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Introduction

This Paper is in three sections. The first is concerned with defining the terms, and setting the boundaries of the field with an analysis of the meanings and uses of the concepts referred to by the term 'New Age Alternative Spiritualities'

The second section describes the design of a model for the field, the idea of the web. An explanation is given of the influences used in the design of the web model and the value of applying 'insider' categories to phenomena.

In the third section a case study is used, that of Psychology of Vision, as an example of an organisation that functions according to the criteria of the web model. Here there is insider/primary material illustrating how New Age Alternative Spiritualities are creating new forms of 'diffuse communities'

Defining the Terms – The Boundaries of the Field

Each of the words of the title of this text begs a number of questions. The problems associated with defining each concept, 'New Age', 'Alternative' and 'Spiritualities' are indeed so great that one could suggest that each term could be replaced with its antonym, its opposite, and *still* describe aspects of the *same* religious phenomena. So we might say that these phenomena are 'Historical' and 'New Age'; 'Mainstream' and 'Alternative'; 'Materialist' and 'Spiritual'. This observation is in part a truism, given Kant's notion of the 'antinomies of reason' whereby a concept is partially defined by its opposite. However, this use of oppositional terms points to the great diversity and plurality of New Age Alternative Spiritualities, which, in turn, indicates the movement in the last fifty years from periphery to mainstream, the diverse history of New Age spiritualities and the broad variety of spiritualities currently available.

Some brief observations about each term of the phrase will be made in turn, in order to clarify some boundaries for the field, and for the definition that follows.

New Age

In a culture which is continually self defining and labelling its own historical processes and periods there are problems with the concepts of 'contemporary', 'modernity' and 'new'. Modernism and post-modernism are now movements of the past century and are no longer 'modern'. Some new religious movements have been established since the nineteenth century and even the Japanese religions known as new new religious movements are rapidly ageing. The 'shock of the new' in the world of art as well as broader culture has become the commonplace of the old, and the New Age according to scholars such as J. Gordon Melton

has already passed away (1988). Cultural historians of the middle part of the twentieth century recognised the difficulties of maintaining such categories of periodisation with the refrain that 'all that is solid melts into air'. This leads me to question what is the meaning of 'New Age' when we talk about New Age Spiritualities. How solid is this term, in this context? What is intended both in the ascription of the term by outsiders, and the adoption of the term by insiders? There are, I think, three aspects that we need to recognise in the use of the words New Age here.

The first is straightforwardly lexical – that which is new is of the present, it occurs in the same field of experience, culture and time as the individual applying the term. However, in the context of New Age Alternative Spiritualities this field of experience, culture and time is not global. The reference is to a predominantly western, or one third world, manifestation of spirituality. It is not the spirituality of the last of the Kalahari Bushmen, though in the eclectic and syncretistic splicings of these phenomena, the spirituality of the Bushmen via Laurens van der Post is, *inter alia*, an influence on the modern, contemporary conception of spirituality.

The second aspect we need to consider is the historicity of the phenomena. While the emphasis may be on New Age formations, these are in many ways re-workings or simple appropriations of historical, old and ancient ideas, beliefs and practices. For a number of contemporary religious orientations, such as for example pagan Druidry, the significance of old traditions is intrinsically linked with notions of authority and identity for its practitioners. One might assert that the search for roots is a primary concern in defining the authenticity of some New Age spiritualities, both for outsiders and insiders. Equally, the incorporation of appropriated histories in the creation of 'traditions' and the use of them in belief systems can be utilised by scholars of religions as *indicators* of New Age spiritual groups. Thus we find that the channelled teachings of the Ramala Teachers (the teachers are otherworldly but the channels are based in Glastonbury) partake of Christian history to derive concepts of a New Age crisis and Hindu ideas of reincarnation.[1] In this sense the New Age is not new, it is more accurately a re-expression of the old.

The third aspect in the use of the word New Age in association with spirituality comes especially from insiders and practitioners. For these groups of people the corollary terms that are, in a way, synonyms for New Age spirituality, are the words, dynamic and transforming, changing and transformational. In essence these people define a spirituality of immanence and experience. Spirituality that is truly New Age may pay heed to history but is most concerned with the process of change. On a macro level this is a change in the way we view the world from inanimate object to living process infused with spirit. On a micro level New Age spiritualities are about personal transformation and knowledge gained through personal experience. For insiders the epithet spirituality in everyday life indicates this experiential engagement with a numinous world. Finally, we may summarise, that as a historical marker the notion of New Age is necessarily unfixed, for it is by definition new and of the present, which is always in the process of becoming – a perception with which many insiders of New Age Alternative Spiritualities would be happy to concur.

Alternative

The first question to be begged here is alternative to what? We have already noted that the phenomena labelled 'New Age Alternative Spiritualities' refer primarily to beliefs, practices and organisations that occur in the modern western world, predominantly America and Europe. It may be more accurate to refer to the technological, post-industrial world and

thereby expand this geography to include Australia, Japan and parts of South America. The alternative is then to the mainstream religious tradition relevant to each specific country. Thus in Japan the alternative is to Shinto and Buddhism while in the UK the alternative is to Christianity. This is an apparently unproblematic distinction until we consider two significant assumptions about the category 'mainstream religious traditions'.

First it would be naïve not to recognise that there are problems with the definition of what constitutes a mainstream religious tradition. Ninian Smart's conception of religions as worldviews encompasses a range of ideologies outside the canon of 'world religions'. Smart includes Humanism, Marxism and Nationalism in his typology of religions. Using Smart's dimensional analysis of religions we might need to include the combined ideology of liberal democracy and consumer-capitalism as a distinct worldview. In fact it is this worldview that is the mainstream tradition of the technological, post-industrial world. In the 'clash of civilizations', from which Al Qaeda is the most radical and misshapen growth, the conflict is not between Islam and Christianity so much as a defence of alternatives against the overweening ideology of the consumer-capitalist worldview. A significant feature of New Age Alternative Spiritualities is that for many the alternatives proposed are not to Christianity, or whatever specific *religious* tradition, but to the overarching expansion of the ideologies defended by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. An important grouping within New Age Alternative Spiritualities specifically focuses on responses to this worldview using concepts such as E. F. Schumacher's economic theory of 'small is beautiful', Arne Naess's concept of 'deep ecology' and James Lovelock's Gaia theory in publications such as *Resurgence* and organisations such as the Schumacher College. This perspective is best expressed by Satish Kumar's triad, 'Soil, Soul and Society'.

The second assumption implicit in the notions of 'alternative' and 'mainstream' is that they are mutually exclusive. There are two related issues which problematise this assumption. The first is statistical. Numerically, alternative spirituality is in fact the mainstream and not a minor sub-group of religious affiliations. This point has been highlighted in studies such as that taken by the BBC series *Soul of Britain* (2000) and more recently in Paul Heelas's analysis of religious orientation in the UK (2002). A greater number of the population of Britain self-define as spiritual, as an alternative to being members of a traditional religion than those that either self-define as secular or as practising members of a religious group. The second implicit problem in the notion of alternative is that alternative spirituality is *not* exclusive of spirituality in the traditional religions.

My own research into Alternative and so-called New Age groups shows that, to adapt Grace Davie's epithet, many believers both believe in alternative spiritualities and belong to traditional religions (Corrywright, 2000; Davie, 1994). Helen Waterhouse's research using the European Values survey, which cites 24% of British believing in reincarnation, many of whom are practising members of Christian churches, supports this assertion (1999). The commitment to spirituality is often not an alternative but a both/and choice for insiders.

Nevertheless, many people happily self-identify with the notion of following an alternative to the concept of religion. This is because they conceive religion to be a static hierarchical structure that is primarily doctrinal. In contrast alternative spirituality is perceived as a positive choice toward a religiosity that is lived and experienced without the mediations of priestly or scriptural authority. This is why, elsewhere, I have defined Contemporary Spirituality in terms of 'praxis before doctrine' (2001).

3

Spirituality

Eric Sharpe suggested that significant words go through three stages of development. First they are concepts working as a shorthand for a collection of linked ideas; secondly they are used as mottoes whereby everyone knows what they generally pertain to but the links are rather more loose; finally they become clichés, frequently used but with minimal useful content. A number of critics would suggest that the term spirituality works at the level of cliché. If so, the phenomenology of the word has passed through Sharpe's three stages at great pace for its current ubiquity belies its brief history and usage in contemporary parlance. The current academic use of the term is a modern development. For example, *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* edited by. Mircea Eliade, in 1987 has no entry on 'spirituality'. *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (ed. James Hastings, 1915) carries an entry which, while prefacing that 'the term "spirituality" has been used in a great variety of ways' concentrates solely on Christian spirituality. The author, David Fyffe, recognises that,

> The substantive 'Spirituality' does not occur in Scripture, but the adjectival 'spiritual' … is frequently employed to describe the character of the man who has entered the kingdom of God. (Fyffe, 1915, 808).

The more recent *A New Dictionary of Religions* (ed. John Hinnells, 1995) is considerably more helpful with a full entry on 'Spirituality' and emphasis on the contemporary meanings of the term. Ursula King, the author of this entry, states:

> The subject matter of spirituality is a perennial human concern, but the critical, comparative reflection on spirituality in a global context is a recent phenomenon.' (1995:495).

She goes on to elucidate three levels of this 'contemporary understanding of spirituality',

1. Spirituality as lived experience or praxis.
2. Spirituality as a teaching that grows out of this praxis.
3. The systematic, comparative and critical study of spiritual experiences and teachings (1995:495).

Finally, King states a point of enormous significance for this area of research:

> Contemporary understandings of spirituality are sometimes too imitative, static and anchored in the past, thereby failing to capture the dynamic, transformative quality of spirituality as lived experience … Creative new developments in the contemporary understanding of spirituality are linked to a new enquiry into human spiritual energy resources and the importance of our global spiritual heritage for the future of humankind. (1995:496).

In the academic field of Religious Studies the concepts and labels we use to define the diverse phenomena of New Age Alternative Spiritualities are in a state of continual morphosis. The terms New Age, Holistic and Alternative have been attached to the terms Movement and Spirituality or Spiritualities in various ways to refer to ostensibly the same phenomena. It is sufficient to recognise here that this illustrates rather well the dynamic contemporary engagement between scholars and the objects of their research. And, for the sake of clarity, I will offer my own definition of spirituality as an operative contemporary use of the term:

Alternative Spirituality in the contemporary context is about personal engagement with the sacred in daily life. It is based on the belief that the material world is infused with spiritual energy and human experience is necessarily spiritual. It is a spirituality that requires no intermediaries doctrinal or human and the only real agency of knowledge is direct personal experience.

Designing a Model for the Field – The Idea of the Web

The model I envisage is identifiable as a web. It comprises individual and group networks and can be applied to disclose doctrine, belief and intellectual history, but its focus is on living tradition, praxis and experience.

An accurate representation of Alternative or New Age Spiritualities needs an insider perception of the practices, concepts and beliefs influencing the spiritual paradigm of reality. For those within the New Age spiritualities have a vision of seismic cultural change - a paradigm shift of Kuhnian proportion. The change, in essence, is from a culture that embraces materialism to one that affirms spirituality. Russell Di Carlo, predicts

> a shift from seeing the universe as a mechanical device with no mind or will of its own, to seeing it as intelligent, self-organising and ever-evolving (1996, 11).

Such optimism may not be evident in all Alternative Spiritualities but the assumption that spirituality underlies materiality, whether in terms of a divine will or a more amorphous energy, is universal. Thus social interaction and the process of historical change, the social world, is constructed by a paradigm quite at odds with a Weberian paradigm of secularisation and rationalisation. Belief and praxis are inflected by this central paradigm, and an observer's model should accommodate this worldview if it is to accurately represent it.

The elements that I have appropriated to construct the web model for Alternative Spiritualities are current concepts in many academic programmes but the web is also informed by the field of New Age spirituality itself. David Spangler has given an apt metaphor by which the New Age can be distinguished from traditional religions. He compares Christianity to a cathedral whose architecture is 'unified in the person of Jesus Christ'; while the New Age

> is more like a flea market or county fair ... [with] ... jesters and jugglers, magicians and shamans, healers and mystics, and the inevitable hucksters eager for a quick sale before packing up and moving on.

The error committed by many commentators, according to Spangler,

> has been to isolate one or two tents and to deal with them as if they were cathedrals covering the whole fair.

The fair, he says,

> is a place whose architecture is horizontal rather than vertical (1993:80).

To extend Spangler's metaphor, we need to imagine the movements of those visiting the fair during the course of a day. Each person leaves a different trail of footprints from one tent to another. It is our task to reveal the nature of that pathway, to measure the consequences and meanings of the connections made at the fair. The tents, which incorporate certain specific traditions are vital to the model, but they are the nodes, the points of linkage between the pathways - and in this fair, even the tents are not static. The visual image of this model is a radically flattened, non-hierarchical, network of connections unique in detail for each individual, with a web-like morphology.

The notion of the web has considerable currency, especially in information technology and the resources of the world wide web. It is significant as a paradigmatic model for living systems (Capra, 1996). At the same time the idea of the web has been explicitly applied to methodology in the study of religions, as in Rita Gross's construction of a feminist hermeneutic which is a 'seamless harmonious web' (1993:315), and is implicit in the model of the 'segmented polycentric integrated network' developed by Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine (1970:xii; 33-4).

Another feature of the web model is that it grows out of systems theory (Laszlo, 1972). Certain elements within the criteria of systems thinking relate specifically to the web model of Alternative Spiritualities especially the ideas of inter-relationship and dynamism with an emphasis on holistic characteristics. Similar themes have been developed by Fritjof Capra in his work on biological-cultural systems as webs (1992, 1996). The fundamental features of his image of interaction and inter-dependence are that

> living systems at all levels are networks, we must visualise the web of life as living systems (networks) interacting in network fashion with other systems (networks)... the web of life consists of networks within networks. (1996:35)

We thus have an image markedly similar to Spangler's horizontal fair. In terms of the phenomena of New Age spiritualities there is no hierarchy of organisation, unless the observer specifically adopts one, such as for example, the statistical significance of certain New Age groupings (some tents/networks *are* bigger than others). It is simply the case that there are manifold networks operating within the larger network of Alternative Spirituality. The web is a means of organising the chaos of overlapping institutions and practices which are the network of New Age spiritualities.

The basis for Capra's position is the constructivist theory whereby

> things do not have intrinsic properties. All the properties flow from their relationships (1992:84).

There is an *a priori* assumption of 'things' to have 'relationships'; but these things can only be described accurately in terms of their relationships. This aspect of Capra's theory rests on the biologic-epistemic model of cognition developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela They set themselves the objective of outlining

> a theory of knowledge ... to show how knowing generates the explanation of knowing

whereby

> the phenomenon of explaining and the phenomenon explained can be seen to belong to the same domain (1987:239).

They explicitly seek a *via media*

> eschewing the extremes of representationalism (objectivism) and solipsism (idealism) (241)

by constructing their theory on the principle that

> human cognition as effective action pertains to the biological domain, but it is always lived in a cultural tradition (244).

They conclude that the 'knowledge of knowledge compels' towards ethical considerations. For if this knowledge is biological and cultural, every expression of it emerges from a 'network of interactions' with the world and the human community. Thus, the 'social imperative for a human-centred ethics' arises out of the understanding of the network relationships whereby

> every human act has an ethical meaning because it is an act of constitution of the human world (1987:239-250).

Again we can recognise in this model of human interaction and knowledge certain themes which inform the idea of the web. The observation that humans make meanings in a 'network of interactions' seems further to establish the features of networks as the key to

unlocking the nature of the many spiritualities developing in the New Age 'fair'. At the same time, the ethical imperative this self-reflective knowledge entails may partly explain the social and political activism espoused by many within the New Age spiritualities.

A further element influencing the model of a relational web is Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances', used to characterise the relationships between ostensibly differing organisations. The notion of family resemblance carries an assumption of shared characteristics. The criteria governing the essentials of family characteristics are, however, by no means absolute. An outsider may highlight response to secularism as the key characteristic, an insider may define unseen spiritual energies as the central relating characteristic. These problems of self-description and classification are overcome, in part, by the notion of a web of *relationships* rather than an assumption of similarity or identity of beliefs. In this way the family resemblances may be conceived not as essentially issues of religious *belief* but the functions of *interaction*, which may include religious beliefs as one form of these interactions. That is to say, while the doctrines and beliefs of the New Age spiritualities are undoubtedly significant, the underlying familial resemblances are to be found in the *modes of connection* between individuals, organisations and the wider network. The genealogy of the family resides in praxis more than doctrine.

It is thus apposite to relate the notion of family resemblances to Gerlach and Hine's concept of 'segmented polycentric integrated networks'. The central features of the model they developed relate to the structural composition of groups and are defined such that

> an organisation can be characterised as a network - decentralised, segmentary and reticulate.

These features are elaborated to describe the essential structure of such movements:

> decentralisation has to do with the decision-making, regulatory functions of the movement

which is not 'acephalous' with a unitary hierarchy, but 'polycephalous';

> segmentation has to do with the social structure - the composition of parts that make up the movement as a whole;
> reticulation has to do with the way these parts are tied together into a network[2] (1970:34-5).

This model clearly has similarities to the web model articulated here, especially in terms of methodology for, in order to represent the reticulate and segmentary nature of the movements, it is necessary to develop a scheme which highlights the interconnections as much as the nodes. Just such a hermeneutic is available in the notion of the web.

Yet the web is simply a metaphor. The polymethodic approaches of the scholar of religion could be accounted for by another image perhaps, and the multiplicity of the phenomena has been portrayed in many ways in post-modern analyses of culture. Nevertheless, any theoretical framework is equally as historically situated as the ostensible object of its study. The web emerges in contemporary culture as an image of interconnection, as a model of the 'situatedness' or contextual nature of knowledge. The web also has a role as a model for living systems as an alternative to the linear positivistic schema which resonate in evolutionary principles and ideas of progress that still pervade the epistemologies of modernity. It can be seen as a methodological principle (a web of methods) congruent to the phenomena it describes (a web of interacting practices and beliefs). If a key aim is for scholars to represent the views of a culture or movement it is necessary to develop an ethnomethodological standpoint of congruence, such as I have described here. From this perspective it becomes possible to provide a 'thick description' (Geertz) of what the 'natives' really think.

The Diffuse Communities of the New Age

The example I will give to illustrate these phenomena requires a little background explanation. First I need to introduce a neologism, the term 'web-community' which I take to be shorthand for the diffuse communities of the New Age or Alternative spiritualities. The organisation that I have chosen to illustrate the notion of web-communities is called *Psychology of Vision*. *Psychology of Vision* is what Marilyn Ferguson calls a psycho-technology. That is an approach that is informed by psychological principles which are instrumental in rationale, and are generally focused on achieving some form of holistic, spiritual integration.

Psychology of Vision (henceforth, PoV) is based in Kaneohe, Hawaii, where it's two co-founders, Chuck and Lency Spezzano, live. However, there are a number of national organisations that carry out PoV seminars and serve as centres for PoV products. These include Canada, Japan, Taiwan, Switzerland, Germany, Austria and the UK. The main PoV centre, outside Hawaii, is *Psychology of Vision UK Ltd*, which has its offices in Pewsey, Wiltshire. PoV provides a useful example of how a web-community has locations in specific areas yet is diffused across local and national boundaries. Because PoV advertises in national and international publications participants of their courses come from many areas of the country, and from abroad. The community is dispersed.

Though there are many strands linking PoV to the wider web of New Age or Alternative spiritualities I want to concentrate today on one feature of the emergent community linked with PoV. This feature is shaped by the *informal* connections made by individuals involved in the organisation of PoV UK and participants of PoV courses. The development of a newsletter in September 2000 from an informal network of PoV workshop participants illustrates one manifestation of the increasing cohesiveness of some aspects of informal network groups, or web-communities. The first newsletter produced by this group, called *friends helping friends*, operates both as an information bulletin board and as a network hub from which PoV workshop participants can extend network links.

There has always been an unofficial support network for *Psychology of Vision* UK but the aim of 'friends helping friends' is to expand and develop this network. Each contact is committed to providing a nucleus to focus the energy of the work.

There is no formal structure and indeed what is on offer may vary greatly - some may invite you to a barbecue or dinner, others for a cup of tea and a chat, or perhaps to join a study group. Whatever is on offer, the underlying intention is the same - to provide support and encouragement on your healing journey (*friends helping friends*, 2000: 3).

The emergence of diverse structures within a specific network indicates the evolutionary expansion of network hubs within web-communities. This example from PoV gives a concrete basis for Manuel Castells' description of the modalities of the 'network society':

> Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes (for example, values or performance goals). A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance. (1996: 470)

It is necessary to consider how communities such as these cohere and are reticulated between different nodes of the web. The web of PoV expands and has a morphology akin to

the computer-graphic of the mathematical Mandelbrot set. The colourful expressions and novel formulations of its unpredictable expansion are the products of the unquantifiable interests, experiences and skills of the multiple individuals who come into contact with PoV through other webs. Given the existence of other networks or web-communities, such as the World Wide Web or closer web-community forms such as other psycho-technologies, it is possible to assert probabilities about the nature of the evolutionary growth of the informal PoV community. However, it remains impossible to quantify the finite resonances of any web-community because of the complex infinitude of informal network connections and influences.

Nevertheless, there are means of uncovering the web community network. The most effective mode for gaining access to the informal networks is by qualitative research. The organic nature of webs, that is the way they are constructed by the pathways of individuals, necessitates discovering insiders' perspectives. We may describe these pathways in a number of ways, but the essential narrative must be given by the voices of those making the journey. If we fail to represent the views of the researched community, we may fall foul of Clifford Geertz's criticism of constructing 'ingenuities' which bear little resemblance to the actual structure of the researched community (1973: 11). The key to the informal structure of such web-communities is communication.

My research into a number of New Age/Alternative groups has provided evidence to this conclusion. A high percentage of questionnaire respondents and interviewees have cited word-of-mouth communication as *the key* or a highly significant means for sharing information and ideas which is a major type of thread linking those within a web-community. There is a high level of commitment to sharing information and experiences gained through workshops, seminars, psycho-technological programmes, presentations, fairs, discussion groups, retreats, personal spiritual experiences and so on, with other people. So a core modality of the definition, and expansion, of such web-communities is via informal, word-of-mouth communications. Underlying this medium is the self-conscious adoption of communication as an active means of developing personal spiritualities.

However, when one follows the diverse pathways of individual biographies as a way of mapping community one discovers that the notion of a discrete self-contained community is a fiction. Communities such as these overlap and are interdependent. By following the pathways of individuals within the communities we can see many levels of engagement and many levels of activity in a variety of communities. The final section of this paper provides brief details of the way New Age communities cohere and are interlinked by looking at individuals within the web-community of PoV.

Some individuals have little engagement with the PoV community. For 'Bob' the web he wove in religious and spiritual communities was circumscribed to a limited number of people and events. Very few of his close relationships were involved with this aspect of his interests. His biographical details marked a secular path away from his Church of England upbringing. From the time 'I got thrown out of Cheltenham College for filling the hymn books and Bibles with ink' this individual developed networks of an explicitly secular nature. His entry into the web-communities of New Age spiritualities was through PoV and, at the time of I spoke with him, this was the only major connection he had with the manifold nodes within New Age or Alternative web-communities.

Other individuals have developed more diverse interests, and involvement with multiple communities, of which PoV is just one part. For 'Roshan' this was in part by default. He had become an alcoholic and under the auspices of Alcoholics Anonymous achieved, at the time of interview, sobriety. The 'Twelve Step' method taught at AA meetings had provided him with a preliminary connection to New Age spiritualities. His network of friendships had become solely those for whom spirituality is, in William James's terms, a 'live option':

> All the people that I'm attracted to ... are contemplative and thoughtful and spiritual. All of them, without exception. I don't spend any time with people who aren't prepared to look inward a bit.

Yet his own web of relationships with New Age spiritualities was largely through personal contacts, with PoV representing the main formal node or web-community with which he was connected.

Other individuals with whom I have spoken have evolved considerably larger webs linking them to a variety of different communities. For 'Elska', the PoV web-community was one amongst several communities in which she was active. Other spiritual groups with which she had become involved were Sri Chinmoy meditation sessions, Soul Creativity seminars and art workshops. She was most active in her local Bristol artist's community, which meets once a week, convenes workshops, and according to the interviewee, deals with issues related to spirituality and 'mother earth'.

Her web-communities spread, as many within New Age spiritualities claim, beyond the material and measurable to more ephemeral realms where the notion of connection and community retains a meaning on the level of spiritual energies. For many within New Age spiritualities in general, and specifically for some amongst the PoV web-community, the spiritual web of connections has a vitality and significance equal to communities within material realms. One individual's description of the spiritual journey and the attributes of the spiritual person exemplifies this ephemeral mode of such communities. From her perspective *every* interaction she has is an interaction in the broadest notion of a spiritual community:

> New Age ... seems like it's part of everyday life ... spirituality always has been ... it's our journey out of the mud up to the heavens ... some are more spiritual because they've had more reincarnations. [Spirituality is about] people who really want to help other people. They have such a strong centre that they just endlessly give out and it seems to come from an inexhaustible supply ... so they end up forming groups where this can keep happening, where people can 'plug in' ... I think service is a big part of it ... once that connection upwards is established it automatically turns into helping other people.

> My list of gurus is getting bigger and bigger ... you realise that everybody is there to help you and teach you. I have guides who come to me in dreams, who give me advice or who are leading the way.

Thus there are many layers to the interconnections between communities. There are evident mundane, worldly communities that interact with each other using recognised formal mediations of paper and electronic systems. There are equally less formal diffuse communities that are supported primarily by word-of-mouth communications, webs that I have designated as informal. These connections are less clearly evident and are difficult to track in any quantitative sense. It is possible merely to provide 'extracts' from the informal pathways which interlink nodes in these informal webs.

For those within the New Age spiritualities, there are modes of community which are just as concrete, though they are even less easy to determine for the outsider. These modes of community involve human persons and non-human persons or 'guides'. The spiritual and material realms are interpenetrating in this worldview. The web-communities of New Age or Alternative spiritualities are then comprised by the relationship between individual psyches, social groupings and a universal spirituality. But of this further realm even the subtlest qualitative research can have little to say and, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, thereof one is necessarily silent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, briefly, the phenomena of New Age Alternative Spiritualities are in a state of flux while the categories and concepts we use to describe these phenomena are shifting in accord with developments in the field. The novel expressions of Alternative spiritualities require new models and typologies to describe them at the same time as we develop greater methodological maturity in the study of religions. Increasingly we recognise the importance of plurality, diversity and specificity as well as the importance of context – so we speak of Buddhisms or African Christianities, or Australian Contemporary Alternative Paganisms. The web model provides a functional typology at individual and group levels that can accommodate this diversity and plurality.

Finally, I want to offer a new notion of community in this new plural context, one that accepts the dissolution of certain forms of community in the post-modern world. I want to suggest that novel forms of diffuse web-communities are emerging and that it is in the field of New Age or Alternative spiritualities that we can find evidence of these new and evolving communities.

NOTES

1. The crisis of modernity is likened to, even equivalent to, that which required Noah's ark, "of consciousness", and Hindu ideas of reincarnation to arrive at the concept of "evolved souls". (Vision of Ramala, 1991)

2. Gerlach and Hine note that "according to Webster something that is reticulate is weblike, resembling a network - with crossing and inter-crossing lines" (1970:55)

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