian	S
Jennifer	31	F	28	Catholic	T
Julia	25	F	22	Christian N/S	S
Katherine	22	F	20	Catholic	S
Kelly	32	F	17	Roman Catholic	T
Lisa	48	F	40	Catholic	T
Maia	27	F	15	Catholic	T
Mark	33	M	16	Christian N/S	S
Matthew	26	M	25	Presbyterian	T
Morgan	31	F	30	Baptist	S
Nicola	43	F	25	Catholic	T
Rachel	27	F	25	Christian N/S	S
Rose	24	F	19	Orthodox	S
Sandra	24	F	12	Orthodox	S
Shery	23	F	N/A	Pagan/Wicca	S
Simon	29	M	25	Catholic	S
Stacy	25	F	N/S	Orthodox	S
Tracy	56	F	26	Catholic	S
Trevor	54	M	42	Catholic, Baptist	S
Vanessa	31	F	25	Catholic	S
Wendy	29	F	11	N/S	S (ex. T)

*To fully protect the anonymity of the participants, each of their names has been changed with pseudonyms.

**This category refers to the type of Wiccans: Traditional (T) and Solitary (S)

The number of Solitary practitioners outnumbers the one of Traditional practitioners. There were 23 Solitary participants, while only 9 Traditional participants. This might be part because the majority of my respondents came from a group called *Solitary Wiccans*, though the group is not restricting membership to Solitary practitioners only. This groups states in its rules page that:

"The purpose of the group is to exchange ideas, thoughts and feelings and share aspects of ourselves of that we wish to share. This is a place of tranquillity and no judgement, where our sisters and brothers can come together and unite"

Moreover, three interviewed Wiccans who declared themselves as being part of covens, therefore Traditional practitioners, were members of the *Solitary Wiccans* group. As explained at the beginning of Chapter 1, Traditional Wicca is composed of a couple of traditions. The Traditional Wiccans I interviewed came from various traditions. The tradition they were part of was not an important or decisive variable for this study because my interest laid not in the difference between covens, but in the difference between coven members and Solitary practitioners. And as argued by the beginning of 4.2, interviewing coven members from various Wiccan tradition meant that I have covered some diversity to reflect a better outcome of the characteristics of my conversion/affiliation argument.

4.4 The Interview Structure

The following sub-section contains four parts. The first part describes how I designed the questionnaire; the second part talks about the pilot stage of the interview; the third part describes how I conducted the interviews, and the final part describes the ethical considerations.

4.4.1 Designing the questionnaire

When designing the interview, I took into consideration two important aspects. These aspects consist of general and specific objectives. Those objectives led me to design the questionnaire as being divided into two core parts. The first part was composed by set questions, which were equally addressed to all participants. This part of the interview was intended to obtain general information about the interviewee's background. It referred to personal details such as their name, age, past religious background, age when they first encountered Wicca and age when they became part of Wicca, and the type of Wiccan member (i.e. Solitary or Traditional practitioner). Such information was crucial in establishing how long the conversion/affiliation process took place after their first contact to Wicca; how long they practised as solitary adherents before becoming part of covens, if they ever did. Such answers showed that the process of conversion/affiliation is a lengthy process and that each narrative is unique. The second part of the interview was structured more as an interview guide. Because this research was based on semi-structured interviews, this part of the questionnaire was composed of 15 questions meant to guide me as the interviewer. Additional questions were added throughout the interview where I felt clearer or more detailed answers should be given, or where I considered interesting aspects were brought forward and needed further exploration. Therefore, each interviewee structured their own narrative of conversion/affiliation and, as each of their stories were different, the development of the narratives was different. Some participants preferred to emphasise certain experiences or events while omitting others. For instance, a couple of the participants preferred to talk more about the negative parts of their previous churches; this aspect shed light on the positive experiences found when joining Wicca, regardless if it was

a conversion narrative or an affiliation narrative. Others, more precisely Solitary practitioners, placed more emphasis on the negative aspects of Traditional Wicca, such information reflected the dogmatic and authoritative nature of Traditional Wicca. Therefore, the use of the questionnaire was important because it ensured full coverage on all the topics on which this research is based. After conducting the pre-pilot interview, which will be described following this section, I tried to memorise the entire questionnaire to ensure the interview was fluid and natural, similar to a conversation between friends. Equally important to mention is that the use of the questionnaire satisfied the exploratory nature of this research.

4.4.2 Pre-pilot and pilot interview

Before starting the fieldwork, I conducted two pilot interviews. Pre-pilot and pilot are the two phases of a pilot interview (Gillham, 2005).

During the pre-piloting phase I tested the questionnaire and ask for critical feedback from the interviewed person. I applied the questionnaire to an acquaintance to identify any potential problems emerging from the questions. This phase was meant to permit me to experiment and prepare a well-structured interview, which, in turn, would assure a fluent conversation. The second phase consisted of running a real interview trial. Through this phase I looked at the interview holistically, as opposed to the pre-pilot one which only helped me to slightly adjust questions. To conduct a pilot interview, I needed a real case, which meant an individual from the segment of population I wished to study. Applying this last stage helped me make any last changes and adjustments to the whole questionnaire. This stage was crucial in adding or eliminating questions.

4.4.3 Conducting the interview

The interviews ran through five stages (Gillham, 2005):

The *preparation phase* begun before the interviews took place. In this phase I selected the number of participants and informed them about the research purpose, as well as making sure they were well informed about the interview requirements and the probable length of it. In this phase the participant and I agreed on a suitable date and time for the interview to take place. A couple of interviews had to be rescheduled a couple of times and a few of them eventually never took place due to various reasons. Most interviews were conducted online via Facebook messenger, Facetime and Skype, while the face-to-face interviews took place at my office and at local coffee bars.

The *initial contact phase* involved presenting myself as a PhD student, as well as giving a more detailed statement about what I was researching. Each individual that agreed to participate in the study received a three page "Information and Consent" form[12] a couple of days prior to the interview, so that they had time to understand, reflect and think upon any arising issues. During this phase, I asked for their signed form and briefly went through it to make sure their responses coincided with the form's ticked boxes: (1) I delivered all the information about confidentiality and anonymity. I reassured them that their personal cues will never be published without their consent, and that any other type of personal information will remain secure, and that only I will have access to it; (2) I informed them about their rights, such as being able to withdraw at any time or any refusal to answer a question was permitted; (3) made sure they agreed and felt comfortable with being recorded.

[12] The form is included in the Appendix.

In the *orientation phase* I explained the topics we would touch upon during the interview. Every participant had to organise their conversion narrative by considering three main themes: (1) previous religion and previous knowledge about magic and witchcraft; (2) their experience with witchcraft and key moments of affiliation and; (3) post-affiliation experiences.

The *substantive phase* refers to the interview's central core. I memorised the questionnaire guide to ensure fluent and natural dialogue. I aimed for robust and honest answers by giving them plenty of room to talk and avoiding leading questions, as well as avoiding interrupting them when they were highly engaged in answering the questions. Although talking in interviews cannot be perceived as "natural talk" or naturally occurring, I aimed for *rich talk,* meaning that I encouraged people to speak at length and develop their ideas as they wished (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015: 47). I made sure to gather every piece of information presented by my interviewees and encourage them to clarify or elaborate their answers when necessary. I remained open minded to all their thoughts, ideas and comments, and reformulated or added questions when necessary. In this way, I made sure I touched upon as many aspects as possible and fully understood their conversion narratives. The interviews lasted differently according to the participants' time. On average, I spent between 1 hour and 1 hour and a half per interview. There was no need for a second interview for any of the participants, as I tried to cover all aspects in one session, regardless of its duration. Most of my respondents were energetic and enthusiastic about the interview and answered all questions. One interview was more sensitive as the participant felt a little overwhelmed emotionally. We stopped for a couple of moments and then she

reassured me that she was well and wanted to continue the interview regardless of her reaction.

An important component of my research and a less easy post-interview task was to reconstruct their conversion narratives. Respondents would get excited over certain topics and less so about, or even ignore, others. To make sure I covered their whole conversion experience, I sometimes had to return to specific parts that appeared unclear or not fully described.

The *interview closure* phase is more of a social process. After having the questions answered, I asked them to make any last personal comments[13] or information that they felt they wanted to say and to be included in the study. Some participants had nothing else to add, but others were rather pleased by such a request and continued talking for a couple more minutes. I then thanked the respondents for participating in the interview and kindly asked them to refer my study to any other Wiccan they think might be willing to participate.

4.4.4 Ethics

Qualitative interviewers, Fetterman argues (1989: 120), "do not work in a vacuum, they work with people. They often prey into people's innermost secrets, sacred rights, achievements and failures". Thus, I have made sure that when conducting a research which some people might find sensitive, I would avoid any harmful impact.

[13] At the end of the interview, some participants asked if they can have a copy of final thesis. I was pleased about this request and promised to send an electronic copy once everything is finished.

Hammersley & Traianou (2012: 2) describe ethics as “a set of principles that embody or exemplify what is good or right or allow us to identify what is bad or wrong”. Thus, being ethical emphasises the morality of one’s actions. Or in other words, being ethical suggests that one is morally correct towards another individual. For my research, I took measures to ensure that ethical safeguards will be in place throughout the duration of this study. Through this I aimed to minimize any potential risk to my interviewees. Although my sampling frame was not expected to contain potentially vulnerable individuals, for some people, religion might be regarded as a sensitive subject. This issue presented a risk that some persons may become distressed either during or after the interview. However, prior to the interview, participants were given information about ethical assurances through an information sheet and an interview consent form (see Appendix). The information sheet stated that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any point without giving any explanations unless they want to. It clearly stated that there were no obligations to answer one or more questions if they did not wish to. The information sheet contained a clear explanation about the participant’s right to anonymity and confidentiality: any identifying cue, such as name, place or other personal detail, would be changed with pseudonyms. The interview consent form bears my participants’ printed names and signature. It consists of a couple of statements they had to acknowledge and agree on before starting the interview. The document also contains details about myself and the institution I am part of for any further contact. These types of forms have the advantage of fully informing the participant about the nature of my study, as well as the importance of my participants’ implication at the outset (Bryman, 2015). Due to my position as an overt researcher, deception was not a problem. Bryman explains that deception “occurs when

researchers represent their work as something other than what it is" (2015: 186). Prior to the interview, all my participants were informed about my position in this research, as well as what my study is about. Bryman also argues that deception in various degrees is widespread, because researchers usually wish to limit participants' understanding about their study. However, when needed, I was prepared to offer clear and well-defined explanations to all my participants regarding the study.

Thus, my research was designed and reviewed to ensure quality, integrity and also transparency by having all participants fully informed about the purpose and nature of the study and its implications; granting and respecting confidentiality and anonymity at all levels; stating clearly that participation is harmless and free from any coercion. Nonetheless, this study is fully independent: no funding has been provided, neither does it bare any conflicts of interest. Data collection only started once the research ethics committee at the University of Essex had given its approval.

4.5 Analysing the Data

After I finished the fieldwork, the analysis process went through two stages: observing the data and organising the data.

4.5.1 Observing the Data

During most of the interviews I was able to take field notes without disrupting the natural flow of my participants. The first step I took in making sense of data was to holistically look at the interviews. I listened to the recordings a couple of times while following the field notes and writing new comments or impressions. At this stage I built a table containing the participants' important details. As presented in Table 4.1, these details included: name, age,

sex, conversion age, previous religion affiliation and the type of their membership. Organising the data with such details helped have a first better impression related to the conversion/affiliation narratives. I also noted that some conversion/affiliation stories were similar and showed certain patterns.

4.5.2 Organising the Data

The first step in organising the data was to transcribe the interviews. Transcripts required time and effort; to ensure data was reproduced accurately, I repeatedly listened to the recordings. According to each audio recording, a transcription took between 6 to 10 hours. For each file of recording and transcript I allocated a pseudonym, therefore no document would contain the interviewees' personal names. Another document was produced which contained a full list of the pseudonyms and a couple of characteristics to that pseudonyms, such as time and date, place (i.e. Skype, written or face to face) and a short description of interview context. To avoid any delays in organising the data, most recordings were transcribed immediately after the interview finished. Therefore, by the end of my fieldwork in July 2018, all interviews were transcribed. Additionally, notes taken during the informal conversations I had on the Facebook groups were also put in a document. At this stage I organised my participants into two groups: those who are Traditional Wiccans and those who are Solitary practitioners. By segmenting and categorising the interviews into two main groups simplified the writing of each analysis chapter, because it allowed me to analyse them separately and see how each group's characteristics are different. During this stage I also focused on systemising their responses to answer the following key questions: which are the personal reasons to convert/affiliate?; which are the reasons for leaving their former religion?; how did Wicca appeal to their needs?; what does it mean to be a Wiccan?; how

would they describe their journey to becoming a Wiccan?. The qualitative data from the interview transcripts was analysed using narrative analysis. The NVivo data analysis software was used to analyse the basis of themes that emerged from the interviews. Both recordings and transcripts of the interviews were kept as encrypted files, using VeraCrypt software.

4.6 Limitations

The study is exploratory, and its findings ought not be considered as universally applicable or exhaustive. The in-depth interviews offer rich insights about the belief in Wiccan practice and conversion-affiliation membership to Wicca and the data collected could suggest a definite pattern, however, the outcome of the research cannot be generalized to the population due to its limited amount of sample size. By no means does this thesis offer a ubiquitous answer, applicable to all individuals that identify themselves as Wiccans, but to the small population of practitioners interviewed during my fieldwork. The claims I make within this thesis are based on the answers I received from my interviewees. Unlike any quantitative research, interviews as a qualitative research method give voice to individuals' meaning-making of the world, however an interviewee has the ability to build a world the truthfulness of which is difficult to check, unless other methods, such as participant observation, are included.

4.7 Planning and resources

The following research was undertaken by me alone. I drew on the voluntarily cooperation of the Facebook pages' administrators to enable data collection. My position as a member within the two mentioned groups helped facilitate access to participants. The research was conducted on a full-time basis (I was at my participants' disposal according to their

preferred time and date). There were no extra costs for carrying out this research, as no travel was needed and neither the participants were paid or reimbursed. The cost of specialist software that was needed for data collection and analysis were either free of charge (OBS Studio & VeraCryp) or covered by site licence (NVivo) available to me through the institution I am part of.

4.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to describe step-by-step the planning and execution of my research. My qualitative research was based on 32 in-depth interviews designed to explore and understand how individuals become Wiccan members. The outcome of this study shows that members undergo two different processes, which will be further analysed in the next three analysis chapters. The first process is that of conversion, which is typical for Traditional Wiccans and a discussion of this aspect will be fully analysed in the next chapter. The second process is that of affiliation, which is typical for Solitary practitioners and a discussion of this aspect will be fully analysed in the second chapter of analysis. The main method to study the conversion/affiliation processes was the semi-structured interview. This research had a flexible design which allowed more freedom during my data collection period. It was also flexible because the variables I was researching were not quantitatively measurable. The qualitative method was extremely useful for this type of study because it helped in tracking down the entire progression of events which the adherents underwent through their transition into a Wiccan member. The qualitative method helped provide personal and explicit information about feelings, beliefs, behaviours and opinions of individuals. Such information was effective in identifying factors which might have detrimental roles in the conversion/affiliation processes, and which otherwise might not be

evident, such as the influence of social network. Another main advantage for using the semi-structured interview was that I had the opportunity to produce a comparative conversion/affiliation analysis between Traditional and Solitary Wiccans. The main disadvantage for using qualitative methods is the considerable length of time required to gather information. Doing interviews and reconstructing narratives is a demanding task because it requires effort from both the researcher and the interviewee. This effort shall be put into words in the following analysis chapters that wish to reconceptualise the processes of conversion and affiliation applied on Wiccan adherents.

CHAPTER 5
A RELIGION WITH CONVERTS?

The following chapter will use the data from my interviews to challenge Adler's category of conversion and offer alternative accounts for interpreting her model. I will argue that, comprehended in certain ways, Wicca adherents either convert or affiliate, and that conversion models, such as the ones presented in the literature review, can be valuable tools for investigating membership to Wicca. Adler's analytical category of conversion is based on her belief that Neo-Paganism has a distinctive character in contrast to other religions. I will argue that this analytical category is, in fact, a useful component which facilitates the comparison of Traditional Wicca to other systems of belief. I will do so by providing in the first sub-chapter an account for Wiccan practices and demonstrate how such practices can be perceived as their communal practices, which are similar to other cults' practices, therefore establishing a similar character to New Age or New Religious Movements. In the second sub-chapter I will analyse Adler's so-called 'non-dogmatic' characteristic of Wicca, which is said to be configured by the freedom in practice and belief. I will then demonstrate that this uniqueness is, in fact, a common practice among other denominations and can be clearly observed within the practices of Wicca's Traditional covens, which are restricted by internal group norms. This chapter demonstrates that Adler was wrong to generalise all branches and traditions of Wicca as a unique movement and show that covens exercise their functionality similarly to other cults. This chapter sets the problem between conversion (Traditional Wicca) and affiliation (Solitary Wicca) and

demonstrates that Traditional Wicca represents those members that undergo a process of conversion, while Chapter 6 will demonstrate that Adler's analysis of a religion with no converts is better applied to Solitary Wiccans.

5.1 Wicca's common practices

Supported by evidence obtained from interviewees, the following subchapter presents Wicca's common practices and how these can be understood as Wicca's dogma. By exemplifying this, I challenge Adler's argument that Wicca has no dogma. According to the individuals interviewed, adherents encountered Wicca through individual reading or through their social network; and their attraction to it shows varied motivations. Such motivations include resacralisation of the earth, freedom of practice (including the freedom of which gods can be worshipped), connection with nature and natural phenomena (i.e. the movement of the moon, seasonal festivals), exploration of the human psyche and mysteries, its open ethos, feminist philosophy, and self-development. Such answers were consistent across the sampling frame. Answers were similar for individuals who have been practicing for a short period of time to those more experienced.

Alberto: *Wicca is […] freedom. Is like freedom of speech, but in a magical way. I don't want to say religious…but just magical. You work with nature and then nature works back with you. I am not constrained by any norms or unwritten laws. Wicca is an open playground to find myself by working with nature and the treasures nature gives us. […] For me, the earth is my altar, with I prey on and worship on. On most full moons I stand outside, bare feet, just to feel grounded to the earth, the grass…to just nature in general.*

Maia: *I feel I have all the richness in the world with Wicca because everything is just magic. Nature is magic. Every single being that is found in the natural chain has a purpose. […] I used to like sitting at the beach and listen to the sound of the sea, and later, after became more found of Wicca, I realised that that is my way to recharge my energy. That is how I reconnect with nature.*

Brendan: *The difference in wicca is that it's a particular practice, all rituals, and all spells and things like that are done inside a circle, like a sacred circle that you draw up with energy, or they are done in front of an altar with specific tools and practice methods, whereas green witchcraft goes away from all of the hierarchy and all of the, as I would say, pompon ceremony or stuff and it really has more of a connection with your relationship with Mother Earth itself, so actually being active in your relationship with the earth. So not so much of just a practice and saying I care about nature, but more of, you know, if you're out and about as a person. When I was part of another circle, which was a green witch circle, we would actually go out into nature and we would clean out rubbish and we would get involved in ocean walks and stuff like that and clear away rubbish and things like that, so it was more environmental as spiritual, but it still has the attachments of witchcraft, so it still has the main principles of witchcraft, but it's more nature driven, so it's about your love for nature and the environment and the people within it.*

Alberto, Maia and Brandan's stories are important because they show not only the connection to nature and nature's energy that most of my informants have described but also another more practical side of it. An important aspect of Wicca is the freedom of choosing which Gods suit better their personal aspirations, or, as in some cases, which Gods *choose* to act as spiritual guidance in their esoteric journey. Most of my interviewees

invoked a *calling*, either through lucid dreaming or during their daily activities, that was detrimental for their conversion experience.

Maia, along other interviewees, mentioned that Wicca is magic. There is no doubt that the word magic is highly important in the practice of Wicca. Wiccan author Scott Cunningham (2001: 6) notes that "in Wicca, magic is used as a tool to sanctify ritual areas, to improve ourselves and the world in which we live". However, he also argues the Wicca is not only magic: "Many people confuse Wicca with magic as if the two words were interchangeable. Wicca is a religion that embraces magic. If you seek only to practice magic, Wicca probably isn't the answer for you" (2001: 6). There is the possibility that some individuals may become Wiccans because they want to practice magic in directly instrumental ways, such as practicing charms, healing, fortune-telling, binding, curse removal, love magic and others alike. However, the discussion regarding magic I had with my interviewees suggested that for them the directly instrumental ways were not as important as the philosophical aspect of magic was. Through this I mean that interviewees were more interested in seeing magic as a means to improve their lives and return energy back to nature. This is exemplified in the next interview extract:

Tracy: *I haven't been a Wiccan for a very long time, but I know this is a lifelong journey anyway, as everyday you learn something new about yourself. Through Wicca, so far, I learned that magic means to know yourself, to learn how you are or who you are. For me, the magic in Wicca means a self-discovering journey.*

This collective of answers is similar to testimonies present in Harrington's (2005: 31) studies, that cite the following:

> “ "It seemed to encapsulate a lot of things that I believed in which I had worked out for myself" and "It felt right for me. It felt suddenly... I was presented with a religion which actually believed in the sort of things I believed, which didn’t seem to have a home. It felt very comfortable." ”

A very interesting narrative is presented by Jade, a 39 year old ex-Presbyterian. She converted to Wicca when she was 30. Her journey of conversion was short and abrupt but confessed she never had doubts about choosing the magical path. Her story is extremely valuable because she is the only informant to include Christian-Jewish mythology in her belief.

Jade: *I was still Presbyterian when I felt there is another calling for me. One night I had a dream. I saw Lilith and heard God. And I knew from that moment that they are my guidance. In Wicca, you have the Lord and the Lady, or the Goddess and the Horned God. I believe that Christianity and Paganism intertwine, and we can actually learn from both and grow spiritually. I know it might sound weird…like, combining Christianity with witchcraft is like a total no-no, but this is how I found my balance. I know Lilith called me because she was the first woman created and she is equal to the man. I truly believe that humans on Earth are meant to be equal despite your sex, beliefs, nationality…you name it. So, I guess I was just drawn to her because of that.*

This story is important because, unlike my other informants, Jade includes elements from Christian mythology, like Lilith and God. She said that to her, God is a ubiquitous entity that does not belong to just one religious denomination, but to anyone who needs guidance in their spiritual journey. Another similar example comes from Rachel’s narrative, a 27 year old

ex-Christian, who incorporated Egyptian mythology in her practices because she felt she was called by some specific Egyptian gods.

Rachel: *I feel like they chose me. Because when I first started looking into Wicca I started looking into Celtic deities because my bloodline generation go… are almost 100% Scottish so I've been looking into Celtic deities and nothing really rang through, and then one day I just couldn't get goddess Isis out of my mind, and that went on for a few days and I said ok I will sit and meditate on this and I got this sort of beautiful vision about goddess Isis coming and blessing me and being like "I am going to empower you and teach and share knowledge". And for a long time it was just her […] and so there was a very strong condition in my mind that women are lesser than men. And so for a very long time the only deity I felt connected to was the goddess Isis and I feel like that was because I need to recognise the strength of the woman and really have that part of my mindset before it was beneficial for me to work with the god. And then about a year later I felt the god Osiris calling me and so now I worship them in tandem along with the goddess Serket […] But yeah I felt like they chose … called to me, and I work with them because of that.*

Calling on William James' (1902) approach to religious experience, the importance of these interviews is not to persuade whether there is a truth in their beliefs, or a complexity in their *dogma*, but to establish their experiences of transcendence, their mystical ecstasy. Jade's belief does not stray too far away from her initial religious background; but she builds upon it, enriching it with anagogic significance. Whereas Rachel dives into a completely new mythical universe and embraces it based on her extrasensory experiences. Why do people like Jade and Rachel believe in magic? The magic cosmos is a universe filled with mystical possibilities, in which rationality plays no main role. However, rationalism does not make

the magical cosmos abscond, neither is it important in explaining whether superstition, wizardry or supernatural experiences occur. It is almost impossible to explain such occurrences based on rational grounds, as such experiences are not the type of material on which rationality functions. On the same note, explaining their belief in magic and supernatural power can be similarly compared to why the Christian believes in Jesus or why the Muslim believes in Allah. There is no rational answer to this unless the conversion reasons presented in the literature review chapter are taken into account. This only brings more similarities between Wicca and any other form of religion or spirituality. Jade and Rachel's narratives, among other similar narratives, testify to a near-universal conviction that an imaginary, imperceptible world could possibly influence human life. I use the word "imaginary" in this context not to show that the act of believing in magic is synonym with fiction, but as poet William Blake would use, as describing what one would look "not with but through the eye". In a universe where magical possibilities are unlimited, as in Wicca, imagination is key, and so are witches and gods and spirits and charms. Thus, in this discussion, the importance of analysing such testimonies is not whether they reflect the truthfulness of Wicca, but how magic is mapped and how the self perceives the conversion/affiliation imagination.

Invoking the divine, the Gods and the Goddesses is an important aspect of the Wiccan identity because it channels the individual in a particular state of trance. The process of invoking, alongside other communal practices, such as burning sage, casting a spell circle or bringing offerings, possesses similar meanings to the genuine Wiccan, but are performed differently according to the solitary practitioner or the traditional one. The very essence of the process of invoking lies in the transcendence from mundane consciousness to mystical

trance. Such rites constitute important experiences in the life of the adherents, as they become vessels for divine empowerment. For the solitary, this process is performed in solitude; and the adherent acts both as their own priest and priestess, and divine vessel. For traditional Wiccans[14] which are part of a convent, this performance acts as a poem of ambivalence between the divine feminine (the Sun) and the divine masculine (the Moon) and are performed by the Priest and Priestess for the magico-religious trance of the coven. Although the latter performance is more ceremonial in nature, both have the aspect of liturgy. Liturgy, as a *religious* phenomenon represents a customary worship that establishes the connection with a divine agency which the Wiccan or the coven channel directly. This is a sacred communal response to the patron god(s) through various activities which ultimately aim to praise and supplicate (Crowley, 1996). Most of the interviewees who have taken part in such ceremonial practices have claimed to have beneficial outcomes and feel 'more charged with positive energy':

Clarissa: *It is a very enlightening experience. I feel like I am connecting with all the living organisms around me, but at the same time, I feel the empowerment given by my gods. It is a special moment because you realise you are so little, but you carry so much. You come to realise that the feminine is not the counterpart of the masculine or vice versa, but they are one. And you become one with them. It is a long moment of meditation when you are truly sincere with yourself and acknowledge how small you are in this world but also how important your existence is. […] Yes, it has actually helped cope with a lot of things. One of them is my anxiety. It calms me down, it balances the way I think and feel. During the Sabbaths, while I connect with my gods, I also use a breathing technique that I learnt from*

[14] A person who is part of a coven is called an initiate. This word derives from the fact that the person has went through the process of a Year and a Day and has been initiated into Wicca in that coven.

one of our brothers and it truly helps me focus not on my blessings but also with the non-Wiccan world.

In some respects, this ritual (liturgy) appears to be similar to what New Age practitioners would call 'channelling' (mediumship), which refers to the act of communicating with a dead spirit through the practice of a medium (O'Keeffe, 2005). In this case, the medium(s) is represented by the Priest and Priestess, while the 'dead spirit' is represented by the god(s). This association does not search to belittle Wiccans' practice to fraudulent acts which the medium/psychic industry faced during the nineteenth century (Brandon, 1984), but to show a similitude to other mythological elements and to challenge Margot Adler's view on the uniqueness of Wicca. The fact that this Wiccan ritual represents a transformatory experience for the adherent by utilising their tangible corpus as a divine vessel for the supernatural power may also recall on Rudolph Otto's (1950[1923]) notion of *numinous*. The term addresses religious experience as a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self" and he suggests that it is the core of all religions:

> "The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its "profane," non-religious mood of everyday experience. [...] It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures" (pp. 12-13)

The gods that Wiccans take as guidance in their spiritual journey are believed to be manifestations of the Divine within humanity. Mainstream religions, such as Christianity, are

primarily concerned with life beyond death and other-worldly sanctification of the soul, whereas New Age spiritualities focus on the present human life. While some adherents might be interested in life beyond death, reincarnation and the energy carried through past and future lives, the main argument that contrasts Wicca as having an other-worldly orientation is the sacralisation of the body and the immediate responses of the body and the mind to different stimulations. This sacralisation can take different forms; such as in Clarissa's example presented above, who copes with her anxiety through meditation during Sabbath. Another example of sacralisation of the body is also exemplified in the following interview extracts:

Anna: *The Spiral Dance is one of my favourite moments because I celebrate who I am and how I feel. […] I embrace myself and accept myself for who I am – body and mind. I feel like my body becomes my temple. It is one of the few moments when I feel fully proud of being a woman, with or without any flaws, a life-bringer, a flower in full bloom.*

The body has spiritual importance, it has a sensuous, mysterious meaning, which acts as a manifestation of the this-worldly orientation. Such statements also bring into question issues regarding a self-ethnic orientation of the Wicca adherent, of which some scholars argue as being an important characteristic of the New Age movement (Hanegraaff, 1998; Heelas, 1996). The bodily presence, the self-growing and self-transformation processes that my interviewees narrated do point out, to a certain degree, to the 'I am God' motif, in which it can be understood that the self becomes the creator of their individualistic world, which is one of the most common convictions of the New Age movement (Hanegraaff, 1998). Hanegraaff's argument of the New Age as being self-ethnic can only be applied to Wicca if we accept an atheistic imagination:

> "The gods that earlier generations believed in, as supernatural beings existing apart from humanity, turn out to be mere projections of the human mind. It is humanity that creates gods instead of the opposite." (1998: 113)

The corpus of qualitative data I gathered shows that individuals truly believe in the existence of supernatural beings. They do not invent their own gods, but they re-enchant their present individualism with past imagery of set mythological entities. Hanegraaff's statement does not make Wicca stand apart as New Age, but it deconstructs all religions and spiritualities to pure fabrications created by humankind. From an atheistic-enlightenment point of view, such statement would make perfect sense: Gods and belief systems are unreal, and their only purpose exhibits mechanical solidarity that maintains homogeneity of the individuals. This, then, only leaves Wiccans as mere folklore enthusiasts with environmentalist tendencies. However, Wicca does not lack structure: a belief in the Old Gods or divinity is fundamental to Wicca. The following extracts show what the interviewed adherents believe Wicca implies:

Anna: *Wicca is an **organised religion**, which necessitates the belief in a goddess and a god. However, it is possible to be a witch without being a Wiccan. If you take the Horned God and the Lady of the Moon out of the **religion**, then it is no longer Wicca. It is in the same way, for instance, if you take Jesus Christ out of Christianity, then it is no longer Christianity*

Alberto: *Wicca is **a religion** which includes the Old Gods. Should you want to practice magic but not worship then you are a Wizard, Witch, Magician, Sorcerer, or whatever other term you prefer, but you are not considered a Wiccan.*

Simon: *I do not believe in deities, I would rather refer to them as energy. All things are made of energy so therefore they can be manipulated. Magic, in a nutshell, means to manipulate one energy by mixing another energy into it. Pretty much, this is the way in which we*

manipulate our environment to better match our needs. Each goddess or god is particularly attributed to an energy. Take for instance Thor, which is the god of thunder and lightning and war, or Aphrodite, which is the goddess of love. In my view, the deities are purely ***personifications of specific energy sources****. So, I do not call on Aphrodite for love. What I rather do, is to manifest the energy I desire and then work with it accordingly. Think of it like this, if the gods are the power and then we have the capability to manipulate and use such a power to suit our needs, then who is stronger? […]* ***A coven that has no religion, I think, would be more like, let's say, a laboratory for experimenting with energies****.*

Having Wicca's common practices established and detailed by interview extracts from Wiccan practitioners, the following section will analyse how those practices can viewed as being part of a dogma.

5.2 Traditional Wicca – Challenging Adler's religion with no converts

Based on the analysis of Wicca's common practices, presented in the section above, the second part of this chapter will demonstrate how Adler's argument can be reinterpreted. In this section I will show that Traditional Wicca is a part of the movement that has dogma, and to which individuals undergo a joining process that is similar to conversion models presented in the literature review chapter. This section also sets out the main differences between Traditional and Solitary which will further be discussed in the next chapter.

Adler states that Paganism has no converts because it does not follow a traditional recruitment process: "you will find no one handing you Pagan leaflets on the street or shouting at you from a corner" (pp. x), but individuals "in most cases, word of mouth, a discussion between friends, a lecture, a book, or an article provides the entry point" (pp.

14). Adler presents two scenarios in which the individual could or could not come to acknowledge Paganism. Her first setting represents a public space in which the interaction takes place between strangers. The way in which Adler is envisioning this suggests an image of the aggressive street-corner preacher who is distributing and communicating their propaganda and demanding for a positive response from the public. Such preachers or strategies seek for anonymous attention; they do not target a specific population, but they strip the individuality of a person and search for nameless individuals that can numerically contribute to their cult. The convert is a *passive self* because, in such a setting, conversion is something that just *happens to* them. The second setting that Adler presents suggest a friendlier-more intimate scenario, where the individual is not aggressively presented with Pagan ideologies, but they are in a comfortable setting in which the conversation occurs between them and familiar faces. It shows a small-scale setting in which participants are recognised as individuals making rational decisions and who create and control the situation. This situation entails an *active self*, in which the individual actively contributes. Adler seems to try to argue her understanding of conversion based on the image of the passive self which once fallen for the persuasions of the preacher, it loses its individuality:

> "Almost every religious group that has received massive exposure in the press, from the Hare Krishna movements to the Unification Church to the People's Temple, lies outside the Pagan resurgence. The many hundreds of Pagan religious groups, by and large, stand in contrast and opposition to these authoritarian movements" (pp. xi-xii)

Adler clearly delineates that Paganism has no dogma and no authority. The only authority that seems to be present lies within the individual, which, in her view, promotes a sense of divinisation of the active self:

> "The world is holy. Nature is holy. The body is holy. Sexuality is holy. The mind is holy. The imagination is holy. A spiritual path that is not stagnant ultimately leads one to the understanding of one's own divine nature. Thou art Goddess. Thou art God. Divinity is imminent in all Nature. It is as much within you as without." (pp. ix)

As argued above, Wicca is a journey of self-reflexivity and self-sacralisation, which leads to a self-ethic orientation, which in turn is a characteristic of the New Age movements. Given Adler's own understanding of conversion as something *happening to* someone and her view on Paganism that mirrors New Age tendencies, she then does not distance Wicca from 'cults and odd sects', but, on the contrary, she indirectly compares them. One way in which she does this is by presenting her understanding of dogma, which seems to function like her understanding of conversion. Adler understands dogma as a set of explicit beliefs, based on inflexibility and control, which the individual must consent to during the process of conversion. Indeed, the uniformity of Wicca cannot be enforced because there is no official structure of authority to regulate it. However, Adler does state that "while Neo-Paganism and modern Wicca are very anarchistic religions and it is probably wrong to say all Pagans believe this or that, there are some basic beliefs that most people in this book share" (pp. ix). Such beliefs, as discussed in first part of this chapter, like the divination of the self and nature or the belief in the Goddess and her consort the Horned God, are communal beliefs of Wicca, which, as argued, do have a structure whether they are religiously followed by its adherents or not. Adler also uses her personal experience to express the way she converted to Paganism, however, her narrative fails to demonstrate how Paganism has little in common with contemporary cults. Her *conversion* narrative is similar to what a *Moonie* experienced after converting to the Unification Church:

> "like most Neo-Pagan, I never converted in the accepted sense – I never adopted any new beliefs" (Adler, 1979: 20)

> "we continue to represent the Church we used to attend but with a different emphasis and more accurate destination. For example, I have looked for the good in the Catholic church, and I embrace it. I actually feel more strongly Catholic than I ever did in my life" (Fichter: 174)

The claims are similar in the sense that there is continuity between an individual's past and present. Such experience can also be observed in my research, in Jade's narrative present earlier, on how she re-interpreted her former Judeo-Christian belief and adapted it to her present spiritual path. Another example from my corpus of research presents a similar version of belief re-interpretation and continuity under a new form:

Matthew: *I see the Old Gods as symbolic imagery of the different things and actions I see or do or happen. I believe in Mother Earth as my Goddess, but then, even before I converted to Wicca, I have always been drawn to nature and believed that nature has her own spirit*.

All three claims, of becoming a Neo-Pagan, a Moonie and a Wiccan suggest that the process may have several things in common, whether their emphasis is on doctrinal orthodoxy or orthopraxy is structurally differently or not. The most evident argument is their self-direct intellectual quest towards spiritual wisdom, which is also a strong argument for many other denominations. Such stories suggest that individuals remember their conversion journey as a gradual process, involving a series of actions in which long-held memories and intuitions have slowly led them to a new set of re-invented beliefs. This process of re-articulation and re-awakening indicate that the conversion processes demand a more nuanced view.

In defining the process in which individuals initiate themselves into magical practices, Luhrmann (1989: 336) similarly suggests like Adler that "magic does not require an explicit endorsement of a specific creed, or of the teachings of a particular teacher". She acknowledges that becoming a magician is a learning process in which the practitioners

change their *habits*, making magical assumptions seem possible and credible. In adopting new habits, the magician ends up performing a set of rites and practices that are communal within the magical society. Learning magic is a solitary quest. To Luhrmann, becoming a magician is like becoming a specialist in some type of activity, a process which is never sudden but develops gradually, thus she does not refer to this journey as conversion but as 'interpretive drift'. Her theory points out to a retrospective realisation, in which if the individual is to become a magician they must first act like one and then belief will follow. However, her account of 'interpretive drift' does not necessarily demonstrate something unusual. William James (1902: 169) discussed a similar gradual type of conversion, in which the individual's transformation consists "in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits". Luhrmann not only distinguishes the interpretive drift from sudden conversion, but also from the process of socialisation. As mentioned above, she claims that for one to be called a witch, then one must first act like a witch. However, in order to act like a particular entity belonging to a particular sub-culture, the individual must first acknowledge their identity and associate with their otherness. To fully explain how socialisation actually plays an important role in introducing individuals to the magical world, and how Luhrmann's interpretive drift is in fact what William James described as a gradual conversion process, I will use the story of Brendan, a 37 year old man who found witchcraft and converted to Wicca from a very young age:

Brendan: *So, I was 13 when I walked into a magic shop and I had a few questions that I asked and basically from that I was invited to join a coven. Yeah, obviously, I had a few questions that they weren't expecting […] But the first year and a day I've been in the coven... like we caught up on esbats and sabbaths, which are the main festivals and,*

basically, moon workshops, where they give you things that you need to study, and, basically, guidance, tools of practice and stuff like that. So, it gives you like an understanding of how all these things are inter-related. This may sound a bit funny, or it may not... ever since I was younger, like a little kid, I can't actually remember at what point, but I've always been quite intuitive, I've had the ability to say things, and feel things and experience things and never actually knew that what I was experiencing, seeing or feeling was any different from anybody else, until I started voicing it to other people. And then, my parents weren't religious in any way, so we weren't involved in religious churches and stuff, and my parents always did talk about, kind of like aliens or ghosts or stuff like that around the home. I always found that fascinating, I wanted to know more and it wasn't something that was necessarily again my family in any way, but I had a lot of questions from a young age, especially when I found out that other people weren't experiencing the same things that I was, or I would see things or feel things in other people and I learnt to realise that these things that I was feeling or seeing were actually correct.

Wiccans, or to use Luhrmann's term, magicians form a collective, to which individuals recognise members as part of their creed and in which they form new social relationships. Without this socialisation individuals could not be introduced into the circle of magic practitioners. Whether this collective is represented by a coven, a festival, a lecture hall or any other social setting, the individual meets other people at different stages of conversion (commitment) along similar spiritual paths. This contact can also be insignificant or can mark the beginning of a long relationship. The newcomer's social relationship may be diffused; but, however it might be, the individual is somehow socialised into Wicca. Socialisation does constitute a context for initiation for the newcomer. Brendan's example shows that he

already had some knowledge prior to entering the magic shop. The magic shop, as a social setting, served him as a ramp for initiation into magic. Prior to entering the shop, he did not act as a Wiccan, however, he did have some beliefs in magic, which remained consistent throughout his adulthood. Brendan's so-called 'interpretive drift' was, in fact, a gradual process of conversion: he was aware of some magical possibilities, he searched for answers, he found a group of like-minded individuals who were willing to make him part of their community, and this eventually led to his full commitment to Wicca. Brendan's motif for conversion could be explained by Lofland and Skonovd's (1983) *revivalist motif* which suggests that individuals convert to a certain religious movement as a result of their experience within an emotionally incited group. For Brendan and many others in my corpus of research, this was a revelatory experience, a self-directed search for his spiritual growth and an opportunity to associate himself with a larger spiritual community which shared his beliefs. If Brendan's conversion can be categorised as a gradual conversion process, it is challenging to say why other similar narratives cannot. Thus, if Brendan's story is described as conversion, Wicca cannot be considered anymore to be an incomparable spiritual movement. It will, nevertheless, be a unique and transformatory experience for the member, which shows that people do change, and people do become Wiccans, but it will also demonstrate that Neo-Paganism is a spirituality to which people convert as active decision-making selves.

Recalling Adler's argument, Neo-Paganism's specificity lies in its depiction as a spirituality that searches to secure the individuality of one's group through specific social and religious strategies and withstand any comparison that would categorise it into any broader classification. This distinctiveness is also satirically described by William James (1902: 10):

> "The first thing the intellect does with an object is to class it along with something else. But any object that is infinitely important to us and awakens our feels to us also as it must be sui generis and unique. Probably a crab would be filled sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. "I am no such thing," it would say; "I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone."

Thus, because the study of religion tends to use comparison as a tool to enact understandings about a specific group, it is very important to carefully explore such allegations of uniqueness that Adler so vehemently states. There is, though, some validity in Adler's argument of Neo-Paganism being a religion without converts based on imprudent perceptions of new religious and New Age movements. Such perceptions describe cults with attributes like conformity, authority, and dogma, which to a large extent are not typical for Wicca, or Neo-Paganism in general. A closer look at what cults are and, why Adler and other members alike have a hostile attitude towards such a comparison, is then needed. Colin Campbell (1972), for instance, believes that cults are new expressions of religion, which are mostly products of Western social environments. He suggests that Western societies grow a 'cultic milieu' which identifies numerous forms of mysticism. Here he points to a variety of techniques of divination, complementary medicine or other occult beliefs. This belief is opposed to any institutionalized forms of religion. Thus, the cult is more characterized by an expression of "radical religious individualism" (Troeltsch, 1931: 377), where the individual's interest in mysticism mostly embraces aspects of contemporary culture. In this fashion, the cult is merely a creation of individualistic aspirations that have a more idealistic and aesthetic form rather than a mere expression of religiosity.

There are also other accounts of contemporary cultic milieu that do not necessarily include traditional expressions of religiosity but may have incorporated some secular activities. In this case, Steve Bruce (1996: 82) argued about cults as being "a small loosely knit group

organized around some common themes and interests but lacking a sharply defined and exclusive belief system" and that "each individual member is the final authority as to what constitutes the truth to salvation". What Bruce seems to point out is that a cult does not necessarily claim to hold the unique religious 'truth' regarding divine salvation but focuses more on the individual's well-being within the group. For him, the cult is understanding and tolerant of its members. However, being too selective in their acceptance of doctrines and having customers rather than true devotees, cults are more likely to be unstable and short-lived. As per Bruce's writings, the members of a cult seem to rather pick small indefinite amounts of information, beliefs, thoughts or other specific elements that better suit their lifestyle. Because he sees members as consumers rather than devotees, Bruce is also adamant that the cultic milieu is very much influenced by fashions of today's culture and that it offers no great systems of morality. In other words, cults are merely insignificant forms of religion with no clear-cut framework of either beliefs or practices. Even though they may have a spiritual gloss, cults are mostly preoccupied with human potential and self-oriented improvements.

Another view regarding cults and their members is offered by Stark & Bainbridge (1980), who believe that individuals are calculating actors that are dealing with a system of 'rewards'. They too believe that cults are a product of today's culture that became so popular in the West due to their adaptation to the individuals' emotional and spiritual needs. The difference in their analysis is that cults are not necessarily superficial, but innovating forms of religiosity. Their analysis of cults resembles one of the general religious understandings. Stark & Bainbridge speak of a system of 'rewards' which can be defined as a web of spiritual needs and desires, such as prosperity, wealth, good luck in life, good health

or even answers to ultimate meaning questions. In such cases, the individual is willing to incur a surcharge in exchange for the rewards. Stark & Bainbridge (1985) also refer to 'compensators' as a different spiritual system where the individual is convinced that rewards are obtained once they perform certain rituals or practices, either mentally or physically. In this context, a person thinks that somewhere in the future, a supernatural entity will reward them accordingly to their spiritual behaviour. This is, though, the very essence of religion and religious beliefs, where one is compensated in the afterlife for compliance with one's beliefs and practices. What is different in Stark & Bainbridge's argument is that cults may be a different substitute in the way people cope up with their emotional needs in society; whereas old established religions may lack or are not able to provide for such needs. Regardless of their religious or commercial nature, cults are new forms of spiritual expression particularly concerned with the requirements brought forth by the modern condition.

Another complex insight about cults is again described by Stark & Bainbridge (1985), who have identified three types of cultic organisations. The first to speak about is the *audience cults*. These cults require the least involvement between leaders and members. Individuals within this group are most likely to limit their interaction with the cult to just mail ordering, plastic media goods or occasional participation to organized events. The second group is called the *client cults*. These cults are described as a more structured organization. Initially, Stark & Bainbridge argue, these types of cults used to focus more on various forms of spiritualism, such as healing miracles or astrological prognoses. Later, they turned into groups promoting the fulfilment of human potential. These cults can be usefully compared with New Age movements, as both seem to embrace different counter-cultural values and

to emphasise on holistic therapies. The third and last group Stark & Bainbridge (1985) describe are the *cult movements*. These ones presuppose high commitment and emotional implication. They mostly forbid followers to adhere to other religious movements and may completely dominate one's life. These cultic groups may resemble the inquires demanded within the New Religious Movements, where a system of morally ascribed rules is present and where followers, depending on the cult's orientation towards the world, have a clearly defined perception over what types of supernatural beliefs and practices are accepted or not (Hunt, 2003; Wallis, 1984). Neo-Pagans and magic practitioners share the trait of eclecticism; they do not hold rigidly to a singular set of assumptions, but they draw upon multiple traditions and mythologies. Stark & Bainbridge (1985) identify an extensive diversity among cult movements. What would seem to trouble Adler the most in Stark & Bainbridge's analysis is their statement arguing that in such cults "little more than modest financial support, attendance at group functions, and **assent to the truth of the cult doctrines is asked of members**" (pp.29; emphasis added). Adler's main argument is mostly based on the assumption that the cult is non-dogmatic and non-authoritarian, and that it promotes freedom in religious practice and belief. The following interview extract illustrates that there are, in fact, rules in Wicca and, moreover, not all practices should be deemed as acceptable. Kelly has been practicing Wicca as a solitary for thirteen years and became initiated in the Alexandrian tradition for a year.

Kelly: *I like with this day and age information is everywhere. Whether the information is good or bad, or not necessarily bad but misinformed or not correct or half way there, is another thing. And I think with Wicca people get very excited, they think 'oh well this is a religion where I can do everything I want. I can create everything I want, I can be anything I*

want. If it feels good, I am going to do it' and then they are labelling it with Wicca, where in fact they are just doing witchcraft. Not that that's bad, ***but there is a structure to Wicca****, there is a bare bone to it. Now that, the information that is put out like the Farrars' or even in Doreen Valiante's book they give that outer court information, that's the structure of Wicca. And then people are taking that and are like 'eh I don't want to do that, I want to do something else' and then they put in whatever they want. And that's fine, but then they are still calling it Wicca and it's not the case. And I think with the overflood of information now and the feel-good movement of the 90's it's kind of … and I hate to say it because I hate when other people say it, but it has watered down even the outer court information. And it's kind of sad because I see some genuine seekers who get lost in that. They get kind of stuck in the kitty pool and they don't know how to get out and they turn away from the religion and they find something else that kind of fits but doesn't really … and sometimes if they just kept pressing on, if they found some solid information or if they went back in time to see about where Wicca originated from and started from there maybe they would have found British traditional Wicca and sort that out … maybe sort out more credible sources and stayed solitary … it's hard when you have 20 people telling you that Wicca is doing whatever you feel like, do whatever feels good and then you have that one trained British traditional person saying that's not what it is, not even in the solitary movement this is not how it's supposed to be. And then you get shut down and you draw out … it's kind of sad because I feel like Wicca just kind of … you are stunting it's growth, it's kind of knowing it down before it even had a chance, because all these people are trying to make it into something it isn't or bent it to their own will and snuggle a label on it.*

Adler (1979: ix) does however cautiously testify that there is some sort of doctrine present: "while New-Paganism and modern Wicca are very anarchistic religions and it is probably wrong to say all Pagans believe this or that, there are some basic beliefs that most people […] share". Such a statement could suggest a communal identity that Wiccans share. The fact that there are elements in Wicca that might function as doctrine denotes a possibility to analyse magic practitioners as being part of a *modern cult movement* (Hunt, 2003). Given Adler's effort to describe Wicca as a religion that remains anti-authoritarian and standing against the totalistic political and religious views promoted in the Western societies, it probably would not be wrong to interpret these assertions as being Wicca's most communal doctrine. Adler defends her beliefs by arguing that

> "if you go far enough back, all our ancestors practiced religions that had neither creeds nor dogmas, neither prophets nor holy books […] It is these polytheistic religions of imminence that are being revived and re-created by Neo-Pagans today." (pp. ix)

Indeed, if we go far enough back, we might identify some religions that were lacking institutional structure. However, coven-based Wicca, as Kelly stated above in the interview, is based on certain traditions, such as Dianic, Gardnerian or Alexandrian, which follow the teachings of certain individuals whom at one point in their life or career acted maybe not as prophets, but as spiritual leaders, a fact which, in turn, is characteristic to New Religious Movements.

As argued above by some adherents in the interview extracts, Wicca has structure and norms. Those norms could refer to the deities the coven chooses to worship and the way they wish to conduct their liturgy. All members are expected to participate in the meetings and perform the chosen practices. But to do so and to fully be considered a member of a

coven, the individuals need to undergo a rite of initiation. Vivianne Crowley (1996: 96-7) argues that "Wicca is an esoteric religion with an initiatory religious and magical system" and that "initiation is a rebirth and a spiritual awakening". A similar process is suggested by Crowley for the solitary practitioner, although not as sumptuous as the one performed into a coven and probably not as efficient either. Crowley argues, thus, that "people who are unable to contact a Wiccan group should practise self-initiation […] One is a ceremony that we devise and perform ourselves in order to tell the Gods that we are theirs and are willing to serve them" (pp. 92). Although Luhrmann argued against, the Wiccan initiation could be interpreted as an endorsement into a specific creed, just as christening is interpreted as endorsement into Christianity. Both Adler and Luhrmann have firmly attempted to distance New-Paganism from other contemporary new religious movements by relying upon the idea that most other groups are doctrinally explicit and have a rigid structure. This argument is highly dependent on a constant reinforcing of how they understand doctrine and conversion, as presented earlier in this chapter. The initiation process, like any other of the Wiccan practices such as drawing a magic circle, burning sage, lighting specific coloured candles, could possibly be interpreted as their most communal practices. They may not be as strict as other new religious movements' practices, but they are regularly performed by Wicca adherents. Adler and Luhrmann's argument may also be too dependent on the understanding of the other groups' high level of conformity over official authority, such as a charismatic leader. But as per Crowley's (1996: 92) description, individuals who seek initiation find that "it is difficult to operate on ourselves because we cannot see properly what we are doing. Similarly, it is difficult to guide ourselves through the initial stages of spiritual and magical development without anyone who is more advanced on the path". This

shows that there is a hierarchical structure in Wicca, which Dominic above stated as being a hassle for his personal spiritual growth, and that members must conform to these internal group norms if they want to be part of the coven. Each Wiccan will experience this process differently, just as any other individual will experience conversion or affiliation differently to another group. To remain practicable and acceptable, a group must determine what is acceptable and what is unacceptable within their normative structure. This, however, allows diversity within the group. Thus, in actual practice, Adler's desire to establish Wicca as a unique movement can be detracted, as her argument of unbounded freedom can be restricted by internal group norms, just as authoritarianism can be softened by articulations of individuality in other new religious movements.

This individuality can also be observed within Wicca in the practice of the solitary adherents, as Kelly pointed out. Kelly, a member of a coven, argues that Wicca becomes a 'mix and match' spirituality because some practitioners choose how to practice Wicca, therefore, weakening the dogma and structure that Wicca supposedly should have. This statement is to some extent in agreement with Adler's view, but it mainly shows that she is both wrong and right at the same time if Wiccans are distinctively analysed as solitary and traditional practitioners. Traditional Wiccans are more likely to experience a complete conversion based on their search for a coven, which would be: similar to the search of a church; the acceptance within that coven, which would be similar to being accepted in a congregation; and the initiation process, which would be similar to being granted membership to a denomination, such as being baptised. Such a lengthy and complex process has been described by many scholars as conversion careers. Thus, if other cult members that undergo similar conversion processes can be analysed from a conversion career point of view, it is

hard to explain why traditional Wiccans cannot. For solitary practitioners, it can be interpreted as a sparse process because it involves more of a self-learning commitment. They have, as Adler suggested, freedom in practice, which is not restricted by coven rules, but to some extent by Wicca's general dogma. For solitary practitioners it is harder to argue whether they undergo a conversion process or something that might resemble the initiation process. Although Crowley explains the possibility of achieving self-initiation, not one solitary practitioner I interviewed experienced it. The main argument for choosing not to be part of a coven and not to undergo such processes is their reluctance against something that reminds them of authority and dogma; Adler's main attributes in trying to defend Wicca's uniqueness:

Evelyn: *When I was younger, my parents made me go to Sunday school and everything and they were Presbyterians, so I didn't like that, I didn't like those rules. […] Because I don't really... I have some friends that are Wiccans and I'll go to some of their rites sometimes if I'm in the mood, but usually I don't practice that sort of things, it's just... looking after my part of the earth, working with crystals, working with essential oils [...] that's what makes me happy, that's my spirituality, that's how I show, or try to show the world who I am with doing things like that. I know I'm not saying it right... It's just something that seems really natural to me, I suppose is because of being a child in the church, the rites and things like that don't mean much to me because there are rules, and I really don't believe that whoever creator is, or whatever, meant to have rules, he just meant for us to live and let live and look after our bit of dirt... and our animals and things like that. […] I was part of a coven, but they had rules and I just... I didn't like it. And I suppose that's people choices like everyone decides on the rules. I'm assuming, when the group started, the coven started, but it was just... it*

wasn't for me, because, you know, I go outside and see the full moon and do drumming and things like that, I don't need to call a guardian goddess and things like that, I don't need that in my life. Because they are there anyway, they are inside me, they are in everything I do.

Kelly: *Well…I was raised Roman Catholic, and there was a turning point in my life where I basically gave up hope on God, on religion. I still felt that there was something there and I was missing it. And I thought, well you know if anything is going to save me, it's going to do it now. So, I learnt of Wicca when I was 13, but I was too scared to do anything, I was too scared of the devil, I was too scared of what people might think, I was too scared of the unknown. So, I put it aside, and then it brought up again when I was 15 and I did the same thing, I lingered a little bit, but I was like "I can't do this, I don't want to mess anything up if it's not real'. And then again when I was 17 and I was going through a difficult period in my life where it was one or the other and a friend came to me with Wicca again. And I thought to myself 'something knocks 3 times, you open the door'. So, I opened the door and I found that it was everything I was already believing in and I just didn't know that there was a name for it.*

If it can then be agreed that Traditional Wiccans undergo, more or less, through a conversion process, then this process has different perspectives, but the most important one suggests an overall change of identity and worldview. Most informants agreed that Wicca had had a considerable impact on their lives, however, none of them suggested it was a once-in-a-lifetime choice. The choice they made indicates what William James described as a gradual conversion process, where the novice was gradually introduced to the world of magic. Whether this choice was sometimes followed by corporeal experience of spiritual encounter, informants never described them as being part of a conversion experience, but

more of a realisation that superstitions are facts and there is a system of belief that recognises them as factual extra sensorial experiences.

5.3 Conclusion

Adler notes that what makes Wicca stand apart as a movement and not a religion is the freedom in religious practice and belief, which was one of the six most prominent answers she collected during her investigation. The other answers reflected intellectual satisfaction, involvement with environmentalism and feminism, development for imagination and personal growth. This again entails the fact that Neo-Paganism is not part of new religious movements based on the lack of institutional structure because practicing magic does not require any advocacy of a certain creed. In the same fashion, Luhrmann (1989: 337) argues that people who turn to magic are looking for strong “emotional and imaginative religious experiences”, but at the same time carefully suggests that such people do not search for a religion per se. This view brings further explanations to the argument that magic and religion are two distinguishable features. Both their arguments suggest that, as opposed to Wicca, most other cults are firmly formed on explicit doctrinal structures, whereas “magical practice lacks the institutional structure that demands a commitment to a particular belief. Unlike the vast majority of other sects, cults and devotions it is clear that magic does not require an explicit endorsement of a specific creed, or of the teachings of a particular teacher, or indeed - since the occult so often presents itself as avant-garde science - of a hypothesis of the divine at all" (Luhrmann, 1989: 337). Another important aspect of Wicca is its type of practitioners. In her attempt to defend Wicca as a movement with no converts, Adler based her argument on Wicca’s freedom in religious practice and belief. However, deliberately or not, both Adler and Luhrmann omit to analyse the functionality of Traditional

Wicca covens and the ad hoc activities of the solitary practitioners. The categorisation of Wicca's members and the analysis of their narratives might show that Adler's argument is simultaneously true and false. Such narratives show that the individual undergoes a transformation into a faithful believer, which later may lead to a process of resocialisation, as presented in Brendan's case. Resocialisation in these cases is dualistic. Firstly, it is a resocialisation in terms of religious matters; the individuals are changing their religious belief and practices into something that is now more appropriate to their personal feelings. Secondly, it is a resocialisation in terms of social matters; the individuals start to identify themselves with the new group and reintegrate themselves into like-minded groups. These groups can later become covens or just circles of other individuals with whom they can relate and socialise.

This chapter has demonstrated that Traditional Wicca shares commonality with New Age cults and challenged Adler's understanding of Wiccans as individuals who do not convert. In this chapter I have outlined the probable influence of the New Age spirituality over the shared doctrine and practices of Traditional Wicca. By doing so, I have argued that Traditional Wiccans are individuals who convert even if Traditional Wicca's dogma is less rigid and strict than of other cults. I have also suggested that if Traditional Wiccans can be considered converts, then they can be analysed through the use of various conversion models presented in the literature chapter. One of the challenges in understanding conversion in Traditional adherents, as opposed to Solitary adherents who affiliate, as it will be demonstrated in the next chapter, was to understand what conversion itself means from the perspective of my interviewees. For the Traditional Wiccans, being part of a coven, going through the initiation process and participating in regular meetings were key features

of their membership to the group. These key features suggest that Traditional Wiccans undergo a complex process of conversion, just as any other cult member.

CHAPTER 6
A RELIGION WITHOUT CONVERTS?

The following chapter argues that conversion is a diffuse process and that Solitary Wicca and Traditional Wicca should be considered two distinctive entities that need to be analysed separately. It has been established in the previous chapter that Traditional Wiccans share commonality with other cults in terms of conversion. In this chapter I argue that solitary practitioners do not convert, but they affiliate to the movement because a conversion process would be meaningless to such individuals. I argue that individuals' agency plays a more important role in the meaning-making of solitary practitioners than the sense of community would. As a consequence, solitary practitioners re-enchant their lives through practice in solitude, and any type of practice that has the slightest resemblance to organised, dogmatic religious institutions only contribute to their lapse of faith and disenchantment. This chapter follows up the discussion from the previous chapter in which I proposed a reinterpretation of Adler's notion of religion with no converts. If in the previous chapter I demonstrated that Adler was wrong to declare all Wiccans as individuals who do not convert, in this chapter I propose that her argument is more valuable and valid in the analysis of solitary Wiccans, which, as I will show, do not convert but they affiliate to Wicca. The following chapter will first discuss Max Weber's (1922[1978]) notions of authority and enchantment. Using Weber's theoretical background sheds light on Adler's understanding of Wicca as a religion that has no dogma and no authority. Once the scene of my analysis is set, I then return to my interviews to demonstrate how they fit within the larger theoretical

framework. I use Weber to demonstrate that, to a certain extent, Adler was right to claim that individuals join Wicca because it is not as authoritative as other cults, but she was wrong to generalise all Wicca's branches and traditions as non-authoritative, as her arguments fail to include the internal norms and limited agency found within Traditional Wicca groups. As well, this subchapter will discuss Weber's idea of re-enchantment to demonstrate how Solitary practitioners distance and differentiate themselves from Traditional ones, by re-inventing and re-creating their own sacred space based on Wicca's teachings. The second subchapter focuses on Solitary Wicca and sets out the core meaning of solitary practice as opposed to Traditional Wicca's practice and belief. This second section will show that groups like Traditional covens serve solitary Wiccans as a form without function. Also, this section will open the discussion on the difference between conversion and affiliation, and why these notions are important in analysing the two groups, which will further be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

6.1 Authority and Enchantment

In *Economy and Society* ([1922] 1978), Max Weber defines authority as the probability that specific orders will be followed by a given group of people. At the same time, he states that any form of authority involves a minimum of voluntary compliance or submission. An example of such interest can be an economic one, for instance. Members of a group can be tied to their superior by habit or for reasons of ideology. The category in which these reasons fit determines the type of authority. Weber forwarded three types of authority. These are traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic authorities. The analysis of Weber's key notions of authority and disenchantment will set out the theoretical background on which Wicca's functionality is based on; more precisely it shows on what type of authority

Traditional Wicca works and how re-enchanting the world is applied differently for Traditional and Solitary Wiccans.

Traditional authority is based on the belief in the sanctity of traditions and the legitimacy of those who exercise it. This type of authority is passed down from one generation to another and is represented by individuals like tribal chiefs or monarchs. In a political system based on traditional authority, legitimacy is conferred by faith in the validity and sanctity of the rules, traditions and customs. In such a system, the ruler is chosen based on traditions, and his authority is based on unwritten laws which are considered sacred. Individuals obey their leaders because tradition tells them to. In most cases, their obedience is based on personal loyalty, or simple ideas shared by each individual (Weber, 1978: 227). Traditional authority is characteristic to pre-modern societies; societies in which the political power has not yet been emancipated from religious power (Weber, 1978: 215). People are subject to traditional authority because "this is the tradition". The right to rule is transmitted by birth, therefore it is hereditary, from father to son or by direct appointment by a former leader. Humans obey a ruler, not a set of rules, as it would be the case for rational-legal authority. Under such a system, the administration is generally composed of the personal servants of the ruler, in which personal loyalty describes the relationship between the leader and the administration. They are bound to the ruler by a covenant of faith and are totally dependent by the ruler's position. This is a defining feature of all patriarchal or patrimonial systems and even bureaucratic state regimes, despite their rational structure characteristic of the modern state. Traditional systems are not based on a clearly defined sphere of competence, within a rational hierarchy, as there is no system of contracts or promotions as a result of merit. They are lacking qualified staff with precise attributions and skills. These individuals

do not fall into the category of the politician in Weber's view, but rather they are party officials who are interested in power, and who can be dismissed at any time and often disappear at the same time as the person in charge.

Rational authority is based on the validity of a legal status and its effective competence, which are built upon rationally developed rules. Weber (1978: 217) describes it as "resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issues commands". Such authority corresponds to the rational-legal domination exercised by the modern states. In a system based on legal-rational authority, power is legitimized by rules and procedures that define the rights and obligations of the citizen. One can thus speak of the existence of a written constitution that includes this set of rules that underlie the organization of society. The system based on rational-legal legitimacy is characteristic to most modern states. Weber calls this type of authority as a modernisation process that led to the formation of the modern states in Western Europe (Weber, 1978: 217). In *Economy and Society*, Max Weber makes a detailed description of this type of authority, arguing that there are five principles underlying this system. The first principle of rational authority is based on the notion that any legal norm can be established by common accord or may be imposed with the pretence of being respected by the members of the organization (Weber, 1978: 217). These rules constitute what Weber calls the legislative body of a system and they are applied to particular cases. In a system based on such a structure, authority does not depend on personal characteristics, like in the other two types of authority. It is not transmitted as a right of birth but through a formal position. Citizens are subject to authority only as members of the organization and owe no responsibility to the person holding the authority but only to the law. The person who holds

the authority is also the subject of this "impersonal order" (Weber, 1978: 218), as Weber calls it, and guides their actions in accordance with the requirements laid down by law. The leader is obliged to exercise his authority only within the limits set by the law.

Charismatic authority is based on devotion to sanctity, to heroism or other exceptional qualities “or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him” (Weber, 1978: 241). This refers to the great capacity and personal characteristics of a demagogue or of the head of a party, or other individuals in similar positions. When talking about politics and especially about the idea of political vocation, Max Weber refers, implicitly, to charisma. He defines charisma as a quality of an individual’s personality which is distinguishable from ordinary people and this person is treated as if they are endowed with supernatural, superhuman or, at least, exceptional qualities and powers. These qualities are not accessible to the ordinary person, and are regarded as having divine origins, and therefore, based on these qualities, the individual is considered a leader (Weber, 1978: 241). In the twentieth century, the phenomenon of charisma was particularly identified in the areas where large social movements occurred, in the areas where various revolutions took place, such as the Bolshevik Revolution, the national liberation revolutions that led to the collapse of colonial empires and so forth. The leaders of these movements are what Weber calls charismatic leaders. The charismatic leader is seen as a person sent by destiny, and their charisma is sufficient to legitimise their authority within the society. As a result, charismatic authority can be defined as an authority which is based on devotion to exceptional sanctity, to heroism, or to the exceptional qualities of a given individual (Weber, 1978: 241). This means that the leader represents the whole authority; his disappearance for whatever reasons could equate to the dissolution of

the whole power. Charismatic leaders typically appear during critical situations, described by Weber as existential fears, identity crisis, and even identity void. They appear as rescuers, proposing a solution. The demagogic discourse that consecrates them as leaders often resorts to feelings and emotions. Therefore, Weber states, that sometimes, with the advent of a charismatic leader, one can speak of a dictatorship based on the exploitation of the emotionality of the masses (Weber, 1992: 34). The genre of discourse changes in the case of the charismatic leader from reason to the frequent call of purely emotional means that put the masses on the move. In the case of charismatic authority, the confidence of the masses in the morality of their leader's policies is solid. People's devotion to them takes place in parallel with their own beliefs and aspirations. The charismatic leader, according to Weber, is the type of the true politician, a professional politician who lives for politics. In crisis situations in which such a charismatic leader is identified, a cult of the leader's personality usually appears, which implies they are worshipped to excess by the people. This cult of personality is characteristic to states that have recently had revolutions and presupposes the veneration of a leader which is seen as a liberator or saviour. This veneration may entail raising the ruler near to a divine rank. The cult of personality tends to give a sign of equivalence between the state and the leader, and it is impossible to separate the two entities. Under systems based on charismatic authority, the administrative body does not only obey the leader by virtue of the belief in its qualities and the images of authority that they create, but also because of its material responsibility and social status. Just as in traditional authority, there is no independent administrative body to maintain even after the leader's disappearance, but with an administration in which the ascension to positions is made by the degree of loyalty to the leader. They submit to the leader because of the

benefits that they can offer and because of the fear of losing those benefits (Weber, 1992: 34). As Weber states, we are dealing with an authority based on constraints because it refers to external material means.

Weber explained these authorities as forces that could bring either order and stability, as it would be the case for traditional and rational authorities, or disorder and change, for the charismatic authority, to institutions and society. Weber saw traditional authority as nonrational, stable and impersonal, while rational authority as rational, stable and impersonal; and, lastly, charismatic authority as nonrational, unstable and personal (Blau, 1963; Conger, 1993). Weber made a clear difference between following a personal, yet momentarily charismatic leader as opposed to following the more impersonal and stable traditional or rational form of authority. Weber further perceived both rational and charismatic authority as systems of rebellion against the dormant status quo of traditional authority. This was done through principles and actions based on rationality and consent in the case of rational authority, and through an emotional reaction towards a heroic leader in the case of charismatic authority. Weber also argued that charismatic authority is inherently momentary and unstable, therefore it is most effective during times of crisis and change. Its main purpose is primarily to facilitate the change from one order to another. Once this change is accomplished, charismatic authority becomes “routinized” or fades away, because charismatic leadership is replaced by tradition, rules and institutionalized bureaucracy. Therefore, the irony of charismatic authority is that frequently it is replaced by those very forms of authority which it originally sought to rescind. Weber forwarded his theory of authority during the beginning of the twentieth century and within that context his ideas made a great deal of sense. Larger and more complex bureaucratic organizations were

created during the industrial age and Weber observed that structures based on traditional authority were being replaced by rational-based authority systems which were often aided by charismatic leaders whose entrepreneurial energy and views were being transformed into the vast corporations of the twentieth century. Such a time of change in terms of new religious movements that brought forward new figures to represent charismatic authority was in 1951 when the Witchcraft act of 1735 was repealed. The 1735 Witchcraft Act, passed in the Kingdom of Great Britain, proscribed witch-hunting but forbade the practice of witchcraft, to one year's imprisonment, to protect people from fraudulent fortune-tellers (Gaskill, 2010; Hutton, 1999). By repealing this act, Great Britain saw a rise in individuals claiming to hold magical powers. Such an individual was Gerald Gardner, the founding father of Wicca, who in 1958 published the first Wiccan key text *Witchcraft Today*. Gerald Gardner gradually became the image of charismatic authority for Wicca adherents, and even after his death he remained an important figure in Wicca as some Traditional covens follow the Gardnerian tradition and his spiritual outputs. His charismatic authority was passed down to those individuals who are ascribed the role of priest and priestess within a coven. These individuals act as important spiritual figures which are endowed with supernatural, superhuman or, at least, exceptional qualities and powers; and according to Weber's argument, it means that these leaders represent the whole authority within the small coven circle. Solitary Wiccans, however, because they practice magic on their own and do not take part in covens, do not endow any figure with charismatic characteristics. This denial of any form of authority present among the solitary practitioners forwards a rupture within their system of belief. I here suggest that Solitary Wicca is an attempt to re-enchant the world, from the disenchanted world the Traditional Wicca creates.

Key to Weber's interpretation of Disenchantment of the World and which has direct relevance to Wicca, as will be discussed below, is the exclusion of the sacramental mediation of salvation. Weber suggested that the individual mediation of salvation would be magic (as for Calvin), since it entails that humans could have influence on the will of God just as ancient magicians would influence the will of the gods through sacrificial practices. If there is no route of sacramental mediation, then the believer can be reassured of their deliverance through either being the Holy Spirit's vessel (as for Luther) or as the divine will's tool (as for Calvin). With this deliverance typology, human action is discharged of any positive soteriological significance, resulting a twofold separation of nature and grace. No more can nature mediate grace, as well as human action cannot cooperate with grace anymore. Disenchantment therefore represents a secularisation of the human action's soteriological significance. It can also be observed in Weber the disenchantment motif articulated in terms of a conveyance of religious values from the religious-spiritual realm to the secular one. Weber (following Luther) suggested that having a religious vocation, such as joining the monastery, would mean that that vocation was a calling to secular activity. By the disenchantment of religious life, Weber suggested that special religious activities become devalued, whereas the ordinary activities become valuable. This devaluating should be understood as a result of another conception of rationality which develops while religions go through rationalisation, which shifts them into irrational spheres. The disenchantment of the world is a process that took civilisation, especially Western ones, from a period of absolutism to capitalism:

> "The tension between religion and intellectual knowledge definitely comes to the fore wherever rational, empirical knowledge has consistently worked through to the disenchantment of the world and its transformation into a causal mechanism. For then science encounters claims of the ethical postulate that the

> world is a God-ordained, and hence somehow meaningfully and ethically oriented, cosmos. In principle, the empirical as well as the mathematically oriented view of the world develops refutations of every intellectual approach which in any case asks for a 'meaning' of inner-worldly occurrences. Every increase of rationalism in empirical science increasingly pushes religion from the rational into the irrational realm; but only today does religion become the irrational or anti-rational supra-human power." (Weber, 1988: 564)

This process disenchants old cultures from the prevailing rule and collision of unexplainable, supernatural and irrational phenomena, and enters an era of reason, which is spread across all dimensions of social reality, such as politics, science, economy, religion or everyday life. The consequence of this process is that all the magic, sacred and mystery disappears, as well as the demytholisation and desacralisation of culture. Weber saw modernity as the apex of human thought, but a return to previous phases could be possible. The possibility of re-enchanting the world by reviving an irrational and supernatural religion would mean that individuals lose their autonomy and independent judgement. This re-enchantment of the world is a fundamental success factor for Wicca in its initial coven form, and later for solitary practitioners. Those individuals joining covens are the ones disappointed with the results of scientific progress, dismayed by the structures of organised mainstream religions and established churches. Solitary Wiccans, in turn, are those individuals joining Wicca as a movement but searching by their own the path to sacredness.

This can be linked to the work of Graham Harvey (1999: 234, 243) who argued that "narratives of conversions do not occur in Pagan discourse", but they describe themselves as 'coming home' and that "more typically they discover that the name for their existing sort of spirituality is Paganism. They find that they are not alone in the world but that there are books, groups and world-wide web site devoted to the exploration of this spirituality". Considering Harvey's argument, the sense of community appears as a result of the

individual's wish for seeking common companions, rather than the individual being integrated into a pre-existing community. Harvey continues by saying "Paganism does encourage a sense of community or belonging with other Pagans and 'all our relations'. People join groups to celebrate together or to learn." (pp. 243). Harvey's main argument, as Adler suggested, is based on the idea that Pagans do not convert, but they 'come home' once they learn there is a name and a practice to their beliefs. In *Religious Conversion* (1999: 15), Bryant and Lamb argue that "Conversion is normally…part of joining one or another religious community. It becomes linked to identity and memberships in a community". In using these terms, Harvey describes one aspect of becoming a witch, without taking into consideration the distinction between Traditional and Solitary. Also, Bryant and Lamb's argument seems to be rather simplistic, and most likely would be suitable for describing the process of affiliation than conversion. Their characterisation describes well a process of affiliation that is typical for many cults in the modern Western society. For instance, there is no sense among atheists to de-convert from their former system of belief and re-convert to the atheist community; but they disaffiliate and re-affiliate to a community that shares the same worldview. Solitary Wiccans are the ones who are disappointed with the dogmatic and authorial form of Traditional Wicca, which, for Solitary Wiccans, is as much as disenchanted as mainstream religions and established churches. This process of re-enchanting the world, alongside the onset of Wicca, may have many causes, but what I consider to be most essential is a decreased effect of the process of secularisation; a process "by which society and culture are set free from the domination of religious institutions and symbols, thus making human life de-sacred" (Olechnicki, 2012: 370). Lothar Ross (1990) comments that around the 1970s, people widely accepted that without religious ideas society can work

perfectly fine. Olechnicki (2012: 370) suggests that contemporary society has an opposite opinion and argues that "society without religion is an illusion, and that religiosity is an immanent characteristic of the human condition". The favourable outcome of Wicca and other forms of new religious movements proves that following a relatively short extent of time without religion or replacement with secular ideologies, individuals are in search of a meaningful life, which can be found through religiosity or spirituality. Secularisation is not only negating what is perceived as sacred, but it also refers to the universalisation of the sacred and transforming it into profane or vulgarisation of the sacred. The sacred becomes corrupted, while ideal spirituality becomes instrumental spirituality. Thus, it can be agreed that Wicca responds to the individual's needs for religious or spiritual ideas and values. Besides this restrained secularisation, another important motif for Wicca's success as mentioned above is the ability to re-enchant their everyday lives with elements of transcendence, mysticism and mystery which have been rationalised by both the secularised society and mainstream religions.

Wendy: *I was part of a coven for some time. While I enjoyed the company, I hated the structure. They were all nice people and I would never say negative things about them, but for me, the coven made the magic disappear. Mostly because there was this rule and that rule, and then there were different ranks. And yes, there are rules in Wicca, but they are there to show you that nature had its own order and that there are consequences to your actions. Other than that, I do not believe in any other coven rules, but at the same time, I do respect those who are part of covens. Giving up on my coven was a good decision, because it made my connection with the nature stronger, with no other alternation by any human factor.*

To solitary practitioners, covens are not as conservative as ordinary churches, in the sense that they have adjusted to modernity, but at the same time they are too conservative in terms of authoritarianism, dogma and clericalism. The solitary path provides an avenue for practitioners to re-enchant their lives with the spirituality they have lost in previous denominations, including Traditional covens.

6.2 Performing the Solitary path

Having established Weber's theoretical background, the following section will show that groups like Traditional covens serve solitary Wiccans as a form without function. Traditional Wicca is interpreted and treated as any other type of organised church, with its main purpose being that of a form with engulfing authority that constrains the individual's belief and freedom to practice. This part will also discuss how simplistic Adler's view on authority was when she claimed that all of Wicca is non-dogmatic and non-authoritative; and show that within coven-based groups agency is restricted, while solitary practice would fit better the non-dogmatic and non-authoritative interpretation of Wicca.

Bainbridge and Stark (1985) argued that new religious movements and sects will arise as a response to the secularisation process that weakens the influence that traditional religions have over the general public. Other scholars suggested that, in the West, new religious movements will enhance the importance of the individual or a limited, exclusive community (Wilson, 1979). Berger (1967: 167) commented that with the rise of a varied body of sects "history becomes biography" and "cosmology becomes psychology". The modern Pagan recognition of the individual with sanctity and divinity mirrors that tendency. Modern Paganism and the revival of wizardry of the 1900s represent innovative forms of religiosity

and act as a response to the Western countries' secularisation process. In this sense, Waters (2019: 262) comments that:

> "Witchcraft is a dynamic belief system that easily incorporates new ideas and adapts to new situations. […] Throughout its long history, witchcraft had always altered and developed. But it has been particularly mutable during the last two hundred years, as the pace of cultural and social change has quickened."

As with other new religious groups, such as Mazdaznan or the Unification Church, Wicca shares a common aspiration towards intense private religious experiences. And like such cults, they perceive their religious activities as contributing restoration to an imperilled world. However, unlike other cults, modern pagans do not belligerently advertise their salvation recipes to the world or to an individual's misfortune. The contact with magical practice can be, nevertheless, a transforming experience for certain individuals. On one hand, rejecting this experience as a conversion process by some individuals can have various reasons, such as establishing and securing an identity or individuality for themselves and the group they represent. On the other hand, assuming this experience constitutes a conversion process can have other meanings as well, such as determining a context for the practice of magic and Modern Paganism can be accepted and appreciated as a rightful movement. It can also suggest that, regardless of multiple attempts to establish its distinctiveness and uniqueness, Wicca, as other such movements, can be perceived as a continuous response to the Western societies' secularisation of human life. Such a view is described by a Neo-Pagan in Adler's (1989: 124) book: "the protective spirit of our circles is more to shield us from the 20th century than to protect us from malicious harm". Much is obscured by living within the modern, industrialised society, and ritual practices are imbued with therapeutic values, thus

he continues “our circles are a haven from the present that frees us to touch the past and to restore our old attunement to nature” (pp. 124). Such a rough judgement of the human life and the wish for a change mirrors, to different levels, other new religious movements. By Adler’s argument that “you will find no one handling you Pagan leaflets on the street or shouting at you from a corner” as well as among Pagan practitioners “word of mouth, a discussion between friends, a lecture, a book, or an article provides the entry point” (1989: x, 14), shows a distinctive self-preservation strategy. But this distinctiveness has more to do with the nature of authority and dogma, the religious perception of the human life, the presence of divinity than with the absence or presence of conversion.

The following two narratives present the story of a solitary Wiccan and a traditional one. The story of Dominic shows a collective answer that many of the solitary participants I interviewed presented. Dominic is a 28 year old man who was raised as a Baptist but who fully affiliated to the solitary path of Wicca when he was 17. The story of Nicola, a 43 year old woman Traditional Wiccan, found an interest in occulture in her early twenties. At the age of 25 she became very fond of Wicca and for a very long time, she practiced magic and witchcraft by herself and occasionally met fellow practitioners to celebrate different sabbaths. Over the years, Nicola “felt” that she had to become a member of a coven. Nicola’s story is valuable because it depicts the journey to the Traditional Wicca paths that a couple of my participants presented in a similar way.

Dominic: *I am **solitary** and probably will always be. I want this path to be my own. I know that Wicca may assume to be in a coven somehow at one point in your life … like, to have this experience. Some people don’t even recognise solitary practice as being valid. But I don’t really care about their opinion. I know I found something that works for me, that makes me*

feel more at peace with the world around me. […] Yes, I am part of online groups, because why not? I mean, I get to see what other people do, how they practice, what is new … I mean not new in general, but new to me. And although I don't feel the need to be in a coven, it gives me a sense of certainty that there are other like-minded people, to whom I can talk to and share our experiences. […]. Like … in my case, I just like to … kind of know that other people share my feelings or share the same energy. It gives some sort of a community feeling, but at distance, if it makes sense. As I said I am solitary and sure will remain like this … and online groups is kind of an alternative for us … like, ***wanting to be together but alone at the same time.***

Dominic's story illustrates very well the "believing without belonging" paradigm (Davie, 1994). Like many of the solitary Wiccans interviewed, Dominic enjoys witchcraft by himself. Dominic said he is still in the process of learning and probably will keep learning how to practice witchcraft and how to master it until his very last day. He kept affirming that magic is real and can be found in everything around us. He was also very adamant in choosing not to affiliate to a Witch coven because he was "better off" by himself. Dominic believes in the supernatural and paranormal, but he does not like to take it to a dogmatic level. This is the main reason he did not want to be part of a coven. Unlike other participants, Dominic did not necessarily have negative feelings towards his former congregation but felt that his place was not there. Prior to his disaffiliation from the Baptist Church, Dominic had no knowledge of Wicca. Everything he knew about magic was initially from a Christian doctrine perspective, such as practicing magic is a sin. He did not experience an abrupt conversion either. His path to magic was gradual and once he found his spiritual path, he embraced it.

Solitary practitioners are not recognised by some Traditional Wicca practitioners because they are not part of a coven, they do not have a High Priest or a High Priestess to be guided by, they may not celebrate all the Wheel of Year sabbaths, and they may not engage in the initiatory process of a Year and a Day. For Dominic, these processes are not necessarily important in identifying as a witch. He believes that every witch is allowed to engage in any process he or she wants as long as they do not do harm. He enjoys being solitary because he can focus on some sabbaths more than on others, according to his "inner power" at that time of the year. He also affirms that he has his "own pace" and does not like being told what to do by a "dogmatic-like priest of priestess figure" that "resembles most institutional religious figures". Dominic also understands those who like being part of a coven and feel the need of a community, as he enjoys being part of online groups.

Nicola: *About six or seven years ago I felt I should establish myself as a Traditional Wiccan. I felt that I should be part of something…I guess both intimate and inclusive. […] It was a bit of a challenge to find a coven…I mean, it really took me a while to get in touch with them, to prove myself worthy, to create a bond, to have my oath and all that. Initially I looked over the internet…there is website that shows covens across different states and I was actually lucky enough to find two somewhat close to where I live…yeah, so I didn't know which one to choose or to contact … and I said to myself "right, I am just going to put my energy to guide me to a better place", and so I did. It took a while 'till I received a sign and I felt that this is the coven I want to be part of, and I will do everything I can to become initiated…and, yeah…so it happened…I am now part of a coven that follows the Alexandrian Tradition. I have been a member for about 4 years now…but, I am telling you, the whole initiatory year…because all new members must do the what we call a "year and a day" before you*

formally….not formally, but before you are initiated in the coven…yeah, that was a long year, and it felt different than how it was before. I enjoy being part of a coven, yes…I also enjoyed practicing on my own, but a coven gives you a sense of community…I guess. Or a sense of being part of something greater…and it is actually greater because we always celebrate our sabbaths together and the energy that we create just connects with the world around us….with nature…I guess… I don't know, I am pretty sure this was meant for me, like to be part of a coven. I mean…I enjoy the magic we create, the sparkles…yeah.

Nicola's story shows a long process, filled with spiritual experiences and struggles that led her to become an active member in an Alexandrian Wicca coven. Nicola's story is particularly interesting because she had been for many years a solitary Wiccan and had self-taught herself how to practice magic before searching to become an "established Wiccan". As opposed to Dominic, who prefers the life of a solitary male witch, Nicola wanted more than a virtual Wiccan community and she enjoys her regular meetings with the coven members. She suggested that the coven made her feel more "powerful" and able to acknowledge herself better within nature.

Re-envisaging Wicca and contemporary magic practice as religions with converts, at least in the analysis of Traditional coven-based practitioners, shows formerly hidden facets of such movements by situating them in different contexts. Just as Adler rejects such a process, I utilise conversion categorisation to identify a suitable and convenient context for narration, analysis and apprehension. This can also highlight several facets of the category itself. Adler's conversion situations tend to portray a sudden change in the human life; such experience is best exemplified in the Pauline paradigm presented in the literature review chapter. But there are also less dramatic changes that show a gradual conversion, as shown

in the previous chapter. Such gradual conversions are partly attributed to the process of socialisation and constitute a less striking example. However, a sharp distinction between gradual and sudden conversion needs not to be drawn; because if the gradual one may have decisive turning points, so the sudden one can be perceived as part of a process and vice versa. Either characterisation of the conversion process should be understood as a partial explanation of the way in which an individual comprehends human beings, the world, and religion. Hence, Adler's denial that individuals convert to Wicca or Neo-Paganism indicate her belief that conversion is associated with the subjugation of a person to coercive external authority. But the activities of an active self, who is decision-making oriented can also be encompassed within the category of conversion. From this perspective, the revival of magic and Wicca could be understood as continuous responses to secularisation within Western societies. The similarity between Wicca and other similar movements also spur some specific differences. If it can be agreed the coven-based Wiccans convert just as individuals would convert to the Church of SubGenius, for example, this does not necessarily mean that there are other similarities between two. Universal explanations to why and how individuals participate in different movements shadow a pattern of differences and similarities which could be identified through a more meticulous analysis.

If becoming a Wiccan can be considered as a more diffused process of conversion, it is clearer that this category is, in actual practice, a process of individual change. It is insufficient to characterise a religion based on either the absence or presence of conversion. Neither does it entail that a religion is naturally authoritarian or dogmatic, nor that it lacks such official or formal structures. The approach in which an adherent may choose to envisage the process of conversion-affiliation discloses much about how the individual

comprehends the human nature and the world. This is perfectly exemplified by the solitary practitioners; but who can speak authoritatively for such individuals? Considering Max Weber's theory of authority, the legitimacy of information is not comprehended as being under either charismatic authority or traditional authority. Solitary Wicca is not traditional, and practitioners pretend no claim to traditional legitimacy. The system of communications they are part of, such as online groups, are definitely not charismatic as it cannot be legitimised by one singular individual who can rise above the network and assert global authority, thus there will be no routinised charisma to influence such individuals. Their forms of authority have no legal rationale, because, just as Traditional Wicca groups, there is no hierarchical organisation, but also because there is no linear chain of internal group norms and pseudo spiritual leaders, as opposed to Traditional Wicca groups. Does this lack of any type of authority (in the Weberian sense) within the circle of solitary practitioners undermine the validity of Solitary Wicca and turn it into a form of unrecognised branch of Wicca (religion)? In order to answer this, one should first take into consideration a general explanation of the word religion. Debray (2005) shows how with the birth of Christianity, the word *religion* emerged. Initially, Christianity was not seen as a religion and did not grow into one until the third century of the Christian era. For their belief system to become valid in the Roman Empire, Christians had to make a political move. Before Constantine I, Christianity was seen as a popular religion, a *superstitio,* which was a pejorative term. To develop and be accepted in the Roman Empire, Christianity had to become a *religio*, meaning an official religion. In 341, Roman paganism became *superstitio*, or popular religion[15], while Christianity was accepted as a *religio*. This reversal of viewpoint proves the power of labelling politics. In the same fashion, Beckford (2003: 13) argues that religion is

[15] To be read folkloric religion

> "a particularly interesting 'site' where boundary disputes are endemic and where well-entrenched interest groups are prepared to defend their definition of religion against opponents. The history of anti-witchcraft movements in many parts of the world, particularly the Inquisition, is powerful evidence of the deadly length to which some interest groups go to enforce their definition of 'true' religion"

In attempting to define a religion, groups try to persuade others and enforce their own agenda and personal views. Examples of such can be seen in labelling pagan-folkloric practices as heresy during the Early Modern period in Europe or authenticating sanctuaries and miracles. For solitary Wiccans, this legitimacy of their faith, as opposed to Traditional Wiccans, needs further questioning and analysis because of their total lack of authoritative structure. How do they themselves ascribe their identity when there are no normative rules to describe their nexus to spirituality or religiosity? A very rich insight is given by Isaiah, an ex-Evangelist and an ex-coven Wiccan:

Isaiah: *It was more or less the freedom and separation from concepts of power, so I still believe, obviously, as a green witch you become your own priest or priestess, and you still follow your god and goddess, sort of speak, and all that kind of stuff. So, in that sense, it has the slight religious affiliation with the god concept. But you don't have someone declaring that they are grander that what you are, kind of like Catholic churches have structure in it and you have your priests and then you have your bishops and archbishops and stuff like that. So it's like a hierarchy or concept with who has the power or be whatever over another, and Wicca was going that way too, because you have your first stage initiates, your second stage initiates, your third stage initiates, then you have your priests and your high priests and priestesses and stuff like that and it was becoming, basically, to me, it was almost like the religions in Catholicism and stuff like that. And it kind of went against me, because when I started in Wicca, I was said to be an earth bound faith and, so my practice started*

changing, like I went through the degree process and everything, the three stages […] but the more I got into it the further I felt from nature and that's not how I wanted to be, like as a green witch, if I'm outside and I'm walking, you know, if I'm feeling like I need to ground myself, like shield myself from negative energy, I'm more inclined to want to stand near a tree and join its energy, or put love out through the air or things like that, towards loved ones or... so it's more about being free wherever you are, to remove the concept of tools and understanding that nature has an energy of its own and we have an energy within ourselves.

It has been argued that science and tradition have substantially lost their authority to serve to the late-modern selves plausible explanations of what is the actual meaning of life and what the processes of this world really mean. In this sense, Berger, Berger and Kellner (1974: 82) argued that the "modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of 'homelessness'… a metaphysical loss of 'home'". It is interesting to note here how Berger, Berger and Kellner, and others alike[16], were making such observations about the condition of the late-modern individual and how Adler (1989) comes with the answer of the *coming-home experience*, however only for those who find Wicca. Such problems of meaning have been previously discussed by the classical analysis of modernity provided by Max Weber, according to which modern science's rigid anti-metaphysical ethos and inflexible search for truth unavoidably corrodes faith in a transcendent 'other world' which ascribe meaning to 'this world'. Such advancements establish a dynamic "disenchantment of the world". In this process, traditional religious systems, including Traditional Wicca, become less reasonable and lose their former capacity to support the modern self with former persuasive

[16] Zijderveld A C (1970) *The Abstract Society: A cultural Analysis of our Time*. New York: Doubleday
Gehlen A (1980) *Man in the Age of Technology*. New York: Columbia University Press

explanations. Indeed, science can sufficiently account for the world as it is, however it cannot provide for its inherent meaning.

It is within this context that Traditional Wicca provides no sense or has no foundation for the spiritual meaning of the Solitary Wiccan. Traditional Wicca is a disenchanted world for the solitary practitioner, where magic is possible and happens but does not signify anything because it creates existential uncertainties through internal group norms and hierarchies that act as a reminder of the dogmatic and authoritative aspects of mainstream religions. Traditional Wicca is mechanistic and instrumental, and acts as an imperialistic system which undermines authentic identities and individual's union with nature without any constrains. In such terms, Traditional Wicca acts as a purveyor of alienation because it causes too much "institutional" control, thus, no longer providing a genuine *home* for all individuals as Adler promised. This lack of *home* is a deeply-felt dissatisfaction commonly shared by most of the interviewed solitary Wiccans who, like Isaiah, wish not to be associated with.

Sandra: *By no means do I want to say mean things about my brothers and sisters, I believe that they, like myself, are practicing magic like a form of love, and that everything they do is just to spread love and kindness in this world. Oh but I do not like covens mostly because you have those two [priest and priestess] to whom to must act in a certain way…as if they are superior to you, like those priests from the church you see on Sundays. I do respect them as follow witches that have more experience, but please do not belittle me just because I am not there yet. I really believe that witches, solitary or not, when they meet to practice together, they do so because this is a thing they like do to, and because they feel safe and equal with these other people. I do not want to be another form of a lost sheep that has to*

be guided by another figure that thinks he has the power and is in control of other people's lives. That's why I never liked the Sunday service and the church in general.

In a search for a genuine *home* and a re-enchantment of their spirituality, solitary Wiccans act, in a metaphorical way, as an anti-trend or counterculture over Traditional Wicca, which can be understood as the trend or the culture. To a conventional tradition they represent the unconventional, undergoing a counterintuitive phenomenon in which they oppose the mainstream culture – Traditional Wicca – and end up forming a collective with a similar and synchronised wish to search for authenticity and anti-conformity. Again, the solitary collective is an individual revolt to establish a spiritual identity within a circle that imitates or portrays relative dogma, authority, institutionalisation and regimentation. Therefore, the solitary collective is an anti-culture of the popular or mainstream culture that becomes an embedded subcategory. This is the outcome of the behaviour of many that wish to be anti-conformists within a belief system that is said to offer an enchanted *home* but is too regimented by institutional-like group norms. Solitary Wiccans, then, do not convert like Traditional ones would, but they affiliate to the trend by systematically applying their fundamental inner and personal views. These views give meaning to what would be seen as an essentially meaningless world, or in this case a meaningless system of practice and not as much of belief, because it sparks a similarity in conformity to mainstream religious hierarchies, doctrines and authorities. Such problems lead solitary Wiccans to place emphasis on cultural rationalisation which itself leads to a reconstruction and then, most likely, to a replacement of worldview. By its appearance as an institutionalised spirituality, Traditional Wicca becomes vulnerable and loses its plausibility, because it becomes an unconvincing, implausible and unsatisfying factor. Solitary adherents give meaning to their

own individual spirituality through an articulation of religious reconstruction. This does not mean, however, that solitary practitioners change the structure of Wicca, but they tailor it to correspond to their theistic needs. The hunt for articulations of meaning does not need doctrinal conformity or a specific belief, yet it endows reality with meaning.

Alberto: *I am a solitary practitioner. I guess this is a reminiscence from my past Christian faith. Although I believed in god, I never really liked going to church. Probably because my parents always dragged me to Sunday Service, and I hated waking up early in the morning. I always preferred praying in solitude, I guess I never really liked to show off. Like, you know 'look everybody, I am a Christian therefore everybody has to see me praying. I have always been an adept of practicing your own religion in silence. I don't think there is a better link to divinity than directly through your own honest self. I think that is pure honesty, like a moment of meditation. I don't think I need someone else to intervene and tell me what to do and what not to, because I can already feel that myself, and I can, myself, ask for guidance and pray that whatever I am going through or whatever is happening is because that is meant to be and it will only make me grow wiser.*

For practitioners like Isaiah and Alberto, Wicca does not have to hold propositional truths, as the solitary path is constructed on personal experiences which are perceived by the adherents as spiritual lessons about the sacred and their selves which would further guide them in their personal path. For such practitioners, the main virtue that their spirituality must poses is sincerity; and this sincerity can only be achieved through solitary practice, never to be constrained by external factors, unless, what they would experience as, divine intervention interplays. They do not need to perform a prayer of conversion because firstly they do not convert in the literal sense, and secondly because it would be meaningless. For

them, religiosity and spirituality only gain meaning if practiced in their own solitude. Solitariness is a symbolic ritual but serves a significant function, that is its transcendent importance and self-expression. Solitary practice, then, has evolved into an individualistic form of Wicca, where the individual represents the spiritual entity in the place of community. The community lacks any power to critically assess the circumstances in which the individual performs magic, but it is yet based upon the individual's own intuition. No longer does the specific creed has the quest to morally correct the practitioner, as such virtues are individually produced by the practitioner's consciousness. It is, thus, not the coven that acquires spiritual elevation, but the Wiccan as a singular individual that does.

Trevor: *I am solitary because being in a group for me suggests I must agree with that group. And all that weekly or monthly practices they do, it all looks like a purity test. The one people have to do in Protestant churches where you kind of have to prove your loyalty and devotion otherwise you get excluded or marginalised, especially if you are part of a small community. To me it all looks like a business plan and there is no coven that should ever define me or boss me around. Covens are engulfing and do not support each members' degree of individuality.*

Denise: *I am solitary because I learnt that not even clan sisters are to be trusted, plus I don't think they would accept me anyway. I have talked to coven members and I felt like I was a country mouse going to visit the city mouse. I just work best alone. I guess I prefer solitude but would also work well with other too if I choose to. Like, my mom is a witch too, I have friends who are witches too, but I like working my magic alone. There are times where we would focus together on the same things, but not like in a coven way. So I guess these are only things closest to a coven, if you may, but again, nothing structured or organised. I don't*

like and neither do I want anyone dictating how to do my own magic. Plus, when I got on social media and started talking to other people with similar beliefs, I saw that a lot of them were doing this for show, like being hateful to others that were trying to learn or just misguiding them on how you should or should not do your magic work. Covens are controlled environments. And I am so against any type of organised or controlled religion of any kind.

Rose: *I don't particularly like people, so I chose to be alone. I grew up in church and I hate any organised type religion. Being solitary means that I can spell whenever I feel like, dress as I want, I don't have to ask for permission or approval. I can just be me. I also think that being solitary requires more discipline, it makes you an independent thinker, the practice is personal, is yours. I never felt the need to be in a coven or group, because my practice is too personal to me. And once coven practices become more like a thump session, it just feels more like a cult. Whenever there are two or more people involved into something, there will always be someone that wants to control everything. My relationship with my Lady and Lord is just that, it is my relationship and I enjoy every moment of being able to be myself when I connect with them.*

Morgan: *From personal experience, being a Wiccan is having personal freedom. Instead of being a book or a bible that says you have to behave this way, or you have to do this once a week… It is more of a freedom to be yourself. You are not told you have to do that or that. You do not have to go to church every Sunday, you are not told that you have to say your nightly prayers, you are not even given rules. It's basically respecting the earth. If you take from the earth give back to the earth. So in my personal opinion is more of a religious freedom to practice what you want and how you want.*

The interview extracts above show that groups like Traditional covens serve solitary Wiccans as a form without function. Traditional Wicca is interpreted and treated as any other type of organised church, with its main purpose being that of a form with engulfing authority that constrains the individual's belief and freedom in their practice. It is solely a form because it serves no meaning, no real purpose, but on the contrary, it belittles the individual's uniqueness as a witch. Therefore, its function is not acknowledged as a belief system that could provide the practitioner with ample world-building material. This incompatibility arises from the very strict perspective they have on any type of collective that may resemble religious sets of doctrines and rules. Groups are much less magically imbued, if at all. Solitude is both representational and referential as their core spiritual stability. Solitary practice is both form and function. It constitutes firstly as a form because it is a way to sort religious characteristics and its mythological historiographies, just as Traditional Wicca or any other type of religious cult. And secondly, its functionality is given by recombining and reinterpreting myths and rituals that embody an alternative logic of their meaning-making which resists the prophetic form of Traditional Wicca. The solitary practice represents an alternative reaction to characteristics of any form of dominant social order. Their affiliation comes not as a need for identity reconstruction within a new form of spirituality, but as a response to macro-social conditions in which the individual has systematically disapproved with social network commitments. Such conditions of current life tensions produce motivation tensions which lead to establishing affective bonds with the divinity itself while weakening those bonds with a structured collective. As shown in my interviewees' responses, becoming a Solitary Wiccan is an element that contributes to their self-definition while being antithetical to forms of controlled denominations. And as argued by Anthony

Giddens (1991), choosing whether to practice a certain religion or not is an important factor that contributes to the project of the self within late modernity and in which individuals are accountable for creating and recreating a sense of who they are. As opposed to traditional and modern societies in which an individual was expected to continue in their parent's religion and social cues, a hallmark within contemporary societies is the process of individualisation, which can come as a result of choosing to practice a different religion than the one expected within the family (Giddens, 1991). And by choosing to practice a less popular religion, such as Wicca, it serves as a statement for individualisation and self-definition. Self-defining as a solitary witch within the Wiccan community is part of the process of re-imagining enchantment. Solitary Wiccans do not convert like Traditional Wiccans do, but they climatize themselves to the new sacred environment they create for themselves based on the teachings of Wicca. Solitary Wicca, therefore, emphasises individualistic self-discovery, and authority is vested in the practitioner; it never comes from the community because otherwise the sense of spirituality and religiosity would lose plausibility and sacred significance. Becoming a Solitary Wiccan is not justified by finding an external, absolute truth, but by identifying practices and beliefs that could be consistent with what the practitioner already is, or with what can suit best their non-conformity to organised environments.

6.3 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to show how different the practice of Wicca is between Traditional and Solitary adherents. By setting out the problem within Weber's theoretical framework, authority and disenchantment are core elements in analysing the structure of Wicca. The chapter has demonstrated how Adler has too simplistically analysed authority

within Wicca and how she has overlooked the charismatic authority that is passed down to coven *leaders*, priests and priestesses. How these leaders exercise their authoritative power within the coven and how this power restrains members' autonomy and agency. Although seeking to liberate themselves from moral constraints acquired from past mainstream churches and searching to regain spiritual agency, Traditional Wiccans seem to rejoin a denomination that still exercises authority but at a lesser level. The purpose of this chapter was not to show that Traditional Wiccans are wrong in choosing what and how to practice, but instead to show that Adler's idea of a non-dogmatic and non-authoritative Wicca is rather more applicable in the analysis of Solitary practitioners. Also applying Weber's notion of disenchantment shows how individuals joining covens are the ones disappointed with the results of scientific progress, dismayed by the structures of organised mainstream religions and established churches, while Solitary Wiccans are those individuals joining Wicca as a movement and searching the path to sacredness on their own because they carry a double disappointment. One is similar with that of Traditional Wiccans and the second is expressed through their view on covens which reminds them of the structures of organised mainstream religions that they have tried to distance themselves from. Based on the analysis of Solitary Wiccans, this chapter has set out the problem for the following chapter that will discuss and conceptualise the difference between conversion and affiliation.

CHAPTER 7

CONCEPTUALISING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONVERSION AND AFFILIATION

The following chapter will discuss the difference between conversion and affiliation, and why these notions are important in analysing the Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans. In this chapter I will show that although the two notions – conversion and affiliation – can be synonyms and on multiple occasions they are used interchangeably, for my set of data and analysis they portray religious membership to Wicca differently; and that each notion bears different understandings and show a different level of engagement to Wicca as a religious denomination. This chapter argues that those two processes, conversion and affiliation, although having almost similar meanings, describe two distinctive ways of gaining membership to Wicca. To do so, this chapter follows up the discussion on the previous two chapters. In the first one I argued that Traditional Wicca is, as opposed to Adler's (1989) argument, a religion with converts and demonstrated that the way in which covens are structured they are similar to mainstream communities of faith, therefore suggesting a reinterpretation of Adler's view. In the second one I demonstrated how Solitary practitioners are better characterised by Adler's belief of Wicca being a religion "without converts". Controlled communities of faith, such as the coven, provide no sense and creates existential uncertainties, thus driving the Solitary practitioner to search for authenticity and anti-conformity. Based on the argumentation from these two chapters, the following first section of this chapter will argue that a process of conversion better characterises, and

would be more favourable to show, how Traditional Wiccans become members of this movement. Basing my arguments on different religious conversion careers and religious conversion theoretical frameworks provided by a wide range of scholars and combining them with narratives collected from my respondents, I come to the conclusion that because Traditional Wiccans undergo extensive rituals and process during their spiritual journey within a community of faith, which in this case is represented by the coven. Those adherents not only experience a change in their belief, but they also experience a change in their identity, a core feature found in religious conversion theories. The second sub-chapter analyses Solitary Wicca and the characteristics of the meaning of the word affiliation. Although there is little to no academic evidence to show this differentiation between religious affiliation and religious conversion, I base my argument on the description of the word affiliation as provided by the Oxford Dictionary and not on the suggested connotation provided by scholars, which is similar in meaning to religious conversion. I, therefore, come to the conclusion that Solitary Wiccans affiliate to the movement because they do not experience a change in identity, as Traditional Wiccans do, but instead they imbue their current identity and fundamental inner and personal views by articulating a spiritual reconstruction of Wicca's teachings. The third sub-chapter gives a general overview of how individuals join the Wiccan movement and suggests that being either a Traditional or a Solitary member does not mean that one is more Wiccan than the other. The last section discusses my theoretical background and the context I created to analyse Wicca and Wiccans. This section brings into discussion the post-structuralism and interpretivist approaches, which were used to support my arguments that there is no universal truth, but

rather multiple interpretations, and that it is difficult for a social scientist to discover the truth because lived experiences are created on 'situated' experiences.

7.1 Conversion and Traditional Wicca

Many accounts within the annals of religious conversion literature describe the spiritual journeys and religious beliefs throughout the multitude of religious communities. There are multiple reasons as to why people choose to change their belief and a couple of these reasons have been presented in chapter 3. This sub-chapter will further the discussion on religious conversion applied to one of Wicca's branches, the Traditional path, however this chapter will not discuss the reasons why individuals turn to Wicca but will analyse which framework better characterise the process through which individuals become Traditional Wiccans. Therefore, this section will begin with a discussion about general religious conversion careers and then after these frameworks will be applied to Traditional Wicca to demonstrate that coven-based practitioners undergo a process of conversion.

The Oxford dictionary describes the word conversion as "the act or process of changing something from one form, use or system to another". Religious conversion is described by Stark and Finke (2000) as a process by which an individual shifts away from their previous held religious beliefs and commits to a new religious tradition's beliefs. Multiple definitions and conceptualisations of religious conversion have been given by scholars, but they commonly suggest that it is a process that involves a series of events which the individual experiences, rather than a single transformative experience (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998; Hood et al. 2003). There are two types of conversion conceptualisation: traditional and contemporary. In terms of the contemporary one, Richardson (1985) argues that the

order of events happening during a conversion process are flexible and that these events support a multicausal effect that leads to a person's conversion motifs, rather than the belief that the traditional power of God had a direct cause and effect on the individual. The traditional conversion paradigm suggests that the causes of conversion are external to the individual, supernatural and hard to resist; therefore, the conversion process is irreversible (Starbuck 1897; James 1902/1985; Hall 1904; Coe 1916). In contrast to this view, contemporary conversion theories, emerging from both psychology and sociology, suggest that conversion is more self-centric, and converts are described as active participants within their conversion process. The individuals seek to develop meanings of self-identity and personhood within their social contexts. Therefore, a constant interaction is visible between converts, who are active agents, and the external forces, like religious group followers or spiritual forces which the converts perceive. The individual who is converting is both conscious and voluntary (Travisano 1970; Richardson 1985; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Rambo 1993 & 1999; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998 Paloutzian et al. 1999). Another feature of the contemporary analysis of conversion is that converts are understood as searching for the meaning of their natural life, such as finding satisfaction in their relationships or careers, as well as their spiritual life, such as finding satisfaction and meaning in relation to what they perceive to be sacred.

The common understanding of conversion affirms that conversion is simply adopting new sets of religious beliefs which are different than the ones from the previous religious belief. There are definitions which suggest that religious conversions occur as a response to constant emotional stress, which in turn produce a change within the individual which coordinates converts with sacred beliefs (Sargant 1957; Pargament 1997; Zinnbauer and

Pargament 1998; Paloutzian et al. 1999;). For instance, Rambo (1993: 5) describes conversion as “a process of change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations”. Others, such as Snow and Machalek (1984) suggest that conversion is a radical change in a person’s “root reality” (Heirich, 1977: 674) or their “identity, meaning and life” (Travisano, 1970: 594). Early academic accounts have not standardized any conversion definition (Jackson, 1908). Taken together, research on religious conversion comes from various disciplines and produces countless prospects accompanied by various theories, explanations or methods that seek to give complex answers to the process of conversion (Zinnbauer and Pargament, 1998). Therefore, there are diverse religious conversion definitions but no consensus on how such a process operates. There are, however, certain aspects recorded vis-a-vis religious conversion research that indicate a consensus regarding what conversion is not. To begin with, a first differentiation appears between religious conversion and spiritual changes, and this aspect in relation to Wicca will further be discussed in the following subchapter, which develops the idea that this is a spiritual change that characterises better the process of affiliation which Solitary Wiccans experience. Although religious conversion and spiritual change have often been used interchangeably, there are various ways in which they differ (Zinnbauer and Pargament, 2005). Hill and Pargament (2003) describe religion as a structured system of beliefs that has its practices rooted in certain traditions, which permit individuals to conjointly experience the sacred. Whereas spirituality is described as subjective and personal and has flexible means by which a person can connect and experience an otherworldly spiritual force (Peteet 1994; Hill and Pargament 2003; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). In this sense, religion presupposes certain characteristics,

such as institutional involvement, social gatherings or organised practices, whereas spirituality presupposes a focus on universal connectedness, personal relevance, belief in the otherworldly and personal relatedness (Miller and Thoresen 2003; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). Religious conversion is characterised by a couple of components which are widely agreed upon and which give this process a clearer understanding. The feature that seems to be consistent across different religious conversion researches is, as Machalek and Snow (1993) suggest, the fact that religious conversion implicates a radical change within the individual's identity and self. Another agreed upon feature is that religious conversion has a detrimental effect on the outcome of the individual's life. For instance, changes in behaviour, changes in mental health and overall well-being, as well as changes in social group memberships or general social contexts (Paloutzian 1981; Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). A third agreed upon feature would be that prior to conversion, the individuals undergoe or experiences a period of crisis or stress (Heirich 1977; Ullman 1989; Rambo 1993). As suggested above, religious conversion definitions are versatile, vary and lack academic consensus. However, scholars so far tend to agree on the validity of the aforementioned features as being part of the things that characterise religious conversion.

Based on the general definition of conversion and its characteristics presented by various scholars, Traditional Wiccans could best fit into the category of individuals who convert. And, as opposed to what Margot Adler (1989) argued, Traditional Wiccans could be called converts. There are a couple of reasons as to why Traditional Wiccans, as opposed to Solitary ones, which will further be explained in the next sub-chapter, can be considered as individuals who convert. Traditional Wiccans have a greater level of implication, not necessarily in terms of belief or spirituality, but group-wise. As presented above, social

contexts are key features in conversion processes. Traditional Wiccans are those practitioners who are members of covens. Crowley (1996: 41) comments that "those who belong to a coven will generally meet for the eight sabbats, the major seasonal festivals, and also at the 13 Full Moon esbats. Some covens, and particularly those which emphasise training, will meet more frequently". Traditional Wiccans have a stronger bond with the group that they are part of. In this sense, Crowley (1996: 59) describes the importance of the role of the coven by stating that "a useful way of reminding the coven of its role is, where appropriate, to use the pronoun *we* rather than *I* when we are casting a circle with others". The coven is a community of practice where people formally come together to learn, practice and share expertise. Members coalesce around the social energy of their learning. Traditional Wicca has a less formal type of organizational structure than the one of mainstream religions, as argued in chapter 6, and represents a community of practice which presupposes mutual engagement of the adherents around the joint coven encompassing sherd repertoires of their communal resources. Those communal resources include ways of doing things, such as casting circles, routines, tools or symbols which that coven has adopted or produced during its existence and which have become an important element of its practice. This practice defines the community (i.e. the coven) and its members. The implicit and explicit knowledge is negotiated, and meaning is constructed through the coven's communal practices. Traditional Wiccans engage in a meaning-making activity within the circle of the coven and their identity as practitioners of the Craft is understood through their social context. Therefore, the identity of a Traditional Wiccan has a profound connection with the practice of their social context, in this case the coven. Identity within

the coven is by no mean an object, but a temporal thing that is constantly renegotiated during their time as member of the group.

Lisa: *I am oath-bound so I cannot tell you exactly what we are doing during our meetings, it's not like we are plotting the end of the world, but this is how we preserve our identity as witches. This is how we make sure our witch line is transmitted to those who in the future will open up to the Craft. […] I was always looking for meaning and purpose in my previous church, but I never truly found it until I read about Wicca. And it became more profound when I joined the coven. The people here [in the coven] are wonderful and we always get along. We joke a lot and enjoy spending time with each other. We come from different places and sometimes it's hard to get to all the meetings…I mean, you know, life happens, but for the sabbats we are always there because that is what keeps us going. Every sabbat I feel how I am spiritually growing more and more alongside my coven's brothers and sisters. We help each other, lift each other up, they are like my family. The coven is our place of wholeness and it is protected by our Goddess and God. It is not a house but a home in which we seek to reach spiritual maturity.*

Another reason as to why Traditional Wiccans can be considered converts is the step they take forward in legitimising their belief and membership to Wicca once they have joined a coven. Newcomers move from the periphery to having a more active role and responsibilities by undergoing group-specific rituals and practices, commonly known as initiations, that are said to establish their places as priests or priestesses within the coven. Such practices differ from coven to coven, but the most commonly known practice is the year and a day. This period of a year and a day should be understood as a training time in which the newcomer must learn the ways of the Craft. As discussed in chapter 5, such

practices could arguably resemble, for instance, the process of christening by which a person is formally recognised as a member of that denomination. Gooren's (2010) conversion career distinguishes five levels of commitment to the new faith. Wicca's process of initiation would coincide with Gooren's third level of commitment, which is called conversion. This level refers to the moment when individuals become formal members of the given religious group, followed by a change in the participants' religious identities and their commitment to the new group. Once a person is initiated in the coven, they become a priest or a priestess, and therefore they are ascribed a new identity according the group's internal norms. This new identity comes along with the responsibility of a more active participation within the group's common practices and rituals. Individuals also increase their sense of identity as they master or become more proficient in their practice. Members move in ranks during their journey as Traditional Wiccans:

Lisa: *[the year and a day] is a period in which you are tested. Obviously not like in school, but those members in higher ranks observe you and feel your energy. With every meeting you learn more and grow more, and they [the priestess and priests] feel when and if you are ready or not. […] after a while they just decide that your time has come to become a priestess yourself. The same goes for the other initiations, when you become a second stage or a third stage initiate. I started as a maiden, like everyone else. I did not know myself. After about five years I went through my second initiation. As a second degree I have some responsibility in my coven. It is mostly teaching those who are newer to the path. […] I hope that in a couple of years I will posses the wisdom to be initiated for the third time, to become a crone. But this is not up to, I pray to my goddess she would bless me with the necessary wisdom to guide other people.*

Another aspect that contributes to the Traditional Wiccan's identity development is the adopting of a craft name. Usually the names are chosen from various mythologies, such as Norse, Egyptian, Celtic or Greek, but members can also come up with their own. All rituals are taken seriously and usually the name is adopted during the first initiation; therefore, the practitioner must also take the meaning of the name seriously alongside its positive and negative connotations. Adler (1989) argued that Wiccans actively participate when integrating within Wicca. Her contention and my group of Traditional Wiccan respondents fall into the interactionist theoretical family of conversion, which incorporates active participants and social interaction. Such theories suggest that social contexts, such as covens, in which individuals participate, provide a search for progress and meaning (Kilbourne and Richardson, 1989). There are a couple of theories which are part of the interactionist perspective, such as social drift theory, experimental conversion motif or role theory. These theories suggest that the convert negotiates and constructs their identity across different environments and social roles. Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) comment that during this process there are substantial interactions taking place between the social milieu of the community of practice and a person's traits. The experimental conversion motif, for instance, suggests that people actively seek meaning within new denominations but only begin their true religious journey and fully commit to a community's beliefs when trying on roles within the group, and performing practices and rituals along with members of that religious group (Lofland & Skonovd 1981; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Rambo 1993). On the same note, role theories of conversion suggest that people radically change their identities initially by: having a profound interaction with the members of the belief community in given social settings (i.e. covens) and learning the meaning and duties of their

new roles; and secondly by establishing their commitment to the new system of belief (Bromley and Shupe 1979; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989).

Lisa: *When I was reading into Wicca and different mythologies I was also drawn to Egypt and Egyptian mythologies. […] I consider myself luck that I chose the name I wanted based on fondness to Egyptian mythologies. My craft name is Lady Hathor. She was an Egyptian protective goddess. […] When you take a craft name, you also take some aspects of that god or goddess. I specifically wanted Hathor because she is also the goddess of joy and love, and at that time, for a very long time, I wanted to surround myself with joy and love and happiness.*

As discussed in detail in chapter 5, another important aspect that leads to the idea that Traditional Wiccans are converts is the aspect of the coven which resembles the structure of organised mainstream churches.

Wendy: *I was once part of a coven and it was amazing. That is how I started my journey, but right now I am fairly solitary. When you are part of a coven, you get to share the beliefs that coven has, so you become influenced by their ideas and thoughts. Being part of a coven was a wonderful experience because even you are influenced to be the same as the others, you are also exposed to different paths, divinity and rituals. The coven as was part of was teaching the Gardnerian tradition and it was great to learn from those other witches. Covens are great and can be helpful for support and learning, but from my experience they tend to be taken over by people seeking power over enlightenment.*

Although covens exercise their power and authority less visibly and to a lesser degree, authoritative figures such as the high priest or priestess within the coven perform rituals

and act similarly to mainstream religion's figures. This may not constitute a problem for the Traditional Wiccan, but it is one for the Solitary Wiccan because, as it will be explained in the next sub-chapter, it restricts the practitioner's agency. Based on the interviews with Traditional Wiccans, the coven must be perceived as a learning hub, where practitioners gather to educate themselves about the teachings of the Craft. For the newcomers, second degree or third degree members, for instance, are seen rather as educators than as authoritative figures, however such members have responsibilities within the groups and also the power to decide when a member can be granted an initiation process. Learning is interdependent and interrelated with identity development; and, as argued in the first part of this sub-chapter, a change in the individual's identity is a core element in the process of conversion. The movement from a newcomer to an elder is a gradual process, formalised by rituals, and it involves multiple degrees of craft and knowledge experience. The prescribed curriculum of the group takes years to master but grants the movement of the individual from the periphery of the group to the centre of it. Individuals' involvement in the coven will determine how they will participate in the group's activities and consequently gain knowledge from those activities. A person's level of involvement and knowledge will influence their movement from periphery to the centre of the group. During this movement the individual changes their persona from "being" a Wiccan to "becoming" a Wiccan. Each advancement in their internal hierarchical ranks shapes the meaning of their identity as practitioners of the Craft.

7.2 Affiliation and Solitary Wicca

The following sub-chapter identifies religious affiliation as a process by itself that is different from religious conversion by the way practitioners experience their connection to Wicca.

This section turns to Solitary practitioners to demonstrate that their spiritual journey needs to be distinguished from that of the Traditional Wiccan. This section will demonstrate that Solitary Wiccans affiliate to the movement not necessarily by showing that affiliation presents new key elements that determine such a process, but by the lack of key elements that make a religious conversion possible.

The Oxford dictionary describes the word affiliation as “a person’s connection with a political party, religion, etc” or “one group or organization’s official connection with another”. Based on the discussion in the previous sub-chapter, there are debates suggesting that not all religious changes ought to be considered religious conversion (Travisano 1970; Rambo 1993). In this sense, Travisano (1970) explains that alternation and religious conversion are not the same. The process of alternation comes from the concept of social mobility, proposed by Berger (1963), and describes how multiple belief systems influence individuals in the modern day. Individuals find relevance in them and, therefore, accustom their identity accordingly to their chosen belief system (Zehnder 2011). Travison (1970) also comments that adopting a religious persona in certain instances and then a nonreligious persona in other instances (alternation) cannot be defined as conversion, because conversion refers to a person’s identity shift which remains constant across that person’s different social roles. Scholars like Pargament (1997) or Zinnbaur and Pargament (1998, 2005) suggest that spiritual change is a component of religious conversion because it is a personal and subjective alignment of the individual’s self with a supernatural power. This, however, suggests that spirituality is a core element, but also insufficient, in the role of religious conversion. At the same time, it is a core element in the role of religiousness in general.

There is little to no information regarding religious affiliation as a process by itself; most of the time it is interchangeably used with the word and process of religious conversion. In his conversion career, Gooren (2010) describes five levels of commitment, or in other words religious participation. Level three, called conversion, was discussed in the previous sub-chapter and referred to the change of religious identity which was then followed by commitment to the religious group. Level two, which he calls affiliation, refers to the moment when an individual becomes a formal member of the group, but does not imply any identity change. For Gooren, those levels are all part of a conversion process and at the end of the process a person simply becomes a convert. Looking at how Solitary Wiccans become members of the movement, Gooren's level two of commitment might prove to be a useful tool in analysing and differentiating them from their brothers and sisters who are coven members. As discussed in the previous sub-chapter, an identity change is a core element of the conversion, and this identity change is shaped by various processes such as adopting a craft name or adopting and going by a creed's rules. A Solitary Wiccan is only affiliated to, meaning they are connected to but not converted into, Wicca because they do not undergo the same processes as a Traditional Wiccan does. Such processes would be meaningless. For a Traditional Wiccan, the initiation is a sacred process that shows and legitimates their membership to the craft. Wiccan writer Scott Cunningham argues in *Wicca: A guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (2001 [1988]: 73, 75) that "most initiation ceremonies are nothing more than rites marking the acceptance of the person into a coven, and her or his dedication to the Goddess and God" and that "when the Old Ways have become a part of your life and your relationship with the Goddess and God is strong, when you have gathered your tools and performed the rites and magic out of joy, you are truly of the spirit

and can rightly call yourself Wiccan". Cunningham believes that the initiation rite is not compulsory when wanting to become a Wiccan, however he does include in his book a self-initiation ritual for those readers who wish to perform one in solitude. For Cunningham, as for most of my Solitary Wiccan respondents, becoming a Wiccan is a process that involves solely the self, and that power and spirituality which come from within. Cunningham (2001: 76) sarcastically ends his argument on initiation by commenting that "some say 'Only a Wiccan can make a Wiccan.' I say only the Goddess and God can make a Wiccan. Who's better qualified?".

Katherine: *As a Solitary Wiccan I am influenced by everyone and everything around me, but in a coven, I believe it is different. A coven would be like, I guess, in a religion that you basically follow what is taught. If you are solitary you are shaped by your own beliefs and instincts, you just feel what is right and what is wrong. I am not saying that what they practice in covens is wrong, but covens are a different story. I appreciate them as witches, but I follow my own path, I am by myself in this journey. I can teach you what Wicca is and what are the basics of Wicca but it I will never put myself above you if you want to learn and get into it. You know, just because I have been practicing for a month, a year or ten years, it does not mean I am your superior or something…*

Solitary Wicca seeks to distance itself from any structure and results in a form of contestation and escapism, but at the same time in a form of affirmation of worldview. Solitary Wicca may be understood as a form of protest allowing expression by the non-conformists within the context of ontological security. Simultaneously, solitary practitioners learn to find or create meaning through naturalistic interpretations: meanings which can aid in easing the feelings of ontological insecurity. Such an ontological dichotomy is meaningless

in a mediated and controlled environment, such as the one provided within a coven. Solitary practitioners do not need to search for a new image for the Divine by reaching out for communities because this is merely a barren detail that boils down their practice and belief to a singular, disenchanted facticity. If it can be understood that their lapse of faith from their previous denomination resulted in a temporary secularisation of their worldview, solitary practice brought back a re-conceptualisation of what sacredness is. It is a form of de-secularising a secular modern Western world.

To categorise theories and types of conversion, Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) developed a system that is based on two core features, namely agency assigned to converts and level of analysis. Agency is characterised by the role individuals take in their own conversion process. Whether the individual's role in this process is more passive or more active has been a long debate since the contemporary paradigm developed (Richardson, 1985). As explained in the first section of this chapter, the contemporary paradigm of conversions characterised the adherent as an active actor in their conversion which is self-directed towards seeking for meanings in their religious belief. The active actor also experiments with the new belief system, exercises individual choice when taking religious decisions and builds on their social context by interacting with group members. The tradition paradigm, on the other hand, characterises adherents as passive actors upon which supernatural forces act (Scroggs and Douglas 1967; Richardson 1985). The second feature of Kilbourne and Richardson's (1989) system is level of analysis, which shows whether external social factors or internal psychological factors are the core elements that drive conversion. Kilbourne and Richardson argue that conversion may occur at an inter-individual level. This shows that adherents' interactions with other people within their social environment, such as social

networks or group pressure, encourage the conversion process. Kilbourne and Richardson also argue that conversion may occur at an intra-individual level. This level suggests that the factors that fuel the conversion process are found within the person converting, such as personality traits, personal beliefs or cognitive styles. Inter-individual and intra-individual factors are both present during the conversion process, but as mentioned earlier, there are ongoing debates as to which factor plays a more decisive role in driving the process of conversion.

Rachel: *I believe all of us are born with a potential to become a witch. Yet we all just have to learn and be open to nature because there is so much we can see and feel. Some say they are already born witches and its their right to believe so. I know for sure I was not, I was neither brought up in a pagan or witch household. I learnt the craft on my very own and once I got more into it I realise I was not crazy for feeling and seeing things which my family could not. I never felt a deeper connection with anything than nature. […] I left Christianity because I felt I was constrained. I think of myself as a free spirit, I do not need anyone to tell me what or how to do. I can feel it myself. I do not need anyone to tell me what good morals are. There are plenty of guidance books or online groups if I want to ask things. As for the rest it, I am good on my own.*

Simon: *I am a Solitary witch as a result of many years of unbecoming something I was told I should be. Being spiritual does not come from religion. I am spiritual because this is how I decided I want to be. I believe that spirituality comes from my soul. For me, religion is just a set of rules and in so many cases it represents corruption or some sort of a tool for like power struggle. I believe in myself. Wicca for me is a way of life that cannot be shaped or influenced by anyone. […] I am solitary because my inspiration is nature, not some person*

that thinks he has got the power. The power is in all of us. I, myself, found in Wicca love, stability, comfort, wisdom, creativity, security, warmth, connection to the wilderness, and so many others.

For Solitary Wiccans agency is an extremely important element in affiliation. For them, mainstream churches represent the subjugation of agency and to an extent they see Traditional Wicca and covens practicing the same restrictions on members. Solitary Wiccans seek to regain and express their full agency based on their individual religious and spiritual choices without any limitations imposed by group norms. Solitary Wiccans believe that limiting their spirituality contributes to alienation and disenchantment of the world. They view Wicca's spirituality as a path that needs to be experienced without any constraints rather than as a religion to which you convert and follow its dogma as implied by the community of practice (i.e. coven). Kilbourne and Richardson's agency assigned to converts can, to a certain degree, describe the process Solitary Wiccans go through; namely they are active participants that make their own spiritual choices and search on their own for a new spiritual meaning in other denomination than in the ones they originated from, but so do Traditional Wiccans. Kilbourne and Richardson's description of agency characterises, in general terms, the modern religious seeker which can be widely applied to individuals. Agency, as understood in its widest sociological and philosophical meaning, makes the difference between conversion and affiliation in Traditional Wicca and Solitary Wicca. Agency is the individual's capacity to make their own choices and to act independently (Barker, 2005). Solitary Wiccans focus more on self-spirituality; therefore, the self has moral authority. As argued in chapter 6, Solitary adherents are Wicca's "believing without belonging" practitioners, because for them Wicca is just a spiritual change that is only

manifested within themselves and, as argued in the previous sub-chapter, a spiritual change is insufficient and is not equal to the characteristics of a conversion process. Spiritual change presupposes a focus on universal connectedness, personal relevance, belief in the otherworldly and personal relatedness. The Solitary path can be associated with a deinstitutionalisation of identity, where each practitioner is expected to construct their own personal identity in such a way that is by no means centrally informed by mediation factors such as coven membership, internal group norms, dogma and authority, but through a more expressive development of their own spiritual persona. By doing so, the Solitary practitioner does *not* transform from something into something else, as the definition of conversion describes, but they adjust the teachings of Wicca to their own personhood, contributing therefore to the development of self-expression and self-spirituality. This process shows their affiliation to Wicca, or their connection to Wicca as described by the meaning of the concept of affiliation. The Solitary movement is a reaction and adaptation as a result to the conditions of controlled religious communities, including Traditional covens, because they reduce spirituality to a disenchanted lifestyle. Solitary practitioners resist assimilation by mainstream or any community of belief that imposes even a minimal formal organisational structure, dogma or hierarchy, while insisting on focusing on self-autonomy. The fact that they have an amorphous and unregulated nature contributes to the idea that Solitary adherents are affiliated to Wicca. Their decentralisation is also a fundamental aspect of its vitality and ability to furnish a re-developed identity that is not dependent on the conversion processes required by organised structures or traditional lineage coven structures.

7.3 On becoming a Wiccan

Having established the two concepts of affiliation and conversion, this section will discuss in parallel the joining processes of Traditional and Solitary Wiccans.

Tensions between the conversion-affiliation debate arise when trying to characterise Wicca as an institutionalised movement. This could point out a potential "legitimation crisis". Legitimation crisis, as explained by Habermas (1975) describes a condition found in the late capitalist society. In that society, the state has to ensure capital accumulation while upholding mass loyalty. However, the tools by which capital accumulation is achieved may lead to the diminution of mass loyalty. Wicca has no direct link to Habermas' state/economic orientation, but the logic of legitimation crisis does. The ideology through which Wicca has legitimised itself as a movement in the lifeworld sphere is through self-determination and personal autonomy. These two factors have led Wicca's existence as a neotribal spiritual movement that lacks centralisation. Habermas (1989: 170-71) describes lifeworld as a "culturally transmitted and linguistically organised stock of interpretative patterns" and in which mutual understanding is possible. The lifeworld is composed by personality, society and culture. In theory, within contexts these components are negotiable among parties which are oriented toward mutual understanding. Regardless how differentiated or rationalised they may become; these features remain lifeworld functions:

> "In the relation of culture to society, structural differentiation is to be found in the gradual uncoupling of the institutional system from worldviews; in the relation of the personality to society, it is evinced in the extension of the scope of contingency for establishing interpersonal relationships; and in relation of culture to personality, it is manifested in the fact that the renewal of traditions depends more and more on the individuals' readiness to criticise and their ability to innovate." (Habermas, 1989: 181)

As showed by Habermas, it is a desirable condition that between the lifeworld's components there are structural differentiations. This releases the communicative action's full rational potential. Wicca as a movement can be understood as encouraging a rationalisation of the individuals' lifeworlds. This is also encouraged by what Giddens calls "pure relationships" which refers to relationships in which an individual engages, based on the intrinsic satisfactions and rewards. It is also encouraged by problematising a participant's relation to their inherited interpretations with an emphasis on personal experience which contributes to Wicca's legitimate creation of its mythology. However, such a characterisation is more applicable to Traditional Wicca, as covens already present a mild form of institutionalisation, as discussed in chapter 5, and therefore contribute to the understanding of coven practitioners as converts. For Solitary Wicca to function it needs not to be effectively institutionalised because its functionality depends on authentic sociality. Institutionalisation and centrality would undermine and diminish Solitary Wicca's self-development potential. Solitary Wicca serves adherents with the functionality of an affiliation process because it resists structuration and authority.

Affiliation and conversion are not symmetrical, because affiliation is not as coordinated as conversion. Coven members represent the maturation of an affiliated Solitary Wiccan into a converted Traditional Wiccan. When neophytes join covens, they begin their identity transformation and shape it according to the group's rules, norms and rituals. Individuals joining covens seek a full transformation. They want their membership to Wicca to somehow be legitimised, and this happens by changing their previous identity into a new one that is recognised by the community of faith's members, who also hold authoritative roles and make decisions for the group. Being given a coven name is also an important

aspect of identity change; this is not by far a new practice within religious or spiritual cults. Such practices can be observed for instance in Orthodox Christianity (or Eastern Christianity), where individuals who choose to serve a consecrated life as a priest, for example, follow one of the sacred mysteries called Ordination or Cheirotonia (also known as the Holy Order in the Western Church terms). Depending on the degrees (rank) of Ordination, one or more bishops are required to perform the ritual (Sokolof, 2001). In terms of Wicca, such a ritual represents a moment of awakening or realisation that Traditional neophytes are now dedicated and officially accepted members of Wicca. Solitary adherents do not change their identity, but they re-furbish it with the new magical knowledge they have acquired. The process of affiliation should be understood as individuals borrowing the teachings of Wicca and applying them to their own existing identity. Of course, Solitary Wiccans can self-ascribe a Craft name, and during my informal observations with groups of Solitary Wiccans as well as during the interviews I have met individuals that, based on personal preferences, have self-attributed a pseudonym. Craft names in Solitary Wicca did seem a little problematic and the responses vary. Some individuals declared that the name was *given* to them:

Anna: *My Craft name came to me quite a while ago when I was preparing my offerings for one ritual. It just came to me… I would not want to say randomly, but more out of a sudden and I just thought, you know what, I think this sounds just right. And I truly believe it was the universe that sent that name to me or gave that name to me…and I accepted it.*

Some individuals choose the name themselves:

Sandra: *I chose my name. Initially I did a lot of research beforehand, like I was looking into elements, meaning of different animals or crystals or trees, stuff like that. And then eventually I thought 'why am I not looking up my real name'. So I searched and found that my name [name] means River and then I added Raven because I love those smart little birds. So here it is, RiverRaven […]*

And lastly some individuals were rather against such practices:

Alberto: *I do not have a Craft name. I do not need one to be who and what I am. Not having a craft name in almost 30 years has never impeded my path or me in any way. You just need to be yourself. You need to be of true heart and true soul and mind. Be pure in intent. These are the qualities you need. They are the most powerful tools a person can have.*

As it can be observed, there are mixed responses in terms of Craft names for Solitary Wiccans, as opposed to Traditional practitioners presented earlier in this chapter. What is clear from these three examples is that the Craft name in Solitary Wicca may act as a self-empowerment element that only reinforces its nature as a tradition that promotes individualisation. Solitary Wiccans do not need to have Craft names like Traditional Wiccans do. But if they do have Craft names, it does not mean they undergo a conversion process; it means that they just furnish their identity as witches with it because, unlike Traditional Wiccans, their names need not to be approved and accepted by a creed. They do not need to 'Christianise' themselves in the Craft (Wicca). By affirming that Solitary Wiccans do not change their identity while Traditional Wiccans do, the following question arises: does this mean that Solitary practitioners cannot be identified with Wicca? Yes, they can. What stands for both the Solitary and Traditional Wiccans' identities are their beliefs, customs,

practices and rituals. Their identity lies in their capability to be critical thinkers which are articulating their theological perspectives, spirituality and idealistic vision of morality. What differentiates Solitary Wiccans from Traditional Wiccans is their identity as an affiliate as opposed to their identity as a convert.

Disaffiliation from their previous denomination does not necessarily mean that they abandon faith. As discussed in chapter 2, Wicca emerged as a closed group, and individuals needed to be initiated in the coven. Wicca has experienced transformations in order to meet the needs of its practitioners. Such transformations can be seen in the emergence of the Alexandrian Wicca, a branch of Wicca that is largely based on Gardnerian Wicca[17], or in the emergence of the solitary practice which was promoted by Wiccan writes like Doreen Valiente or Raymond Buckland. As described by my respondents, especially the Solitary practitioners, religiosity or spirituality retreated from religious or spiritual institutions (covens) and experienced subjectivisation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Davie's (1994) "believing without belonging" paradigm describes the complexity of the conversion-affiliation dichotomy because Solitary practitioners' behaviours, beliefs and values are based on their personal preferences and relay very little, if at all, on traditional institutions, which here are represented by covens. Individuals seemed to be more attracted to the Solitary path because it promoted an individualisation of religious actors, where individuals acquire agency and autonomy by being able to choose freely what to believe in and how to worship. The emergence of Solitary Wicca not only promoted a form of individualised Wicca, but also an assertion of a new communitarianism. Solitary Wicca can be appreciated as a form

[17] Gardnerian Wicca (or Traditional British Wicca) represents the first branch of Wicca, as proposed by its founding father Gerald Gardner. Both Gardnerian Wicca and Alexandrian Wicca are initiatory traditions and members are part of a coven.

communitarianism in which experiencing the sacred is directed onto the individual rather than the community. Both Traditional Wicca and Solitary Wiccan can be understood as two distinctive types of communitarianism, each group preserving and promoting different behaviours, alongside different ways of joining the Craft. More than Traditional Wiccans, Solitary Wiccans show a capacity of religious organisation transformation by which they elaborate on their subjectivity and individualisation. Solitary Wicca is not, however, portraying a subjectification of Wicca as a religion, but it proposes a different way of re-enchanting the everyday life. Therefore, Solitary Wicca is different to Traditional Wicca and needs to be analysed differently in terms of the conversion-affiliation process.

Is then Wicca an expression of re-sacralisation or secularisation? Based on my interpretation of my set of data, Wicca has experienced an internal secularisation due to the lack of sacredness Solitary practitioners find in Traditional Wicca. However, the answer is probably best determined by the theory that is being used (See Section 3.2). Some scholars might suggest it is a return to the sacred, while others might see a form of secularisation. Although sacralisation and secularisation are two different processes, perhaps Solitary Wicca could be looked at as presenting the two phenomena as paradoxically correlated. They are complimentary processes that determine each other. I ended the previous chapter by affirming that Solitary Wiccans carry a double disappointment; one that has evoked as a result of the lack of enchantment found in their previous denomination and one that is expressed through their view on covens which reminds them of the structures of organised mainstream religions that they have tried to distance themselves from, a fact which suggests another type of disenchantment. Individuals become Wiccans not because they see Wicca as a religion but as a way of life:

Kelly: *Pfff… that is a loaded question. Wicca is like the ground I walk on, it is my foundation. It is not everything, but it is what helps me go through life day by day, like keeps me grounded, yeah… like moving forwards, constantly being intrigued by things, constantly trying to better myself as a person in all aspects of life whether be interpersonal relationships or schooling or magically speaking. It reminds me that I am a fighter and I will get what I want regardless … I am not going to give up, so it's more than just a thing I do twice a month, three times a month. It is more than just meeting with a bunch of people that I practice with. It is not only what I do at my altar but what I bring forth to others, how I present myself… basically.*

Katherine: *Wicca is not just mixing potions or collecting crystals or cursing at your annoying neighbour. Wicca teaches you that everything is a cycle and really that everything that goes around then comes back again. It teaches you not to do harm, and not only to people like the Bible would say, but to the nature and animals as well. Before learning how to cast circles or spells, Wicca teaches you that there is a balance in the cosmos.*

Jennifer: *One of the biggest benefits that I have found with Wicca is being more at peace with yourself, finding that inner peace that everyone says they are always searching for. Wicca kind of taught me to focus more on myself and less on what other people think of me or expect me to be.*

Whether adherents convert or affiliate it does not make them more Wiccan than the others. Becoming a Wiccan is first and foremost a struggle with realising that one is something else than what one has been told to be. It is a struggle to find a new path to lead them to a re-enchantment of the world. Traditional or Solitary, practitioners feel that only within Wicca

they can reach their full spiritual potential. Probably the question that follows this affirmation is why Wicca and not any other (nature-based) religion? As described throughout all three analysis chapters, participants from both traditions consider that the following characteristics contributed to their conversion and affiliation to Wicca:

●Wicca appeals to a wide range of people because it lacks that structure and authority which restricts their spiritual freedom. This spiritual freedom is moulded as per each individual's wish. Wicca is inclusive and not judgemental (e.g. whether you have sinned or not)

●Wicca generates emotionalism. Members pay much attention to their way of worshiping and this creates an atmosphere of transcendence which inspires them to reflect upon nature and life. And at the end of the rituals, many of them feel happiness and release

●Wicca offers satisfaction of one's spiritual and material desires. This satisfaction is seen in the offer of spiritual power by means of rituals and metaphysical experiences (e.g. dreams and visions, seeing or hearing supranatural entities). In terms of the material area, it can be observed in their health healing. Some informants reported suffering from depression and anxiety, and Wicca seem to have worked as a coping mechanism.

●The warmth and the importance of the individuals with which covens accepted and integrated neophytes. Many members have sought spiritual fulfilment in various communities of belief. They affirmed that the covens they are part of make them feel welcomed and comfortable. Covens recognise the members, listen to them, invite them to join in activities and create friendships.

●Wicca does not impose unrealistic standards of morality and behaviour. Some respondents did not agree with the literal and strict adherence to the doctrine, arguing that it decentralises the core of human agency and the subjective life experience. Members believe that you do not need to uphold strict practices and beliefs to feel spiritual satisfaction.

●Wicca promotes the emerging individualist culture. It is a spirituality which emphasises the needs of the individual and promotes spiritual diversity[18]. Wicca reduces its doctrine to having a spirituality rather than having a religion. Religion and religious institutions are all about traditions and controlling the individual. Spirituality represents the heart of the member and their sincerity in the relationship with their Gods or nature.

●Wicca and Wiccans do not promote 'annoying' proselytising practices. Members feel that Wicca has never been imposed onto them, and that they came across Wicca through friendly means (by reading a book, discovering it in an article, hearing about it in a video or from a friend). Members affirm that they joined Wicca freely and not because someone else forced those ideas onto them.

As I presented in chapter 3, Harrington's (2000) 'recognition' motif describes well the main drive for becoming a Wiccan. My respondents recalled that they have already been more or less practicing some sort of magic, or at least they had knowledge about Wicca, for a lengthy period of time before deciding that this is the community of practice that best fits their needs. And those spiritual needs were described by the respondents as a wish for a lack of (religious) institutional control and a wish to re-enchant their secular world with a system of belief that gives each member the ability to choose their own spiritual path. As described in chapter 5, Wicca does have a structure, even if it appears as a less strict one. It is a structure

[18] This includes from being an Atheist Wiccan to a polytheist Wiccan

that encourages individuality. As per Adler's (1989) argument, I do not disagree with her 'coming home' paradigm. Moreover, I believe that such an experience is not exclusive for Wiccans or Pagans, but for anyone that finds spiritual fulfilment in any type of community of practice. Moreover, I would appreciate Adler's notion of 'home' to the meaning of the German term *Heimat*. Blickle (2004) explains that Heimat consists in the relationship between an individual and their social spatial unit. In a more general context, Sandvoss (2005: 65) comments that Heimat is "describing an imagined relationship between the self and the external world, in which part of the world is experienced as inherently related to and constituted through the self". The concept's best understanding is that of homeland, or the place that evokes the positive feelings of home. A strong sense of emotional warmth, security and even stability found within Wicca may offer the opportunity to relocate the individual, textually or territorially, into a new realm that can be associated with the feeling of 'home'. Wiccans may 'go home' because they join a safe space where they practice freely and worship whatever entity appeals to them, but this 'home' is not different than what a Christian might find in a Christian church or a Buddhist in a Buddhist temple. The 'home' that Adler was talking about should be considered as the place, fictive or non-fictive, where individuals, initiated or Solitary Wiccans, feel accepted and feel that they can achieve their spiritual potential.

Both conversion and affiliation take place over time. Those can be observed in the acquired knowledge of practices and doctrine, and the evolution of spiritual experiences. The process of belief change and identity change is different from one individual to another. Some processes are faster than others. Other processes follow a more difficult path through

struggles with their past Christian life[19] which resulted in multiple deconversions and disaffiliations. This also suggests that neither conversion nor affiliation are definitive changes, but latent processes.

7.4 Understanding my Wiccan Context

The following section describes post-structuralism and interpretivism. Although not fully adopted throughout the length of this study, the influence of the two approaches can be observed in my analysis of Wiccans and Wicca both as a phenomenon and epistemologically.

Post-structuralism can be associated with social deconstructionist theories as presented by Jacques Derrida (1976) and Michel Foucault (1980). This approach opposes the psychoanalytic definition of the self, by describing the self as socially constructed through "subjectification" of the individual. Foucault argued that individuals are transformed into subjects through knowledge-based discursive practices and power relations. He argued that human sciences play an important part in the "subjectification" of not only the self, but also in the construction of social realities. It is through searching for the "truth" that knowledge-based disciplines create inquiries regarding the nature of the self, and by which discursive practices are defined. Foucault believed that through this process a "regime of truth" is created around which all other truths are determined. Therefore, knowledge is not pure, but it is rather based on current understanding or, as Rouse (1994:33) suggests, on "continually reproduced situated systems of discourse" which generate their own adaptations of the human subject, alongside our meanings and wisdom connected to the

[19] I note 'Christian life' because all my informants, except one, were former Christians

subjective experience. A subject is then created through the language of discourse. To post-structuralism, the human subject is a “historical achievement”.

Derrida (1976) used deconstruction as a form of critique to affirm that in a work (text) there is not a single intrinsic meaning, but many, which can be conflicting. Language does not mirror experience because there is not one singular truth or one singular essential identity of the self. Lived experience interpretations are representations of the truth restricted by literary conventions, biased by ideology and value and ambiguously interconnected to a cosmos outside themselves. Between experience, reality and the representation of those experiences there will be inevitable gaps (Bruner, 1986). There will never be a “realist” or an accurate reading of what was said or meant, but different representations of those meanings. Therefore, the task is to comprehend how subjective experience is given meaning and is textually constructed. Post-structuralism also brings into question the interactionist conventions of epistemological certainty, as well as textual authority. This means that a critical re-reading of the expectations ingrained in the objective representations is possible. In this sense, Denzin (1992: 39) comments that:

> “While announcing a concern for the difference between objective experience and their subjectivity, interactional meanings and expressions, the approach tells us surprisingly little about the gaps between experiences and their expression… Dancing round the problems of truthfulness and verifiable statements, these authors, committed as they are to the canons of positivist, naturalistic science, ignore the pervasive grey area that joins their life stories with narratives fiction. Seeing themselves creating and contributing to a genre, they fail to see how the very conventions they employ create the subject matter…they wish to analyse. They then proceed to assume the existence of knowledgeable authors, objective texts, starting point in lives, and the presence of influential others”

What Denzin seems to point out is that the interactionist text is unsuccessful in considering that documents can themselves be social constructions creating their own subjects. In

addition to this, Clough (1998) suggests that subjective experiences are revealed by using language, observation and theories of writing. By deconstructing a realist interactionist text, Denzin (1992: 65) comments, it “reproduces a system of realist discourse or emotional realism that creates the impression that the reader can see and feel what the writer has seen”. Clough also suggests that the author is not the sole producer of a text and further comments that the factual representation of an empirical reality is, in fact, narratively constructed. Therefore, it cannot be said anymore that the writer presents an objective and non-disputed report of lived experiences. Instead, readers and authors make use of conventions of interpretation and create their own meanings which moulds their own perspectives and views given by a textual representation of a lived experience. Critically re-reading interactionist texts also highlights interpretations, writing and social life theories are integral parts of the same mechanism. A post-structural and interactionist research functions to create new scenes of investigative criteria. Post-structuralism mainly targets how lived experiences are comprehended and created through prevailing knowledge, textual representation and language of the subject. Interactionism focuses on the social processes which give meaning to those lived experiences of the subject.

Interpretivism challenges the realist premises about the finding of the “truth” and suggests that the social world cannot be investigated in the same manner as the natural world or through “naturalistic observation” as described by Kemper (1990). The interpretivist view understands that knowledge as a social production, in which the researchers and the other participants have an important role in collecting and interpreting the knowledge (Stanley & Wise, 1990; Stacey, 1991). Study participants use the research process and their world experiences to lay the foundations of knowledge (Foltz & Griffin, 1997). Therefore, cultural

representations of their lived experiences are created on 'situate' experiences of the research participants. The interpretivist view suggests two important arguments: (1) the 'real' world is hard and problematic to know because lived experiences are interpretations of people's views; and (2) researchers only have access to ambiguous representations of other's experiences through social interaction, text or talk (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). In other words, Prus (1996: 8-9) argues that

> "people are different from other objects and that the study of human behaviour, consequently, requires a methodology that is attentive to those differences. The interpretivists envision human group life as activity constituted by people in interaction with others. Human behaviour is seen as denoting an interpretive, interactive process. The primary methodological procedures are ethnographic (participant-observation, observation, and open-ended interviews). Human life is studied as it is experienced and accomplished by the very people involved in its production."

It can be observed then that studying human behaviour means to study lived experiences that are entrenched in individual's activities, interactions and interpretations. The human condition is unique, loaded with multiple and sometimes contradictory experiences and interpretations. Interpretivism attempts to catch those experiences and interpretations individuals attach to situations, and the ways in which lived experiences are constructed in conjunction with the other. Interpretivists affirm that individuals make meaning through interactive dialogue. This dialogue becomes the ground where meaning is created and possibly negotiated over time. Implicitly, social reality is not comprehended as a given, but it is socially constructed. Therefore, the use of language, as a site for constructing meaning, will never fully reproduce lived realities. Strives (1993: 424) describes the interpretivist perspective as "our analytic interpretations are partial, alternative truths that aim for believability, not certitude, for enlargement of understanding rather than control".

My fieldwork practice was to a large extent informed by the post-structuralism view and interpretivist tradition, which valued the existence of multiple truths and, respectively, the face-to-face interaction and joint construction of meaning between my informants and myself. The influence and applicability of those two approaches can be observed throughout this thesis. The way in which I examined the conversion-affiliation dichotomy was by deconstructing the text Adler (1989) suggested; and as I described at the end of the previous section of this chapter, Adler's text does not provide the reader with a singular meaning, but it is open for multiple interpretations (as it was mine – see chapter 6). I started this research with the idea in mind that neither the argument supporting religious conversion, nor the argument against it hold the absolute truth, but the truths are created around them. I credit the two arguments as post-positivist, too rooted in over-generalisation and ill-suited to reflect variability, facets and nuances in human interaction and meaning (identity) creation. I believe that by affirming that some individuals convert while others affiliate gives more space for better interpretations of the lived experience and individuals' meaning creation. I believe that for semi-structured belief systems like Wicca a rigid categorisation for belief change or joining process only limits the possibilities to add another layer of knowledge. Starhawk (2004: 7), a self-identified witch and highly mentioned author among my respondents commented that:

> "to be a Witch…. or a Pagan… is more than adopting a new set of terms and customs and a wardrobe of flowing gowns. It is to enter a different universe, a world that is alive and dynamic…., where everything is speaking to us, if only we have ears to listen"

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn upon the definitions of conversion and affiliation to demonstrate that although the words are similar, their meaning can differ if put in specific contexts. By doing so, I then applied the meaning of each concept to Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans to demonstrate that the process of joining Wicca is different for the two groups. In my view, the most important characteristic that differentiates conversion from affiliation is identity formation. The first section of this chapter looked at the process of conversion and Traditional Wiccans, and why this process better fits this group. I have drawn on the creation of a new identity formed within the coven, in accordance with internal group rules and authority of that coven. The fact that covens perform initiation rituals, have different ranks of witches and attribute new identities mostly recognised by being given a coven name, suggests a better resemblance to mainstream religious traditions. I argue that such practices suggest a type of 'Christening' of the neophyte into the world of magic. In the second section I discuss why an affiliation process better characterises Solitary Wiccans. I discuss this in opposition with conversion which requires a different type of dedication to the Wiccan community. However, the main argument for this process focuses on the idea that Solitary Wiccans do not change their identity because they do not need to be 'officially' recognised by their peers to be accepted as a witch. I argue that religious affiliation shows a re-adaptation of their existing identity to the new system of belief, mostly because Wicca as a movement is highly permissive in terms of rituals and beliefs. Therefore, Solitary Wiccans do not change their identity as Traditional Wiccans do, but they furnish their existing identity with their own vision of sacredness.

This final analysis chapter brought together the understandings of Traditional Wicca (chapter 5) and Solitary Wicca (chapter 6) and gave them a new context for the joining process and identity formation. It also placed emphasis on the importance of institutionalisation and authority as push and pull factors. Whether one is looking at Traditional Wicca or Solitary Wicca, the world-creation of both reflects a spiritually motivated environment formed as a consequence of their critique towards the disenchantment of the mainstream. The third section of this chapter discussed in parallel the joining processes of Traditional and Solitary Wiccans. I emphasised the idea that Wicca has experienced transformations in order to meet the needs of its practitioners. Wicca is a malleable system of belief that manages to incorporate the spiritual needs of many, regardless of the joining process. The fourth and final section of this chapter discussed the background or the way I looked at Wicca as a spiritual movement and at Wiccans as lived experiences and narratives ready to add new layers of knowledge. My starting point was the idea that the existing literature does not represent the universal knowledge or truth, but versions that are open for reinterpretation and enrichment.

CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

This study is primarily designed as a contribution towards the broader understanding of Wicca and how individuals join it. It is remarked at the opening of this thesis that there are two major understandings of how individuals become Wiccans: they either convert or they do not convert but they are 'coming home' (Adler, 1979). The aim of this study was to identify which hypothesis reflects reality better. After conducting thirty-two interviews with Traditional and Solitary Wiccans, my findings suggested that both hypotheses are valid, however each one of them is characteristic for one group. I discuss conversion careers in chapter 3 and chapter 7. Most of these theories enquired whether individuals attend places of worship on a regular basis, the belief in a God, the frequency of their religious participation or commitment to the religious group as being adequate methods to determine whether or not they are religious, and if they are then it suggests that a process of conversion took place. However, as discussed in the analysis chapters, participation in rituals and belief in a God does not necessarily involve a process of conversion (i.e. a change in identity). The process of becoming a Wiccan is more sophisticated and needs more attention to differentiate between the Traditional branch and the Solitary path. The narratives presented by my interviewees show that they would rather characterise themselves more as 'spiritual but not religious'; and this characterisation, which has been suggested by other scholars as well as presented in chapter 2, provokes the discussion of whether Wicca is part of the New Age movement or at least a version of the 'new

spirituality' of the twentieth century. The approach I used to tackle the problem of conversion to Wicca was by trying to contextualise each narrative and document the stories and complex experiences of being or becoming a Wiccan. This approach was my method of understanding how individuals go about framing the circumstances of their identification as Wiccans.

To answer the research question outlined in chapter 1 (**Do Wiccans experience a conversion process?**) I found myself in the position where one other question begged answering first: What is the difference between Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans in terms of the joining process? I have started my investigation based on the two antithetical views – conversion and no conversion. While trying to make sense of the two views, I realised that the answers were overgeneralising and not looking at more individual cases. By the time I exhausted the literature on the subject and went through more than half of the interviews I realised that the answer to *Do Wiccans experience a conversion process?* is easier than expected. The short answer is: it depends who you are asking – Traditional or Solitary? The answer came about through a lengthy analysis of Traditional and Solitary members. The literature I have covered tried to give a universal answer for all Wiccans but omitted that there are actually differences between the Wiccan traditions that need attention because, as shown throughout this thesis, these differences uncover new facets of the joining practices, which ultimately answer the conversion question. I began the interviews expecting to listen to stories about conversion or 'coming home'. What I heard were not conversion stories but life stories. After listening to such 32 stories I realised that not only Wicca has had a major positive effect on their lives, but also that the process of becoming a Wiccan is more complex than a label stating convert or non-convert.

What is the difference between Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans in terms of the joining process?

As suggested in chapter 1, the outcome of this study should not be considered universally applicable to all Wiccans due to the limited number of respondents. However, the findings of this study show that there is another facet regarding religious change to Wicca, which scholars so far seemed to have overlooked. This research shows that first of all Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans need to be analysed separately because, regardless of sharing the same or similar beliefs, they are two distinctive branches of the same religious movement which, as shown in chapter 5, chapter 6 and chapter 7, are characterised by different approaches. I decided to name this section of the conclusion using the second research question because not only does it succeed in ultimately providing a pertinent answer to the main research question, but it also helped me realise that Traditional Wicca and Solitary Wicca are two sides of the same coin which need separate attention.

In *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979: 14) Margot Adler asked the question "how do people become Neo-Pagans?". As discussed in chapter 5, her response was that individuals do not convert to Wicca because "Neo-Pagan groups rarely proselytise" (pp.14). Her main argument of individuals not converting (or affiliating) to Wicca is supported by groups lacking a strategy to attract new members. She then continues to suggest that once individuals learn about Wicca, they realise that they were already practicing that religion or following those set of beliefs but did not know it had a name. On this assumption Adler proceeds to suggest that the answer 'I've come home' or 'coming-home' seemed to be a very common phrase used by adherents. Whether this was a collective and sincere response that Adler received during her investigation is hard to contest. However, as discussed in

chapter 3, newer studies seem to indicate that the coming-home phrase is suggested and taught through means of media rather than felt by members (Mayer & Gründer, 2010), therefore members do not necessarily experience home-coming but are made to believe so. Harrington's (2000) study argues that Wiccans experience different conversion motifs and that conversion occurs long before individuals recognise the existence of a religion that presupposes their beliefs. However, Harrington conducted her study on 102 initiated Wiccans (Traditional). Whereas the motifs she presents in her study are somewhat similar to the motifs presented in my interviewees' narratives, her sample excludes Solitary practitioners, therefore limiting her argument to just one branch of Wicca. There is no doubt that prior to becoming Wiccans, those individuals presented various reasons which could be classified as conversion motifs. What those studies lack is clear delimitation between Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans. This delimitation makes possible a re-interpretation of Adler's argument and a classification of the processes that each group experiences. Understanding religious change from other denominations to Wicca was not an easy task because each narrative is unique and presents different levels of engagement. One of the main challenges in understanding religious change was the meaning my participants gave to this concept. A second challenge was understanding that there is another perspective of looking at religious change to Wiccan than what Paganism scholars have presented so far in the literature. The perspective I adopted analysed the participant's experiences while holistically looking at both Traditional and Solitary practitioners. When analysing religious conversion most scholars try to understand *why* people choose certain religious groups, as in Harrington's study for instance. The main focus of this study was to look at how individuals experience conversion, if there is any such process as Adler suggests.

The narratives I have analysed showed that prior to becoming Wiccans, individuals made rational choices and, as Adler suggested, there was no proselytising.[20] The process for changing identity and religious beliefs was different for each individual. While some processes were faster, others were slower, following a more complicated path. This shows that conversion cannot be characterised as a definitive change, and therefore conceptualising the process of affiliation as a separate and distinctive experience was required. Interviewees commented that the essence of Wicca is religious liberty; adherents have the freedom to choose what to worship and how to worship. This freedom led to religious pluralism which also led to a discrepancy between how Solitary adherents wish to practice their spirituality as opposed to coven members. While this diversity is a characteristic that many of my interviewees searched for and seemed to be the main drive for adopting the Wiccan beliefs, it also shows that Wicca is a doctrine of multiplicity. As discussed in the analysis chapters, the main differences between the Traditional and Solitary paths lie in their presence and absence of authoritative figures, rules of conduct, organisation and forms of empowerment. These discrepancies led this research to identify two separate religious change processes: conversion and affiliation. As presented in chapter 5, the coven as a religious organisation embodies an important factor in the process of conversion because it configures the neophyte with a new identity which is recognised by the group's members. For the Solitary practitioner, the coven represents a religious institution that reminds them of organised mainstream religions. For them, this institutional factor represents doctrine and organisation. Those elements (i.e. doctrine, organisation,

[20] Brendan's narrative, in chapter 5, describes the moment when he entered an occult store and was invited to take part in their religious group. While this proselytising tactic is different than the ones presented by scholars, where adherents show up in public places and advertise for their religious groups, I do consider this indirect proselytising.

new identity formation and authority) enforce a conversion process for Traditional Wiccans. In contrast to Solitary practitioners, role theory and socialisation play an important role in the conversion process experienced by Traditional Wiccans. Those approaches are strongly linked with the religious organisation (i.e. the coven). Socialisation is defined by Long and Hadden (1983: 5-7) as "the social process of creating and incorporating new members of a group from a pool of non-members, carried out by members and their allies". In these terms, the members of a coven not only represent the organisation, but they also decide when to initiate new and old members in the different roles a coven holds. Such rituals consolidate the Traditional Wiccan's conversion process.

The data analysis also showed that, regardless of being part of a coven or practicing solitarily, religious pluralism and religious freedom are dynamic features of Wicca. The purpose of both conversion and affiliation is to bring members closer to the divine and provide a new meaning and a new purpose. What differentiates initiated members from Solitary members is not their wish to encounter the holy, but the requirement of identity change that is experienced differently. A rupture with their former identity is required for both types of Wiccans, however this only suggests what scholars define as disaffiliation (Gooren, 2010). A distinction between Traditional and Solitary, and conversion and affiliation are needed in order to fully understand Adler (1979), Luhrmann (1989) or Harrington's (2002) approaches. Having made this distinction, it is easier to have a greater understanding about religious mobility in Wicca.

Final Thoughts

> "The trouble is, our ideas are precious possessions. They express our identity. They signify our loyalties. […] Ideas generally are though; but willed beliefs, deliberately forced or summoned convictions about things we want to be true, are particularly resilient. They can relate to political ideologies or to cultural shibboleths or to profound supernatural powers like spirits, witches, omens, fate, faith healing, intervening angels and strange gods. Whatever the case, faith-based mindsets are powerful indeed." (Waters, 2019: 38)

I began this study with the idea in mind that every social researcher hopes that their effort to produce a scientific work will have a positive outcome on the community or society under investigation, and that their presence in the community will not cause the subjects of study to act unnaturally or worse, to produce harm. Sociological research often involves the creation of characters, like villains, fools and heroes, and the documents and participants are put into categories while the researcher begins to make value-judgements. As a convinced atheist conducting research with the Wiccans, I played a contradictory role while giving voice to their narratives. Thus, it was important to question the 'character' I was playing as a researcher as well as how the other 'characters' involved, my interviewees, are presented while writing 'my story' about the Wiccans and their spiritual change. I believe that this study can only be fully comprehended in conjunction with an appreciation vis-à-vis my position within it. The value-relevance of this research is ingrained to this consideration and alongside sociological theory. This is not because of the subject matter (society) or because of the purpose of sociology (which is to describe social phenomena as well as to improve society through comprehension), but essentially because sociologists are social actors acting in the social world: one cannot separate oneself from the values one holds which will surely affect the way in which one chooses and conceptualises a subject and the way in which one will tell the story of that subject. Nevertheless, the accuracy of the data,

challenging claims to knowledge and also that "our evaluation of what *really* happened is bedevilled because we are almost totally reliant on one person's portrayal of events" (Punch, 1998: 158) constitute the ethical factors that represent the way our 'write up' describes our participants. Rob Stones (2008: 9) comments that "the aim of social science should be to aim at objectivity without allowing pollical and ethical values and preferences to interfere". While this is one important aspect and researchers should aim to do, Max Weber (1949) argues that "the very recognition of the existence of a scientific problem coincides, personally with the possession of specifically oriented motives and 'values'… There is no absolutely 'objective' scientific analysis of culture… or of 'social phenomena'". My view regarding my research would better correspond to Weber's argument. I believe that, although it is not desirable, it is hard to strive for absolute objectivity within social sciences, especially when engaged in situations of unfairness with stigmatised individuals. One particular aspect of being a Wiccan was mentioned time and again. Not being an aspect that would contribute to the overall argument of this thesis, it was hard to find a place to bring it up. However, it seemed to bother both the community of Solitary Wicca and Traditional Wicca. Participants endlessly mentioned being called and stigmatised as Satanists, regardless of their attempts to demonstrate the wrong and confusion that it is being made. I have mentioned briefly in chapter 3 that I am part of a few groups, one of them being Romanian Atheists and Agnostics. Countless times during my adolescence and early young adulthood have I been stigmatised as a Satanist by just affirming I am an atheist. I believe it is somehow understandable, considering that Romania has a percentage of 81% Eastern Orthodox[21]. I started the interviews with my participants as a true believer in atheism, but so many times I felt that my participants and I were more similar than

[21] Romanian National Statistical Institute

different; both being stigmatised in the same manner. I believe that is why on a couple of occasions I was asked if I am a Wiccan or a Pagan myself. Weber's argument of objectivity suggests detachment from the research matter, and the sociologist should be able to respond to findings without emotion or bias. He views opinions and values as facets of the social life which are not part of the science realm to use for explanation but are instead elements of society which are to be analysed. However, the way in which one comes to acknowledge the effect of objectivity itself is a subjective process and one's views are biased from the outset.

A detached or 'value-neutral' approach may not help to comprehend behaviour, and may prevent a substantial contextual understanding, close to the participants or subjects of the study, especially when researching communities, such as Wicca. In this sense, Bauman (2000: 89) comments that "here is no choice between an 'engaged' and 'neutral' way of doing sociology. A non-committal sociology is an impossibility". Therefore, reflexive approaches and unconscious subjectivity make the researcher an emotive, sometimes politically motivated, central element of the research process and findings. I believe that by attempting to recognise one's ideological reflexivity and influence means to place social research into context which might give more meaning and make it more 'believable' to readers. It is important that the researcher is considerate of how they will ultimately portray individuals' stories. More often than not, the research will leave the subjects of study or the community after a certain amount of time and "departure of the researcher and subsequent publication of findings may lead to painful feelings of abandonment and betrayal… and personal and emotionally charged accusations" (Punch, 1998: 178). A thought that was brought to my attention by the members of Wicca Group 1 (See chapter 3) which were so

against researchers and journalists stating that they “do not tolerate such practices” because it is our fault they are portrayed in various ways, such as Satanists, and therefore they “do not wish to be part of school projects”. However, among my participants a few have made requests to “tell others that we [witches] are not mean people, and we do not wish anyone any harm, even if the media has for a very long time shown that witches are the villains that do horrible things”.

Based on subsequent reflection at this moment it can arguably be said that regardless of how much attention researchers pay to the ethical, political or epistemological dilemmas of studying communities such as Wicca, the representation of that community, alongside the final product – the paper – is probably going to be problematic. The act itself of translation from what the researcher sees, up to what the researcher writes involves an intrusion, referred to as ‘perilous’ by Bourdieu (1996). How the researcher decides to represent a community is crucial – the images and descriptions define that community for the time being of the text and even beyond that, and this was a vital concern and consideration for my own study with the Wiccans. In this sense Becker (2007: 285) comments that

> “There is no best way to tell a story about society. Many genres, many methods, many formats – they can all do the trick. Instead of ideal ways to do it, the world gives us possibilities among which we choose. Every way of telling the story of a society does some of the job superbly but other parts not so well”

The more in-depth interviews I did, the more I was convinced of the importance of the way a story is told and how realities are constructed. And I was not telling the story of a single community, but the story of two sides of the same community. Riessman (1993:3) describes this storytelling process as when “a teller in a conversation takes a listener into a past time or a world and recapitulates what happened to them to make a point, a moral one”. My

participants provided me with the *knowing* while my job was *telling*. Scholars suggest that to construct meaning, individuals use narrative links (Plummer, 1985; Bruner, 1986; Mishler, 1986; Gubrium and Holstein, 1995). These linkages glue together bits of experiences that create the subjective meaning. Narratives give structure and a purpose for everyday life events. Narratives also create plots from experiences that may be fragmented and disordered. The stories my participants told may not necessarily embody the facts of how things actually happened, but rather they represent meaning-making systems which piece together past experiences and perceptions. Thus, storytelling recapitulates and reframes past stories to construct present meaning and value. The stories I listened to were not only about conversion and affiliation to Wicca, but they were also stories that presented the more general aspects of secularisation, desacralisation and the re-enchantment of the world, and the implication of religiosity and spirituality in postmodern communities of practice.

Josselson (1995: 35) argues that "in understanding ourselves, we chose those facets of our experience that lead to the present and render our life story coherent". Included in those meaning-making and narrative arguments are the interactionist assumptions which suggest that the world is negotiated through social interactions along with symbolic orders. Storytelling then allows us to be reflexive, and to create identities for both ourselves and the others around us. The dialogue between my participants and I was the site where meaning was being created, re-negotiated and, why not, even contested. Plummer (1995) defines those interactions emerging from story telling as "joint actions". They are the interpretations between the story producers, texts and those who read the told stories. By approaching interpretative practice as the method through which individuals construct their

lives, I directed my attention to how my participants articulate the narratives they reveal about themselves and construct their biographies based on the presentations of their own realities. My participants were ordinary people who responded in extraordinary ways. And this is what this thesis is about – Traditional Wiccans and Solitary Wiccans, and their stories about what I interpreted as conversion and affiliation.

Appendix A

Information and Consent Form

Participant,
The following interview is used only for academic purpose. The data collected from the participant's answers will be analysed by myself, the researcher, in order to formulate my arguments regarding my PhD topic. This project's aim is to look at the link between popular representations of witch/witchcraft and Wiccan beliefs.
Your answers shall be anonymous, and no one else, except I will have access to it. Your full details and address are never to be required. There are no costs involved in this research, nor any possible harms or side effects. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and also to request to withdraw your responses from the study at any time after the interview.
You **cannot** participate in this study:
- if you are under the age of **18**
Please initial the following boxes:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated for the above study. ☐
2. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected. ☐
4. I give permission for my answers to be monitored, collected, and analysed ☐
5. I give permission to be recorded throughout the interview, unless otherwise agreed prior to my participation ☐
6. I agree to take part in the above study voluntarily ☐
7. I agree for my data outcome to be included in the UK Data Archive (please indicate): Yes / No ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix B

Example of Interview Guide

General Questions:

1. What does Wicca mean?

2. How did you become Wiccan?

3. How and when was your first contact with Wicca?

3. After the first contact, how did things work?

4. How did you decide this is suitable for you?

5. What did you think of Wicca or Paganism before becoming a member?

6. Does your family know about your membership to Wicca?

7. Are there any experiences that influenced your decision to join Wicca?

8. Are there any individuals that influenced your decision to join Wicca?

9. For how long have you been a Wiccan?

10. Are you part of any Wiccan groups?

11. How are your relationships with other members?

12. How are your relationships with other non-members? Have you had any incidents?

13. How do you think other non-members perceive you or Wicca? Do you think media representation of witchcraft have had an influence?

14. Has becoming a Wiccan changed your perceptions of spirituality?

15. What is religion to you?

16. What do you think about Wicca's principles or ideology?

17. Where you part of any religious body prior to joining Wicca?

18. Where religiously active in that community? Did you participate in their ceremonies?

19. Did you agree with their doctrine or ritual?

20. How old were you when you stopped attending it?

21. What are your thoughts on that church now?

21. What made you stop attending that religious community?

22. How did you feel after you stop attending?

23. Have you tried other religious denominations before Wicca?

24. Which ones?

25. What made you want to attend these ones?

26. What made you stop attending them?

27. Do you feel you made the right choice with Wicca? Why?

28. What does Wicca mean to you?

Traditional Wiccans:

29. What type of events have you attended as a member of this group?

30. How often do you attend such events?

31. In what ways are these events helpful?

32. Do you have any specific role in the coven?

33. Have you been initiated?

34. How can you describe this experience?

35. How important do you think the coven will be in your life?

Solitary Wiccans:

36. Have you considered joining a coven? Why?

37. What are your views on covens?

38. How does the Solitary path fit you?

39. How do make sense of Wicca's teaching by yourself?

40. Are you part of any Wiccan groups (i.e. Facebook)?

41. Do you think a coven might appeal to your spiritual needs? Why?

Appendix C

Key Landmarks in the Historiography of Witchcraft and Wicca

1689: Toleration Act passed by the English Parliament

1712: German Lutheran philosopher and law professor **Christian Thomasius** (1655-1728) gives the first proper historical work on witch-hunting in his Latin dissertation

1784: Protestant lawyer **Gottfreid Christian Voigt** (1740-1791) publishes in Berlin his Enlightenment essay on witch-trials occurred in the German territory

1787: in France, The Edict of Versailles (also known as the Edict of Tolerance) signed by Louis XVI

1828: the first *romantic* work on witch-trials presented by Catholic law professor **Karl Ernst Jarcke** (1801-1852)

1835: in *Teutonic Mythologie,* German folklorist and linguist **Jakob Grimm** (1785-1863) emphasises on the idea of the witch as a 'wise woman'

1843: the first *rationalist* account of witch-trials presented by Lutheran theologian and politician **Wilhelm Gottlieb Soldan** (1803-1869)

1862: the publication of the most successful and sensationalist 19th Century romantic work on witch-hunting by liberal French historian **Jules Michelet** (1798-1874) called *The Witch*

1893: the first *feminist* work on witch-hunting *Woman, Church and State*, published by **Matilda Joslyn Gage** (1878-1969), an American feminist and political activist

1921: Folklorist and Egyptologist **Margaret Murray** (1863-1963) contributed to the romantic revival of the witch in her book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*

1935 (-1944): under the command of **Heinrich Himmler**, research on witch-trials in Germany is undertaken by the *H-Sonderauftrag*

1939: in England, **Gerald Gardner** claims to be initiated by an old woman who was part of a surviving coven based on the 'Old Religion'

1951: in England, the Witchcraft act of 1735 is repealed

1954: *Witchcraft Today,* the first Wiccan key text is published by **Gerald Gardner**

Appendix D

The Principles of Wiccan Belief (1974)

"1. We practice Rites to attune ourselves with the natural rhythm of life forces marked by the Phases of the Moon and the Seasonal Quarters and Cross-Quarters.

2. We recognize that our intelligence gives us a unique responsibility toward our environment. We seek to live in harmony with Nature, in ecological balance offering fulfillment to life and consciousness within an evolutionary concept.

3. We acknowledge a depth of power far greater than that apparent to the average person. Because it is far greater than ordinary, it is sometimes called "supernatural," but we see it as lying within that which is naturally potential to all.

4. We conceive of the Creative Power in the Universe as manifesting through polarity- as masculine and feminine- and that this same Creative Power lives in all people, and functions through the interaction of the masculine and feminine. We value neither above the other, knowing each to be supportive of the other. We value Sex as pleasure, as the symbol and embodiment of Life, and as one of the sources of energies used in magical practice and religious worship.

5. We recognize both outer worlds and inner, or psychological worlds- sometimes known as the Spiritual World, the Collective Unconscious, the Inner Planes, etc.- and we see in these two dimensions the basis for paranormal phenomena and magical exercises. We neglect neither dimension for the other, seeing both as necessary for our fulfillment.

6. We do not recognize any hierarchy, but do honour those who teach, respect those who share their greater knowledge and wisdom, and acknowledge those who have courageously given themselves in leadership.

7. We see religion, magic, and wisdom-in-living as being united in the way one views the world and lives within it- a world view and philosophy of life, which we identify as Witchcraft, the Wiccan Way.

8. Calling oneself "Witch" does not make a witch- but neither does heredity itself, or the collecting of titles, degrees, and initiations. A Witch seeks to control the forces within him/herself that make life possible in order to live wisely and well, without harm to others, and in harmony with Nature.

9. We acknowledge that it is the affirmation and fulfillment of life, in a continuation of evolution and development of consciousness, that gives meaning to the Universe we know, and to our personal role within it.

10. Our only animosity toward Christianity, or toward any other religion or philosophy-of-life, is to the extent that its institutions have claimed to be “the only way” and have sought to deny freedom to others and to suppress other ways of religious practices and belief.

11. As American Witches, we are not threatened by debates on the history of the Craft, the origins of various aspects of different traditions. We are concerned with our present, and our future.

12. We do not accept the concept of “absolute evil,” nor do we worship any entity known as “Satan” of “the Devil” as defined by Christian Tradition. We do not seek power through the suffering of others, nor do we accept the concept that personal benefits can only be derived by denial to another.

13. We acknowledge what we seek within Nature for that which is contributory to our health and well-being.”

(Adler, 1979: 102-3)

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