

Casting Your Own Spell: The Role of Individualism in Wiccan Beliefs

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Abstract:

Wicca is a neopagan religious movement that gained popularity in the mid-20th century. One of its characteristics is a lack of commitment to dogma. This lack of dogma creates an individualized practice that allows people to be able to bring in their own identities and personalities into their practice to make it most suited for themselves. This individualism creates an endless possibility for people to practice the religion. This research is, therefore, meant to understand the importance of individualism within Wicca and how practitioners use individualized beliefs to bring their identities and personalities into their practice. Utilizing ethnographic interviewing with some participant observation, this research explores questions such as: how individualism is utilized at the individual and collective level, what aspects of their personal identities practitioners bring into Wicca, and how are these identities reflected into their beliefs. This project was completed throughout 2020 and the first half of 2021 and involved ten participants from Western North Carolina.

Keywords: Wicca, individualism, collectivism, identity, witchcraft

Introduction

Imagine yourself in a world full of magic and witches, where all things found in nature (people, animals, plants, stars, the sky, etc.) are alive with spirit and energy. Picture yourself in a place where you can use these energies and spirits to impact yourself and the world around you. To many people, this world may seem make believe, like something out of a fantasy novel. But to many people I have spoken to this past year, this world exists, and it's our world.

I've been interested in paganism ever since I discovered it around 2013, when I was 15 years old. Paganism is an umbrella term for religions interested in pre-Christian mythology, nature-based spirituality, practices magical ritual, and can also involve a belief in reincarnation (Berger 2005, 28 – 29; Urban 2015, 158 – 159; White 2014, 60). As my interest in anthropology developed when I was in college, I came to realize that my interest in paganism was really the first time that I dabbled into the field. This made it pretty clear to me that paganism would be an interesting site to conduct my undergraduate research, since I had years of experience in familiarizing myself with some of the dialogue and information that I would encounter during my fieldwork. I specifically chose the pagan religion Wicca as my area of study, which is the largest branch of paganism (Berger 2005, 28; Jorgensen and Russell 1999, 333; Urban 2015, 158). During my study of Wicca, I kept noticing how important individualism was to the practitioners and how it allowed for Wiccan practices to vary greatly. This became the central idea to my research: to explore the role of individualism in Wicca and how practitioners use individualism to bring their identities into their practice.

My research was conducted during the Spring and Fall of 2020, from January until May and August until early November. I worked alongside ten informants, all of whom were located throughout Western North Carolina. Most of my informants were around the Asheville area, but

some were around Rutherford County. The primary method I used to gather data was ethnographic interviews/ I used this method because I had little access to participant observation and site visits: most of the practitioners I spoke to did not gather in groups and didn't allow me to participate in their rituals. Additionally, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccines not being readily available until about halfway through the year, as well as my own anxieties surrounding the pandemic, meeting with people in-person was a bit of a challenge at times. These factors led me to rely on the interviews and conversations that I had with practitioners (primarily over Zoom, Google Meet, and over the phone, with some being in-person) in order to understand their beliefs, instead of being able to travel to specific places and visit groups. I was able to take part in participant observation towards the end of my research, however. This event will be discussed later.

History of Wicca

The origins of Wicca are a debated topic, but the creation of modern Wicca is commonly attributed to an Englishman named Gerald Gardner. The story begins in the early 20th century with Gardner discovering a group of Wiccans in New Forest, England. This group claimed to be passing down an oral religious tradition that pre-dates Christianity. During his encounters with them they would teach him their practices, but he had to keep them secret. He didn't gain their permission to publish their beliefs until after 1951, when England repealed the last of their anti-witchcraft laws (Berger 2005, 31; Hutton 1999, 205 – 206; Jorgensen and Russell 1999, 326; Luhrmann 1989, 43 – 44; Urban 2015, 159, 161, 164 – 165; Vance 2015, 101 – 102; Waters 2019, 218 – 219).

As stated, there is a debate to whether this story is accurate. Many, including scholars and practitioners have called this story into question. Some scholars have noted that Gardner's statements are largely influenced by his interest in the British anthropologist Margaret Murray's theories of prehistoric matriarchal cults, European mythology and folklore, freemasonry, occultism, and folk magic (Berger 2005, 31; Hutton 1999, 206; Jorgensen and Russell 1999, 326; Luhrmann 1989, 44 – 45; Urban 2015, 159, 161, 164 – 165; Vance 2015, 102; Waters 2019, 218). Although there are criticisms of the story, there is evidence to support some claims, such as the idea of female divinity being important to paleolithic peoples. Ronald Johnstone argues that there is archaeological evidence showing a goddess as the supreme deity in many stone age societies, as well as noting female creator deities in the mythologies of China, Australia, and Egypt (Johnstone 2001, 219). Additionally, sculptures known as Venus figurines, have been found throughout the paleolithic world and are often interpreted as a feminine deity that would be prayed to for fertility purposes (McCoid and McDermott 319, 323).

Wicca, as described by Gardner is focused on the worship of two deities, a God and a Goddess, the divinity of nature, the practice of magical ritual, and reincarnation (Berger 2005, 32 – 33; Hutton 1999, 235 – 236; Luhrmann 1989, 45 – 47; Urban 2015, 165; Vance 2015, 101; Waters 2019, 219). Although not every Wiccan follows Gardner's tradition, these concepts are often very common throughout Wicca with some degree of difference, as I observed through my fieldwork. Most Wiccans I spoke to were primarily focused on worshiping the Goddess, with the God working as her consort, and venerating nature. However, others were disinterested in deities, and some made no references to the importance of reincarnation. Additionally, the God and Goddess were not always viewed as specific beings like Abrahamic figures (as will be

explored later). The way people saw these deities were often viewed based on different gods and goddesses from religions around the world.

The reasons for these differences to be allowed in Wicca is because of contemporary Wicca's commitment to individualism. Individualism became an integral part of Wicca during the 1960s and 70s, roughly a decade or so after Gardner published his earliest works. During this time, Wicca came to the United States and became influenced by its growing counter-culture movement, placing a greater emphasis on individualism, as well as environmentalism, feminism, pacifism, and anti-authoritarianism (Berger 2005, 36 – 37; Urban 2015, 160; Vance 2015, 103). Helen A. Berger claims that the international influence of American culture allowed for these values to spread to Wiccans worldwide (Berger 2005, 37).

I think it's worth noting some common terms Wiccans use, since they will be appearing in throughout my paper. Wicca and its practitioners take on different names. Wicca is often addressed by practitioners as simply "witchcraft," "the craft," and "paganism," due to Gardner perceiving the religion as a continuation of ancient European witchcraft practices. By considering their religion as a part of witchcraft and pagan traditions, Wiccans often address themselves as Wiccans, witches, and pagans. There seems to be no term preferred above the others. However, it is important to note that there are other forms of paganism and witchcraft apart from Wicca, some of which I have encountered in my fieldwork. Keeping all of this in mind, I will use these terms "Wiccan" and "witch" interchangeably throughout my paper since these are the most common terms used by practitioners.

Individualism

Throughout my study of Wicca, it was impossible for me to ignore the vast diversity of beliefs that practitioners embrace. Wicca has the ability to take on many different forms, depending on who is practicing. Through my observations, I have talked to people who are influenced by various ideas: atheism, Gardnerian Wicca, Judaism, feminism, Norse mythology, Cherokee traditions, Egyptian mythology, etc. The possibilities for Wiccan practice seem endless. Although I found this diversity to be one of the most exciting things during my study, it was, no doubt, a big obstacle to overcome. Throughout my research, I was often asked by those I know to explain Wiccan beliefs. This wasn't always easy, because of Wicca's immense diversity. I once talked about this with my informant Claire to which she jokingly responded, "Well, that's a big task!" This begs one of the big questions at hand: how can I make sense of a religion that is practiced differently by each person? I think that the answer to this question lies in how and why Wicca encourages diversity among its practitioners.

Wicca's earliest forays into individualism, as stated earlier, come from the influence of 1960's American counter-culture movements had on Wicca (Berger 2005, 36 – 37; Fisher 1976, 46; Vance 2015, 103). This influence led to Wiccans placing a greater influence on individual practitioners to carve their own paths in Wicca. This emphasis on the individual means that Wicca can be described as an "experiential" religion: placing a greater emphasis on the experiences of the self over that of texts and religious dogma (Luhmann 1989, 7; Vance 2015, 109 – 110). This is how practitioners are able to carve, what seem to be, drastically different interpretations of the religion from one another. This is how an atheist and polytheist can call themselves Wiccans without causing conflict with the worldview of Wicca. This is because of Wicca's belief that the divine is best experienced when it is done in one's own way.

The response I usually get from my informants when asking about the importance of individualism is that it makes the religion more personable and liberating. “Most people that join this religion don’t really like authority,” my informant Charlie tells me. “It seems like a lot of people that come into witchcraft don’t like organized religion. They don’t want their practice to seem too much like Christianity, which is what many witches come from.” The Wiccans I’ve spoken have largely come from a Christian background, be it Southern Baptist or Irish Catholic. Oftentimes, they leave Christianity for reasons along the lines of it not being able to answer their questions, but also, like Charlie said, because they didn’t like having a religion that was too restrictive. Wicca allows practitioners to explore their spirituality, choose between which gods and goddesses they will pray to, if they choose to pray at all, and sometimes how to perform rituals. The Wiccans that I have spoken to have often said that this open religious structure allows them to feel more personally liberated.

I should note, though, that there are religious structures that are widely adhered to in Wicca. For instance, all of the Wiccans I’ve spoken to recognize a divine feminine and masculine, although practitioners can view them differently. Additionally, all that I’ve spoken to practice magic, believe that nature is divine, and astrology is often used alongside their religious practices and beliefs. However, each Wiccan places a different emphasis on each of these aspects, depending on how individuals choose to reflect their personal values and identities onto their beliefs.

For instance, various interpretations can arise when it comes to the divine masculine and feminine. Most Wiccans see them as the God and Goddess, with each individual choosing their own god and goddess to follow. My informant Jefferey, a Wiccan priest, sees the God and Goddess as Cernunnos and Cerridwyn, two Celtic deities he chose to reflect his Welsh and Irish

heritage. Similarly, my informant Chava views them as Azna and Yahweh, which is inspired by her Jewish heritage. These approaches are largely in-line with traditional Wiccan views of divinity, where a god and goddess are venerated.

On the other hand, my informant Claire takes an atheistic approach to the craft. Claire was raised by an atheistic father and a Wiccan mother. They agreed to not raise her to practice any particular religion. However, by the example, but not direction, of her parents, she eventually became an atheistic Wicca. This occurred through primary socialization, where children develop their worldviews through the influence of their parents (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Additionally, she is strongly influenced by her passion for the natural sciences, leading her practice to be influenced by her “scientific brain” as she told me. “I think science has a lot more to do with it than God does,” she told me. Since she is an atheist, Claire views the divine masculine and feminine as spiritual forces that she calls energies. “I think there are energies and a spirit to everything that’s living,” she tells me. “Like, you and I have a spirit, and trees, and plants, and animals have a spirit.” This view of divinity is significantly different from the more traditional approach used by Jefferey and Chava. However, it is still in-line with Wiccan concepts of gendered spirituality, where spiritual forces are represented by a masculine and feminine.

Additionally, Wiccans can vary on which deity will hold prominence in their beliefs. This can be very different for each practitioner. Some of my informants have told me that the God and Goddess hold equal importance to their practice. “I mean, for me, what I believe in is duality,” Wiccan High Priest Shawn told me. “So, I believe in the God and Goddess concept, just because I see that reflected in people, animals, plants, and all aspects of the world. For me that’s how I

view it, as equality.” Jefferey also shares this idea, viewing a balance of the God and Goddess as being reflected throughout nature, an important part of Wiccan spirituality, and based on science.

My contact Meghan also saw a balance of gender as being important to her, but for different reasons. Meghan identifies with she/they pronouns, an identity reflected in their spirituality, which “ebbs and flows.” She told me:

“There are some days where I’m very much in tune to the feminine and goddess side of Wicca. Other days, I strive more towards a balance. All of us, no matter what our gender, even though I hate thinking in binary terms, we all have masculine and feminine aspects and there is a balance within us of both. Somedays I definitely feel very feminine and others I just feel like a person. I think that’s where the gender identity comes from. I just hate that we’re divided like that, like, I just hate divides.”

There are also Wiccans that focus their practice on one deity. Notably, Goddess worship seemed to develop a bit of traction within Wicca. The importance of the Goddess became increasingly important as the religion continued to develop, especially as it became increasingly influenced by feminism and the American counter-culture movement in the mid-20th century (Luhrmann 1989, 52; Ruether 2005, 274 – 275; Urban 2015, 160; Vance 2015, 103). Some Wiccans choose to practice a form of Wicca focused on the Goddess, either by only worshipping her or by putting prominence on her (Ruether 2005, 278 – 279; Urban 2015, 171).

Lisa was an informant of mine that embraces this path. Lisa focused her practice on the Goddess because she finds the idea of a strong, powerful, feminine figure to be important to her. She credits this to be from the influence of her mother, another example of primary socialization influencing spirituality (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 149 – 157). “My mother was a feminist in actions, but not words,” she said. “That left a big impact on me growing up. She set a good example.” Lisa told me she is very passionate about women’s rights and regularly volunteers at Planned Parenthood, so her connection between her spirituality and feminist beliefs are not very

surprising. Lisa doesn't avoid male deities, however. But she only uses them to create a balance between the masculine and feminine divinities.

I think that the best way to understand why and how this happens is to look to the religion itself. Wiccan religious structure encourages individuality and self-expression. One of the rules of Wicca is what's known as the "Wiccan Rede." The Rede states: "an it harm none, do what you will," or, in other words, "do what you want, so long as it harms no one." Although The Rede works as one of the ways Wicca deters its practitioners from using magic for evil purposes, one can see how and why practitioners are able to justify their diverse practices while still maintaining a clear Wiccan identity through this principle (Lewis 1999, 303; Reed 2000, 111 – 112).

Individual Experience in the Community

Based on interpretations of Gardner's work, Wiccans traditionally organize themselves through collectives. This form of organization has been a staple of Wicca since its founding. Gardner claimed to have discovered a Wiccan coven and also trained his followers based around these coven-based practices (Luhrmann 1989, 47 – 50). At the heart of Wicca's history lies the idea of working together in a group and, although this practice has been called into question by some, it is still very much alive.

Throughout my research, the most common term that I encountered to describe a group of Wiccans is a coven. Covens can be traced back to Gardnerian traditions, making them one of the earliest structural means of practicing Wicca. Usually, covens have a membership of around thirteen people. This was based on Margaret Murray's theories of what pre-Christian witch cults

looked like in Europe (Murray 1921, 191). Wiccan covens each hold their autonomy from one another, with only central Wiccan tenets binding them together. Covens can vary over the strictness of their hierarchy. However, most covens are led by a High Priestess and High Priest and were also based on what are called degrees. First degrees are “initiates,” second degrees are given more influence, and third degrees are the highest rank one can achieve (Hutton 1999, 195; Lewis 1999, 63 – 64; Luhrmann 1989, 47 – 48; Vance 2015, 101).

During my time doing research, I met several people actively involved in Wiccan organizations. Like so many others I spoke to, I met Jefferey over Facebook. He made a post in one of the Facebook groups I belong to, describing himself as a Wiccan priest. “Wow! I have to talk to him!” I thought to myself. Not only had I not spoken to any Wiccans working in groups, but I also hadn’t spoken to any priests. I was sure he could give me insights that would be unique from the experiences of the others.

When we met over Zoom, Jeff’s camera was off, but I could hear the world around him. He was outside with his dog, who I could hear running around. I heard the birds, bugs, cars, and any other sounds one might expect from your typical, middle-class, residential area. He was friendly and engaged throughout our conversation. He was clearly passionate about his beliefs, as one could likely expect from a Wiccan priest.

We began our conversation with basic questions about his upbringing, discovering Wicca, what was most important to his practice, etc. What I wanted to focus on most, though, was what drew him to getting involved with Wiccan priesthood and a collective practice. “The reason I began looking for other people to practice with is that I wanted to learn more. I wanted to learn more than what I learned in a book. I wanted to actually be out there and practicing with other people. I wanted that community and comradery and so forth. I wanted to participate in

ritual and not just watch the ritual. You know, to move out of the Outer Court and into the Inner Court. I wanted to have a role in it and be a part of it,” Jefferey told me. He goes on to explain more about the Inner and Outer Courts of Wicca, terms that explain people who have been initiated into the practice or coven (Inner) and those that are not (Outer) (Lewis 1999, 63; Treleven 2008, 28). “That’s what made me decide to be an outer court member and be an inner court member. I wanted to know the mysteries of the god and goddess,” he said. “If you’re only in the outer court of a group than it’s kind of like being part of a church. You’re just sitting on the outside of the pews, just sitting there and watching. But when you’re in the inner court you’re just... just... it’s just more. More of an experience, more information. And that’s what I wanted. I wanted to have more. So that’s where I decided I would join a group, study, do more.”

Jefferey feels a strong desire to learn about the mysteries of Wicca. His transition from being solitary to collectivist was based largely out of a desire for deepening his knowledge of the magical world. His desire to continuously learn more is what drove him to diving further into priesthood. He tells me, “Most people that.. most people becoming a priest or priestess is pretty normal. Most people join an Outer Court, and your next step is to move towards your first degree. And that’s so you’re learning about the tradition that you’re in, or the beliefs of the groups, or so forth. So, it’s kind of like a training thing and to get everyone up to speed on the different Sabbaths and what they mean and to be able to start doing some minor energy work and learning to meditate and doing things like that. So, it’s kind of like a natural progression like that and once you get your first degree it’s kind of your choice to decide to continue on with that. And I just decided I want to continue on with it.”

Jefferey was not alone with this claim. Charlie, a self-identified “traditional witch” I met at a ritual, feels similarly to why Wiccans might be interested in joining a group. “There’s a lot

that you can learn from others,” he tells me. “You know, being able to learn from someone else, someone of a higher degree, can really teach you so much more about the mysteries of magic.” Charlie elaborates that he can’t tell me any of these mysteries since I’m an outsider, but he assures me that they’re nothing “Earth shattering.” “It’s more like secrets that my wife and I would have in the bedroom. They’re not for you, they’re only for us,” he explains. Charlie was always able to get his points across through easy to understand metaphors, making it easy for an outsider like me to understand the world that he lives in.

Other Wiccans that I met echoed similar desires to those of Charlie and Jefferey. During observation I did at a ritual hosted by the Piedmont Church of Wicca I spoke to their High Priest, Shawn, and High Priest Emeritus, Tony. I asked them both questions about their goals for starting the church. “What made you decide to start a coven?” I asked Shawn. “We’re not a coven. We’re a church.” I was quick to apologize for my mistake and asked him to explain more. “Covens are a bit smaller while churches can be a bit larger. Covens can also sometimes be very top-down, and we didn’t want that. We wanted something that everyone could be a part of, more congregational,” he told me. “We really wanted to create a community for witches,” Tony said. “You know, you go to a church for the first time, and you leave with someone to paint your house, fix your car, and a new best friend. We wanted to do the same thing for witches.”

During the ritual itself, I saw several moments that promoted individualism. At the beginning of the ritual, for instance, Shawn asked each person in attendance to call out the deities that they prayed to. This was a deliberate attempt to bring individualism into the ritual, as Shawn told me later that they normally call the God and Goddess separately. Instead, he chose to call to the “one unknowable divine” that night so everyone could call their individual Gods and Goddesses together.

In the middle of the ritual, there was about fifteen to twenty minutes where we could go to different altars set up throughout the ritual site to communicate with their ancestors. This took place during an important Wiccan holiday called Samhain (pronounced sah-when) which is a celebration of winter and ancestors, with symbolism related to death being common. Each altar set up during the ritual had a different way to communicate with ancestors: tarot cards for divination, lighting candles and offering prayers, as well as floating flowers down the creek right next to us (to symbolically let go of any negative energies so they could be carried down the stream). Much like calling out to individual deities, this was another way for the crowd of people to express themselves based on their own ways. Each person was allowed to go to as many stations as they wanted, depending on how they wanted to communicate with the ancestors they were trying to get in touch with.

Based on the testimonies by several Wiccans and observations made at a gathering, I would argue that the collectivist perspective in Wicca is one rooted in individualism. These two both made statements that point to groups, teachers, and hierarchies as having the possibility to enhance the individuals experiences. By becoming initiated in a group and rising through the ranks, one can learn so much more about the divine. By knowing more, they are able to have much more enlightened experiences with divinity. These experiences are not ones that they feel can be obtained through working alone and reading books. They come from active participation in groups and having other people guide one's knowledge and practice. Additionally, even at ritual gatherings, individualism can still hold prominence. As the Piedmont Church of Wicca showed, it is possible to bring in individual practices into a collective setting. This was done through calling individual deities into the ritual and by allowing individuals to reach out to their ancestors in ways that make the most sense to them.

But Wiccan collectives aren't the only way that people practice the craft anymore. As one might expect in an individualistic religion, there is more than one way to practice magic. Some, in stark contrast to the collective structures of traditional Wicca, have taken individualism to extremes in their practices and have abandoned gatherings all together. This will be the next group of Wiccans to be explored in this paper.

Experience in Solitude

Within Wicca, individualism can take varying degrees. Some prefer embracing the tradition as Gardner intended. Others prefer to take a far more individualized approach to the religion. Some will go so far that they will distance their practice from Wiccan communities altogether. These Wiccans are called solitary practitioners, often shortened to "solitaries." Solitaries get their name from their preferred way of practicing Wicca: in solitude. Based on my contacts with solitaries in Western NC, they tend to prefer practicing separately from Wiccan groups and may dissociate their practice from Wiccan norms. Another term I've heard be thrown around to address solitaries is "eclectics," since their practices often "eclectically" embrace a variety of influences from religions that don't belong to witchcraft and paganism. However, there can be differences between the two terms, since some eclectics may find themselves drawn to groups and some groups might also embrace eclectic ideas.

Most of the Wiccans I spoke to could be identified as solitaries. They either spoke about their dislike for practicing in groups or why they left organizations. The stories that I heard cover a variety of reasons, but a common theme was that they feel organized ritual interferes with their experiences. Some of my informants, like Claire and Meghan, both made claims such as this one.

Sometimes, solitaires may have once belonged to a group but lost interest overtime. “I learned my practice from having a teacher,” Lisa tells me. “I was involved in a coven for a while. Once he passed away I lost interest in the coven work.” Lisa’s journey to solitude was transitional. She once belonged to a coven and relied on others to help introduce her to Wicca and to teach her the mysteries of the religion, but now she relies on herself alone.

At the core of the solitary experience is the desire for a practice based entirely around the experiences of the self, where the individual’s beliefs and actions are unregulated by the practices of others. The solitaires that I spoke to often told me that following along with others during rituals interferes with their experiences. As one may expect, it’s hard to practice a religion based on individual experience when a practice impedes on said experience.

Helen A. Berger, in her study of solitary neopagans argues that solitary practice is the most common type of pagan practice (Berger 2019, 1). She argues that the beliefs of solitaires and collectivist Wiccans are largely the same, but there are differences in actions. This is because both groups will likely be reading the same books and visiting the same websites to learn more about Wicca (Berger 2019, 2). Meaning that even if a solitary and collectivist believe the same things, they may have different ways of experiencing their beliefs, or of expressing their devotion for their beliefs. One may feel empowered by joining others in a ritual while solitaires might feel hindered by it. Berger also notes that young people make up a majority of solitaires in a survey she did, while Baby Boomers make up a majority of those practicing in groups (although she notes that young people only made up 36% of her survey) (Berger 2019, 26).

For the solitaires I spoke to, individual experience was the most important aspect of their beliefs. The importance of the self in the creation of their beliefs was arguably *the* defining factor, embracing the anti-authoritarian and individualist values often reflected in post-60s

Wicca. This leads me to ask the questions, what does an individualized Wiccan practice look like? And most notably, how does one's self appear in the practices of individualist, solitary Wiccans? This is where the identities of individuals comes into play. For the next part of this paper, I will be exploring the practices of solitary Wiccans and how their identities are reflected in their beliefs and practices.

Collectivist Wiccans vs. Solitary Wiccans

Although there is general acceptance among Wiccans that there is no right or wrong way to practice the religion, tensions between practitioners still exist. This is particularly true among collectivists and solitaires. Throughout my research, I often heard both sides argue that there was something missing from joining the other side.

Claire was one of the more outspoken solitaires in her disinterest in collectivist practice. "I tried to get with a group on campus to do like a full moon practice or something like that, but I just really didn't like it," she said. "I just think that everyone has such different ways of doing this that I don't really want to change how I usually do stuff, so I kind of just, I like to do it by myself just for that reason because.. not everyone is the same and different stuff doesn't work as well for me. I'm like, they were trying to do like a five minute meditation or something and I can't do that. It takes me a little while to get into that zone. So, I have to do like at least 10 minutes for me to actually be able to meditate or else I just won't. Yeah, so it's like that kind of stuff that's why I usually practice by myself."

Claire's personal distaste of collectivist practices creates a hyper-individualized Wiccan practice. Claire has told me before that her rituals require her to be in a specific headspace which

can sometimes take a while to create. This is even harder when being forced to work with the routines of others. I once asked if I could observe one of her rituals, but she never got back to me. Based on her reaction, I imagine that the idea of working around others would have likely interfered with creating this headspace or the possibility of sustaining that energy. Claire needs to feel comfortable in order to practice magic and solitude makes this easiest to achieve. Her practices are based around the ideas of personal comfort: long meditation, self-care, and working at night (since she feels more spiritual energy at this time). Working with others interferes with the processes required to start ritual work.

On the other side of the spectrum, Jefferey expressed his own disinterest for solitary practice. "Individuality is important in Wicca, but there's also a belief in having a teacher or a high priestess or so forth that passes information down and shares that with you," he told me. "With Wicca, and with other pagan beliefs, or witchcraft, initiation is a big part of it, too. So, you can say, 'oh, I'm a witch and I practice witchcraft now,' but there's something more when you are part of a group and go through the same process that you have. That's what's more important to me in my practice."

Jefferey's perspective was backed up by Charlie. "Eclectics and solitaires seems to be the growing trend nowadays," he tells me. "There's something missing from that, though. There's so much more than what you can learn from a book. Having a teacher can be so important." Charlie also talks about common misconceptions solitaires have towards collectivist practice. "Solitaires think that us traditionals do everything by the book, but that's not true," he says. He continues by channeling his metaphoric skills, "It's like being a musician. When you're alone, you play whatever you want. You have no one telling you what you need to do. But when you come together in a band, then everyone has to follow the same beat. We're not required to follow the

books all the time, but it gives us a framework to stand on when we come together. It's something that keeps us all on the same page."

Despite these clear tensions, all of the people mentioned above, Claire, Jefferey, and Charlie, all agree that people should be able to practice however they feel, even if they might not personally agree with it. What I heard most often regarding this issue was something along the lines of, "it's great that they choose to practice that way, and they have every right to, but it's not how I do things." There is a recognition of a need to uphold the core Wiccan value of "do what ye will." There are tensions between collectivists and solitaries, but they shouldn't be viewed as coming from a place of hate. More of disagreement with how things should be done. Both sides feel that the other is missing something that can be found in the essence of the other, but no side looks down on the other in a necessarily hateful way.

Conclusions

Based on my observations, and with support from the ethnographic materials that I read, I have found that individualism plays an important role in shaping Wiccan worldviews and contributes to people bringing their personal identities into their practices. This is accepted because of Wicca's non-dogmatic approach to their religious structure, best exemplified through the Wiccan Rede which promotes the idea that anyone should be able to do whatever they want, so long as no one is harmed. This lack of dogma means that there are cracks within Wicca's system that need to be filled, which is where identities come into play. From here, Wiccans will bring in their own identities into their beliefs. This causes their beliefs to be more personable, since they reflect themselves, create a liberating feeling, since they have the freedom to practice

as they please, and creates a wide variety of diversity among their belief systems. These identities were exemplified by the practitioners I spoke to through concepts such as personal interests, gender, and heritage.

Additionally, individualism can be observed through both solitary and collective practices. Solitaries will take individualism to an extreme, where they rely primarily on their own experiences in order to practice Wicca. Meanwhile, collectivists will maintain an important view of the self, but also incorporate others in helping them learn about the religion and in ritual practice. Even when practicing together, there are ways that individualism can present itself. As exemplified with the participant observation I had with the Piedmont Church of Wicca during Samhain, the structure of the ritual was set up intentionally so individuals could experience the divine as they desired and so everyone's needs would be met.

Based on the observations I made among Wiccan practitioners in Western North Carolina, it is common for Wiccans to embrace a philosophy of individualism, no matter how they choose to practice. It's clear that for the people I interacted with, individualism is at the heart of what they do, even when it may not seem like it at surface level.

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