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## Coming Home or Drifting Away – Magical Practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Ways of adopting heterodox beliefs and religious worldviews

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### Abstract

This article examines the process-related dynamics of becoming a magical practitioner and an adherent of a Neopagan group respectively. It analyzes the relation of the thesis of *Interpretive Drift* (Luhmann) and the concept of *Coming Home Experience*, which both have a large impact on academic discussion, and which are often seen as mutually contradictory. Using empirical data from two German interview studies with contemporary magicians and German heathen (Ásatrú) groups respectively, the article shows that the two dynamics can form complementary elements of the process. In addition to this, it emphasizes the importance of personal extraordinary experiences containing strong subjective evidence which mostly are neglected in this regard. Taking these individual biographical aspects into account as well as different personal motivations, an immense variety of approaches to alternative worldviews might become possible. Thus, we come to the conclusion that simple generalizations in characterizing the ‘pathway to magical beliefs and practices’ are misleading.

### Introduction

Standing in opposition to traditional forms of religion, most of the so called ‘new’, ‘non-traditional’, or ‘alternative’ religions (Hunt) that emerged as expressions of a search for re-enchantment of the secularized culture within the late modernity of the 20th century are based

upon individual (and collective) experiences of transcendent phenomena. In fact, ‘having (spiritual/religious/magical) experiences’ has become as essential for contemporary Pagan identities as the concept of ‘faith’ within traditional religions. In this paper we try to outline two different approaches to explain processes of adopting heterodox beliefs and religious worldviews which are related to different types of experience. In a broader sense we hope to show how close divergent elements of creating religious or spiritual meaning (personal experiences, narrative conventions, social dispositions etc.) may be linked within the process of adopting an alternative or heterodox belief-system. Taking into account that personal experience is emphasized by many New Religious Movements (NRM) as an important element of contemporary religious expression (McGuire, *Lived religion* passim, “Embodied Practices”; Heelas and Woodhead passim; Bender; Orsi; Ammerman; Knoblauch 271-273), our considerations which are primarily based on the results of two field studies are relevant to a lot of other NRM beyond the particular scope of the two investigated groups (contemporary magicians and German heathens).

In 1983, Tanya M. Luhrmann moved to London to investigate modern witchcraft. Her main aim was to understand “the reasons behind the current ‘revival’ of witchcraft” and motivations for the involvement in magical practice and pagan or occult groups respectively (*Persuasions* 7). For this reason, she decided to become an insider, and to do the things which one has to do to get into this position, i.e. reading magical books and magazines, participating in relevant conferences and meetings, doing magical exercises, and looking for appropriate groups for initiation. She was a young American social anthropologist who easily obtained access to the field. As we were anecdotally told, she has been seen as a very gifted and powerful ‘witch’, and attracted a lot of attention in the Neopagan community. The inevitable came after she had published her findings in a widely read monograph: many of the involved Wiccans and/or magicians raised their voices against the researcher, accusing her of misrepresentation, of pretence, of the betrayal of secrets, and of denying her own experience (Pearson 103). These are severe accusations which do not reflect the general attitude of the people involved at that time,<sup>1</sup> but still exert influence on the assessment of Luhrmann’s study. Thus, the case of Luhrmann has an enduring impact on the discussion of the insider/outsider problem in the study of NRM. Although being an important

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Pike, who reports on a male witch who told her “that if he ever revealed his religious identity to his parents, he would give them a copy of Luhrmann’s *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, both the most theoretical and ethnographic of any study of Neo-Paganism published to date. The witch also pointed out that Luhrmann’s study was most compelling because it did not, like Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon*, gloss over tensions and conflicts within Witchcraft and Neo-Paganism” (Pike 368, endnote 9).

problem<sup>2</sup> we would like to focus on another controversial point, namely her thesis of *interpretive drift* (ID) i.e. the (gradual) process of the establishment of magical beliefs on the basis of individual experience, and of the related strategies of rationalization. We wondered why this thesis became so controversial. The fact that the most severe criticism of ID mainly stems from academic researchers who also claim an insider status as confessed Pagans brought us to the assumption that it may concern some Pagan concepts which are violated by the thesis of ID. Above all, it seems to be the narrative of the *coming home experience* (CHE) which is very common among Neopagans (Berger and Ezzy 56-85) and which is often seen contradictory to the ID thesis (e.g. Harrington, “Conversion”). After outlining the ID and the main lines of criticism, we will scrutinize the CHE regarding its quality as a narrative, but, beyond that, also its quality as a result of individual experiences. In the second part of our paper we would like to show – based on our empirical findings gained from two German interview studies with contemporary magicians and with German heathen groups (Ásatrú), and some theoretical considerations – that the concepts of ID and CHE do not have to be seen as alternatives, but complementary, and that there are other important factors which have been mostly disregarded in this context to date and which have to be taken into account for a better understanding of the processes of establishing magical beliefs, of adopting an alternative worldview, and entering into a Neopagan group respectively.

## Luhrmann’s thesis of interpretive drift

According to Luhrmann’s understanding of ID, a newcomer magician gains more and more subjective evidence of the efficacy of his practice. He “becomes progressively more skilled at seeing new patterns in events, seeing new sorts of events as significant, paying attention to new patterns” – he becomes “a certain sort of specialist” in interpreting events and experiences in a particular and alternative (heterodox) frame of meaning (*Persuasions*, 312). Luhrmann describes this process as “the slow slide from one form of explanation to another, partially propelled by the

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<sup>2</sup> It would be a worthwhile issue to investigate the reactions, the lines of argument and the motives of the insider critics. Being outsiders, we did not perceive Luhrmann’s argument as ridiculing or condemning practitioners of Wicca and the Western Mysteries respectively. The accusation that Luhrmann has “denied her own experience in her ethnography” (Pearson 103) may suggest that her psychological interpretation of *her own experience(s)* as a gifted participant has been a narcissistic slight, at least by some of her critics. There may be a lot more personal motives covered by the criticism of the ethnographer as she got close to many adherents during her field study, and then may have broken the relationships abruptly after finishing the phase of inquiry in the field. Regarding the insider/outsider problem, cf. e.g. Arweck (“Insider/Outsider Problem”).

dynamics of un verbalized experience” (ibid., 322). She attaches a huge importance to the aspect of practical experience. Thus she does not see a socialization process as a primary basis of the ID, but the phenomenological experiences which are made within magical practice: “The experiences give the magical ideas content: the magical ideas make sense of experience. Intellectual and experiential changes shift in tandem, a ragged co-evolution of intellectual habits and phenomenological involvement“ (ibid., 314-15).

Regarding her thesis of ID, one can observe four general lines of critical argumentation: (1) with her thesis, Luhrmann does not take the individual motivations of becoming a magician sufficiently into account (Reid 146-47); (2) in Wicca and other forms of Neopaganism, often the feeling of “recognition” or “coming home” is reported, which has to be seen as contradictory to the ID (Harrington, “Conversion”; Harrington, “Long Journey”; Orion 53); (3) with ‘wrong’ beliefs i.e. a reductionist approach, one cannot understand magic, and thus the thesis of interpretive drift is an academic concept lacking construct validity (Greenwood; Ezzy; Pearson; Harvey); and (4) if the thesis of ID is true, Luhrmann herself should have succumbed to that process, and should have become a magical believer, which was not the case (Pike; Pearson).<sup>3</sup>

Pike, addressing the aforementioned line of criticism refers to the – seemingly – most provoking disclaimer in the first pages of Luhrmann’s book “I never have and do not now ‘believe’ in magic” (*Persuasions*, 18) and complains rightly that the meaning of ‘belief in magic’ remains unclear. In this regard there is, indeed, a lack of clarity in Luhrmann’s argument which can produce the impression that the process of interpretive drift evolves *inevitably for everyone* who performs magic (including reading the insiders’ books) and leads – and this is the essential point – to a particular system of magical and/or religious belief.<sup>4</sup> In addition to this (we will pick this up later on because it is a general problem going beyond Luhrmann’s argumentation) there is another point which is likely to result in misunderstandings regarding the ID thesis due to the lack of clarity: the use of the concept of religious conversion. With regard to this latter point, Margot Adler provided the interpretative framework upon which subsequent studies have been

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the criticism could be easily refuted, but this would go beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> However, Luhrmann did not make such claims, but as she did ‘the whole program’ – reading the relevant books written from an emic perspective, practicing, having extraordinary experiences through magical rituals, and exchanging those experiences with other practitioners – it may be hardly understandable for a lot of convinced magicians why she came to divergent conclusions. Indeed, she only mentions a pragmatic – and not a rational – argument for her decision on which interpretative framework for her experiences she (finally) accepted: “The only reason I continued to think of myself as an anthropologist, rather than as a witch, was that I had a strong disincentive against asserting that rituals had an effect upon the material world” (320).

based in her influential field study (first published in 1979) which also contains the narrative of *coming home*, and which still has a large impact on the debate. Her use of the CHE as an argument to stress the notion that there is no conversion to Paganism falls short: her definition of conversion is too narrow, as Manning has pointed out (307-08),<sup>5</sup> and she did not consider the complexity of the CHE concept, as we now will demonstrate.

## Varieties of the *coming home* concept

Adler called Neopaganism a “religion without converts”, and thus introduced the narrative of *coming home* into the context of Wicca and Paganism. Only a few sentences at the beginning of her voluminous book refer directly to this concept, giving only anecdotal evidence (14). A brief look at the internet demonstrates the outcome of her implicit theory that “Neo-Pagans were already Pagan before they joined the movement” but did not know it (Manning 307). Typing the three words “coming”, “home”, and “Wicca” into the Google search field (German version, day of access: 2009-02-03), the first five results provide the following statements: (1) “Wicca spirituality is a process of coming home to reality, uncovering your true Self, returning to the Divine”;<sup>6</sup> (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”;<sup>7</sup> (3) the next entry contains a question-answer sequence. The answer of an ‘expert’ to the question of how to become a Wiccan is: “Becoming interested in wicca is like coming home, coming back to where you (humanity) started. Welcome back. (...)”;<sup>8</sup> (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

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. Paloutzian, Richardson and Rambo, Rambo and Farhadian, and Bryant and Lamb for a wider (up-to-date) perspective on religious conversion. Maybe one has to understand Adler’s narrow definition in terms of the actual conditions and the cultural situation prevailing at the time formed by efforts to distinguishing the ‘newly’ established Paganism from the Christian tradition (to which the concept of conversion seems to be affiliated). The critique of a definition of conversion which is too narrow also applies to Harvey’s *Coming home and coming out Pagan (but not Converting)*, where the author introduces new conceptual elements (*converting from* in contrast to *converting to*) but does not take the actual scholarly state of the art into consideration.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.wicca-spirituality.com/wicca-magick.html> [accessed: 2009-02-03].

<sup>7</sup> <http://paganwiccan.about.com/od/wiccaandpaganismbasics/a/WWPDiffs.htm> [accessed: 2009-02-03].

<sup>8</sup> <http://en.allexperts.com/q/Pagan-Wiccan-Religion-3207/bored-christianity.htm> [accessed: 2009-02-03].

own”;<sup>9</sup> (5) the fifth entry is provided by the table of contents in the book *Wicca and Witchcraft For Dummies* (2005) by the author Diane Smith. Chapter III is entitled “Coming Home: How Wiccans Become Wiccans”.<sup>10</sup> We can break at this point because the quotations are completely sufficient to show the impact of the CHE as a *narrative*. The third and the fourth statements are especially illustrative as they demonstrate how the CHE is defaulted and transmitted to newcomers (3), and how it gains the status of a theological principle in Wicca: only those who have the experience of ‘coming home’ are chosen by the Goddess (4).<sup>11</sup> Therefore it does not come as a big surprise that one can provide empirical evidence for the CHE if one asks for it more or less directly – as done by Harrington who added a new motif to the conversion motifs of Lofland and Skonovd (373-85)<sup>12</sup>, that of “recognition”, which scored highest among her sample of 102 initiated Wiccans (“Long Journey”, *passim*). Although the informative value of those findings is limited,<sup>13</sup> we want to take a close look at the concept as there should be a core set of experiences which are responsible for the emergence of the widely spread narrative and, moreover, concerns other aspects of the CHE which go beyond the character of a narrative.

At first, we want to have a look at the “Interview with a Modern Witch”, which is provided as a paradigmatic example in Adler’s initiatory book (136-52, especially 136-39). Adler’s question “How did you come to be a Pagan and a Witch?” was answered as follows: “First of all, I am a hereditary Witch, but this does *not* mean that I have a direct lineage from mother to daughter, although [laughter] I did allege this as a neurotic teenager” (136). She mentions that her great-great-grandmother was a “local midwife and healer, basically a faith healer” (*ibid.*). During a phase of religious searching during adolescence she began to read books on the Hermetic tradition and alchemy, amongst others. After buying a magical grimoire she began to work spells and, at that point, got the strong impression that she “was fulfilling something to do with (her) ancestry” (138). She intensely concerned herself with her Irish family roots by reading, as she states, “every book on Irish mythology that I could get hold of. Before the year was out I was

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bos/bos043.htm> [accessed: 2009-02-03].

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dummies.com/store/product/Wicca-and-Witchcraft-For-Dummies.productCd-0764578340,navId-322516,descCd-tableOfContents.html> [accessed: 2009-02-03].

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Berger and Ezzy on the importance of the internet for Neopagan newcomers, and on the transmission of the CHE narrative (38-45).

<sup>12</sup> Lofland and Skonovd specified six conversion motifs: ‘intellectual’, ‘mystical’, ‘experimental’, ‘affectional’, ‘revivalist’, and ‘coercive’.

<sup>13</sup> To investigate the CHE thesis adequately, one should adopt a qualitative approach, which is more adapted to controlling the bias resulting from the predetermined narrative.

calling myself a Witch because I knew that was what I was” (ibid.). The entering of the ‘Craft’ is described as being an “independent decision on my part” (137). As we can see, a lot of different elements and motifs emerge from this account: the fears and wants of an adolescent, and her search for ego identity and coherent self-concept respectively – characteristics of the life-stage of adolescence and the related developmental tasks (e.g. Havighurst) – but also the intensive intellectual preoccupation with magical and esoteric issues, the importance of individual experience gained by magical practice, a feeling of recognition and reconnection with her ancestry, the “decision” to enter the Craft and to call herself a witch as well as the inventing of a strong lineage/family tradition at the outset to gain confidence and certainty on her path. This example, standing at the very beginning of the appearance of the narrative, already demonstrates the conceptual complexity of the CHE.

In the following, we want to mention different psychological and sociological processes which are able (respectively are said to be able) to elicit a CHE. First, we consider the level of individual *beliefs, conviction* and *attitudes*. Therein we find a factor with possibly the biggest impact on the CHE conception in Neopaganism: Neopagan religious systems fit particularly well with previously existing magical beliefs and conviction as they are, on the one hand, part of the particular (Western) culture and traditions; and, on the other hand, they are open to animistic views and magical thinking, in spite of the dominant secularized scientific worldview. We may clarify this relation with a quotation by a young Pagan, Morgan, provided in Berger and Ezzy (49-50):<sup>14</sup>

And one day I saw a Silver Raven Wolf book on the same shelf and picked it up and I was like, “Wow, this is what I believe.” I [had] been on an existential crisis from like sixth to ninth grade. And I was researching different religions trying to figure out what worked for me, and finally I got really frustrated and just wrote down everything I believed, and didn’t give it any name or anything, and when I picked up that Raven Wolf book, everything fit.

The fitting set of ideas she found in one of Raven Wolf’s books contains some magical or paranormal beliefs, but also some elements of her spiritual or religious worldview.<sup>15</sup> Berger and

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<sup>14</sup> Berger & Ezzy provide some useful and interesting ideas on the CHE as a narrative, and on the process of becoming a witch (56-85).

<sup>15</sup> Corresponding to this, Harvey mentions that “[c]oming home to oneself encapsulates the experience of many who discover that their own worldview, experiences, intuitions, preferences and goals can be affirmed” (239). On the other hand, Harvey also mentions that beliefs “are rarely central to the process of becoming Pagan” (245). This reflects his definition of Paganism, which is characterized by an experiential orientated re-linking to Nature. In his view, “Paganism is an ecological affirmation that humanity’s home

Ezzy, who provide some useful and interesting ideas on the CHE as a narrative (passim, particularly 56-85) and on the process of becoming a witch, emphasise the role of the mass media as an important part of the cultural background facilitating the orientation to Neopaganism, and particularly to Witchcraft. Through the mass media, young people come into contact with positive models of magic and Witchcraft, as well as with different ideas which are relevant concepts in modern Witchcraft (e.g. environmentalism, feminism, etc.). Suggesting a “two-pronged process of cultural orientation and individual seekership”, the authors point out that “[t]hese broad cultural factors on their own do not result in conversion to witchcraft, but they do provide a cultural context in which seekers can feel as though they have ‘come home’ to Witchcraft” (58).

Next, we want to examine different interpretive possibilities of the CHE from a *developmental psychological* and a *cognitive psychological* perspective.

Harrington proposes a *Schematic Integration Model* which, in her opinion, “offers an explanation for the feelings of recognition and coming home”. Her main ideas in this regard are as follows: “Initiation into Wicca brings a sense of homecoming when the long-held mental templates (schemas) are finally fulfilled by a religious match of best fit (“Psychology”, 80).<sup>16</sup>

One could take Jean Piaget’s model of stages of cognitive development into consideration, which relies, like Harrington’s model, on early cognitive structures: During the so-called *preoperational stage* (from ages 2-7), magical thinking predominates, and the child develops a form of magico-phenomenalistic causality (229-56). According to Piaget, some features of this stage are: an animistic world view, a finalistic explanation of nature, and egocentrism (the magico-phenomenalistic efficacy of the child’s own movement, and where principles of rationalistic causality are not yet identified). Thus, the feeling of *coming home* could be interpreted as a kind of recognition or remembrance of that stage. However, the structural similarities of the Pagan world

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is Earth” (242). More generally related to religion, the German philosopher Helmuth Plessner remarked as early as 1928: “... Heimat schenkt nur Religion. (...) Wer nach Hause will, in die Heimat, in die Geborgenheit, muß sich dem Glauben zum Opfer bringen“ (342) [„... *home is only given by religion (...)* *Someone who wants to come home, to the homeland, to security has to sacrifice himself to faith*” – Translation by the authors].

<sup>16</sup> In contrast to Beck’s *schema theory*, to which she strongly refers, Harrington changes the conceptualization of schemas substantially. In her perspective, schemas, as “long-held mental templates”, apparently form some kind of ideal or perfect patterns which are built up opposing the early everyday experiences with family members and peers. Such an understanding also does not correspond with other social psychological conceptions of schemas as mental representations as presented e.g. by Fiske and Taylor, and Smith.



view and the developmental stage of magico-phenomenalistic causality may be superficial and misleading, and suggesting a relation between them would be highly speculative.<sup>17</sup>

Another reference to developmental psychology is given by Starhawk, a feminist author and self-described witch. She defines religion as “a matter of relinking with the divine within and with her outer manifestations in all of the human and natural world” (*Spiral Dance* 186). Starhawk refers psychoanalyst Margaret Mahler’s theory which describes phases of child development regarding the process of individuation. In Mahler’s model the first human bonding is with the mother (Mahler, Pine, and Bergmann). Starhawk proposes that there is a precedent and primarily bonding takes place “with the Goddess, the mystical source of the Self prior to individual birth”, as noted by Salomonsen (159). Thus, the CHE could be seen as a result of recovering this first phase of spiritual bonding to the Goddess, and of the state of divine union.

A less speculative approach without theological presumptions, which is based on a large amount of empirical data, can be found in the developmental psychology of self-identity. By reference to the work of Erikson, Marcia, and followers, a developmental psychologist can interpret such a description as given in the “Interview of a Modern Witch” (see above) as typical for reaching ‘identity achievement’ in the domain of religious beliefs after going through a stage of crisis (‘moratorium’) (Marcia).<sup>18</sup> The CHE thus results from the reaching of a stable identity formation; regarding its emotional quality it can be found in different domains, independently of a particular character of the chosen (or found) group/form/direction.

Turning towards the *psychology of consciousness* we also discover hints at CHEs. Magical and Pagan rituals often are accompanied by altered states of consciousness (ASC) which can lead to transpersonal (or non-rational, or integrative, or mystical) experiences (e.g. Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 139-159). Characteristics of such experiences are: the perception of unity, wholeness, connectedness, integration, knowledge, and feelings of love and security (Hofmann and Wiedemer 147-82). The CHE thereby is more a secondary phenomenon which appears rather seldom in scientific literature on the phenomenology of ASC and mystical experiences, but,

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<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Piaget’s model, based on data which he collected in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, now is criticized in many aspects, particularly in his assumptions of children’s animism. See e.g. Gelman, Spelke, and Meck 297-326.

<sup>18</sup> Although the identity status concept is developed with regard to the life-span of adolescence, it is not limited to it. Stephen, Fraser, and Marcia, for example, showed that once identity achievement is reached, it may be followed by a new crisis phase, i.e. by a new Moratorium which again can lead to identity achievement (283-300). The authors call such a process MAMA-cycles (= Moratorium-Achievement-Moratorium-Achievement).

notwithstanding, is reported in that context.<sup>19</sup> Although such CHEs may considerably differ from those which are usually referred to by Pagans, one has to take it into account in order to show the variety of the general use of the concept.

In addition to the above-mentioned approaches to the CHE, we also have to take sociological and social psychological aspects into consideration. As evidence from the research on subcultural groups shows, the feeling of coming home can be a result of experiencing community and/or confraternity after living in a solitary manner for a fairly long time (cf. Carpenter 402).<sup>20</sup> In addition to these emotional aspects, there are also functional aspects to discover: the CHE as self-legitimization in the sense of putting oneself into the lines of an ancient or (re-)invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger), and of the construction of a religious identity in postmodern times (Berger and Ezzy 47, and 237-42). From a social-constructionist point of view the CHE represents a narrative convention that must be understood as part of the re-interpretation of the biographical remembrance of a ‘converted’ person. Its structure follows conventional patterns of ‘telling the story of becoming...’ that are popular within the new community. By taking over another religious or metaphysical worldview, the whole biography becomes re-structured from the perspective of this acquired system of beliefs. Thus, Pagans adopt and use the projective talk of CHE as a sense-making prolongation of their own ‘spiritual path’ that reaches backwards into pre-adolescent beliefs they in fact might not have had before getting used to the new cognitive paradigm. For this reason there is no use, within a constructionist analysis, for the highly

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<sup>19</sup> As one example we may mention Lex Hixon’s *Coming Home: The Experience of Enlightenment in Sacred Traditions* where the concept of coming home directly is related to such mystical experiences in the title of the book. The findings made by Kowalchuk, who carried out interviews with members of the American *Ordo Templis Orientis* group, could be interpreted as corresponding to this approach. Becoming a Thelemite is thus coming in touch with one’s ‘true self’: “It is the development of what has always been” (111). Therewith, the *coming home* aspect is combined with a developmental or evolutionary aspect (using a seed-plant metaphor) – similar to some Buddhist concepts.

<sup>20</sup> Miller remarks that ‘feeling at home there’ is one main reason for people joining *any* alternative religion (6). An interviewee in our own field study on contemporary magicians who was member of the caliphate of the German section of the *Ordo Templis Orientis* (O.T.O.) said that during initiations into the order the answer to the question: “Why do you want to enter our mighty and holy order?” often was: “There are nice people. With you, it’s just cool”. He also mentioned that for some of them the idea of belonging to a line of a tradition is also of importance. Interviews with members of the Neopagan Ásatrú movement in Germany show a similar evidence that ‘coming to Ásatrú’ for most of the interviewees describes the experience of discovering that there are other people who also understand themselves as being on the ‘same path’ after a longer period of practicing this religion in a solitary manner (cf. the example in the following section).

conventionalized narrative of CHE as a theoretical category for the understanding of what ‘really happens’ when people re-organize their worldview (Stenger 185-189).

As we have demonstrated, the CHE can be a result of different psychological and sociological processes on varying levels:

- the level of beliefs, conviction and attitudes
- the developmental psychological level
- the emotional level
- the cognitive level
- the level of consciousness
- the sociological and social psychological level

Therefore, it is not possible to draw clear conclusions about reports on CHEs as one cannot necessarily identify the relevant underlying processes. We now want to turn to our thesis that both concepts of ID and of CHE describe processes which can be relevant in becoming a magical practitioner.

Turning towards magic: examining some process-related dynamics on the basis of empirical data

### *Some theoretical considerations*

First, we want to take up the above-mentioned problem of blurring the levels of magical beliefs and religious beliefs/attitudes. A useful key for a better understanding may be given by taking the title of Luhrmann’s book *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft* seriously. The author’s main purpose was not to investigate the motives of becoming an adherent of a new religion/religious movement, but the process which leads to engaging in magic and which makes the practice of magic into an important part of life. She wanted to reconstruct the dynamics of a cognitive process which is related to the “craft” i.e. the practice of magic yielding more or less concrete results, which contain elements of verification, and which have an effect on the personal belief system. With her thesis of ID, she refers mainly to a cognitive level i.e. to the *establishment of magical beliefs* which develop through the interpretation of experiences and perceptions, and which are put into a specific framework of meaning; the aspect of CHE used by Harrington, Harvey, and other critics refers to *religious self-localization*. Thus, for better understanding, it is useful to make a distinction between becoming an adherent of a new religious movement with its direct reference to magical practices and beliefs (e.g. Wicca), and becoming persuaded of the efficacy of certain magical practices which, of course, can be an element of the ritual structure of a new religion. This also

concerns the ‘magician’ who may have chosen a particular religious or spiritual world view, for example, of a Western mystery school. The ‘magician’s beliefs’ must not be equated with ‘magical beliefs’. To clarify this difficult, but necessary, distinction by way of an example: The individual experience of the presence of a deity during the performance of a religious ritual cannot be equated per se with the experience of a particular occurrence interpreted as a desired or, at least, meaningful outcome of a magical operation. Both can be seen as an expression of paranormal or transcendent forces, but the experience of a deity is usually linked to a particular religious belief system while paranormal experiences and beliefs are not necessarily bound to a definite ontological model of reality and to assumptions about the existence of a deity, of gods, or transcendent entities respectively.<sup>21</sup> They can be, in general, integrated into totally different frameworks of meaning, with the single common element being constituted by their heterodoxy in relation to a scientific worldview. On the other hand, a magic ritual within the context of a religious service, such as invoking a god/a goddess (‘drawing down the moon’) or the consecration of bread and wine in the Christian Catholic service, gains its significance from its symbolic content, and it must not be taken literally by the religious believer. There is no pressure of proof and evaluation which accompanies pragmatic magical operations such as e.g. doing a ritual to help another person finding a new job, or something similar.

For this reason we suggest introducing an interpretation of ‘magic’ and ‘religion’ in their relationship with ‘paranormal experiences’, arguing from a social-constructionist view (Berger and Luckmann 1966) which focuses on the importance of subjective evidence for the stabilization of any personal worldview. As ‘paranormal’ we specify a type of perception or causal attribution of occurrences that do not correspond with common expectations of ‘normality’ adopted within the process of socialization. By defining ‘paranormal occurrences’ in connection with the process of socialisation, this category becomes highly dependant upon cultural processes. The emergence of ‘paranormal’ phenomena within the rationalist culture of the West might, for instance, be understood as a kind of natural phenomena of which no principles are known to date. There are, of course, other interpretations which are possible as well – for instance magical or religious ones (Schetsche and Schmied-Knittel 170-76). Within the particular types of beliefs and actions that are commonly summed up under the multi-dimensional phenomenon of ‘magic’, the reference to the paranormal in the above-mentioned sense is essential. Bypassing the accidental aspects of the paranormal, the aim of the magical practitioner is to try to ‘force the hands of chance’ with his own will, or to elicit meaningful information on paranormal ways (divination). Performing magic

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, both experiences can appear together in one event. Thus, often it is difficult to differentiate them in a religious ‘real life’ context. For analytical reasons and to expound the problems, we have to however adhere to this distinction.

thus means provoking things that – within the collectively legitimized *Wissensordnung* (Spinner)<sup>22</sup> – normally cannot be provoked by man due to their ‘para-normal’ nature. While magic transcends the borders of collective assumptions of normality by provoking the paranormal, the systematisation of different magical practices and beliefs under a broader worldview accounts for the construction of religion. This becomes obvious for Neopagan religions in particular, but is not restricted to it. Within most religions, paranormal phenomena become part of the construction of religious evidence (as in miracles or revelations of god[s]). Our model of understanding religion and magic makes it clear that social definitions of the paranormal are *one* essential part of magical beliefs, and magical beliefs form *one* essential aspect of religion.

To come back to the work of Luhrmann, there is, as mentioned before, a lack of a clear distinction between becoming a ritual magician/a pagan, and becoming more and more engaged in magical practices; between adopting religious beliefs and magical beliefs in the sense of so-called ‘paranormal beliefs’ i.e. that one accepts that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the philosophy of orthodox contemporary ‘hardcore’ scientists; and, furthermore, between Neopagan groups and ritual magic orders, at least regarding her main thesis. One result of this lack of clarity is that one could get the impression that the process of ID can be verified with every practitioner of magic, independent of their biographical context and world view.<sup>23</sup> This would be a misunderstanding to which, in our view, a lot of critics are subjected to. To summarize: as with her critics, the main problem in Luhrmann’s work lies in the insufficient differentiation of magical and religious practice.

However, one has to admit that this is difficult in the case of the groups and individuals investigated. For example, Wicca is strongly related to magical practice. The term “craft” is charged with a rich and complex meaning, and it is part of the self-concept of Wiccan religion.<sup>24</sup> In addition, one should consider the different types of contemporary witchcraft (Pearson; Fischer)<sup>25</sup> representing fairly different approaches to magical practice. Regarding magical groups and individual magic practitioners, the differences are much more striking (Mayer, “Magicians”,

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<sup>22</sup> A rough translation of *Wissensordnung* is ‘knowledge order’ or ‘system of knowledge’.

<sup>23</sup> Luhrmann, in the last chapters of her book dealing with her thesis, writes only of “magician/magicians” in an over-generalized manner, thus leaving such an impression (*Persuasions*).

<sup>24</sup> To distinguish it from the everyday use of the word, one often can find it in uppercase notation in the Neopagan context: the “Craft”.

<sup>25</sup> Pearson identified three main types: Wicca, feminist witchcraft, and hedgewitchcraft. This typology is supported by the findings of Fischer who did a field study on Wicca in Germany. Considering the interesting work of Berger and Ezzy on teenage witches, it is evident that this typology is incomplete and has to be complemented.

in press).<sup>26</sup> As we have seen, the CHE plays an important role as a narrative for Neopagan adherents. The explanations given above – and we will exemplify this in detail with our case examples in the next two paragraphs – show that previously existing magical beliefs and convictions may lead to this experience as the set of ideas provided by Neopagan religious systems fits particularly well with the beginner’s own set of ideas. Thus, no ID has to take place to participate in a magical ritual and to believe in the “craft” because it is part of this religious system (like the concept of consecration in the Catholic system). As with the Christian faith, one can adopt the Neopagan faith without having had experience of the strong subjective evidence of the efficacy of the “craft” (but, however, maybe having had a facilitating CHE). Therefore, for *religious self-localization*, the acceptance of valid narratives can be sufficient, and the experience-based establishment of magical beliefs, of “persuasions of the witch’s craft” as described by Luhmann with her ID-thesis, is not an essential element in this process.

However, her thesis, as an observable process among magical beginners, remains unaffected by this, and there is supporting empirical evidence for it (e.g. Berger and Ezzy; Kaczynski 120; Mayer, *Arkane Welten*, 65-143, 219; Gründer, *Asatbeismus*) as well as for the CHE (Berger and Ezzy; Harrington, “Conversion”, “Long Journey”; Gründer, *Asatbeismus*).<sup>27</sup> There are, however, also individual differences regarding the dynamics of development which seem to be strongly dependent on previous, individual experiences.<sup>28</sup> For many, experiences containing strongly subjective evidence are very important.<sup>29</sup> They form, so to speak, ‘high intensity seeds of

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<sup>26</sup> Mayer points out that many of the academic attempts to define and explain contemporary magic remain unsatisfactory because they do not take the heterogeneity of the individual approaches to magical practice into account. These individual approaches which are formed by particular motivational structures are accompanied by (or lead to) different assessments of magic by different world views. Based on his empirical data, Mayer provides five typified aspects of the figure of the magician: (a) the magician as artist, (b) the magician as social utopian, (c) the magician as scientist, (d) the magician as ‘fully functioning person’, and (e) the magician as seeker of knowledge (Mayer, “Magicians”, in press).

<sup>27</sup> The evidence for the CHE is often based on biographical reports which are subject to the above-mentioned problem of having become a narrative, reducing its explanatory value. However, one can deal with the concept in a similarly deductive manner as with the ID by analyzing the interview data, thereby going beyond the limitation of understanding CHE as a narrative.

<sup>28</sup> This is suggested by the empirical findings of Mayer’s study, but has yet to be investigated systematically (*Arkane Welten*).

<sup>29</sup> An interviewee, as a young child, had some extraordinary (paranormal) experiences which, retrospectively, lastingly formed his approach to questions of existence and worldview. The practice of magic which came up relatively late in his biography cannot be seen independently of his previous experience with parapsychological ‘experiments’, and of his above-mentioned childhood experience. For

experience’ which push the development, or which – to use another image – build pillars piled into solid ground, stabilizing the building’s base which rests on somewhat swampy terrain. It is beyond doubt that the aspect of practical experience is of extreme importance: “The experiences give the magical ideas content: the magical ideas make sense of experience. Intellectual and experiential changes shift, in tandem, a ragged co-evolution of intellectual habits and phenomenological involvement” (Luhmann, *Persuasions* 314-15).

With these findings we have now mentioned three important facets which can occur in the process of becoming a magical practitioner: (a) the feeling and experience of *coming home*, (b) the process of *interpretive drift*, and (c) *extraordinary experiences* containing strongly subjective evidence.<sup>30</sup>

We now want to demonstrate the complexity and the varieties of such processes by way of examples from our empirical data from two German field studies. The first study contains interviews with eleven contemporary magicians (Mayer, conducted in 2004-2005), the second one interviews with 28 members of Germanic heathen (Ásatrú) groups (Gründer, conducted 2006-2007).

### ***Interpretive drift, recognition, and extraordinary experiences on the magician’s path***

The first case of a young woman demonstrates that the two concepts of ID and CHE can occur together within one individual biographical narration.<sup>31</sup> The interviewee grew up in an atheistic parental home. As a child and during her adolescence she was strongly interested in ‘parapsychological’ and occult issues, reading a lot of books on these subjects. Later she began to

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another interviewee, experiencing astonishing success formed the very beginning of his pragmatically oriented magical practice. In these cases the characterization of the dynamics of development as “the slow shift towards belief” (Luhmann, *Persuasions* 307) therefore seems to be inadequate.

In many survey studies on metaphysical beliefs personal experience, together with religious questing, turned out to be the best predictors (Kaczynski 48 and 119).

<sup>30</sup> In this regard, Stromberg’s concept of *the impression point* is of interest, describing “a single ‘symbolic mechanism’ whereby available cultural form is used by actors in a process of adjustment to their social world” (56). He developed it with reference to conversion processes, and to self-transformation processes in the practice of insight psychotherapy. What this concept makes interesting is the fact that all of the three above-mentioned facets can be discovered as aspects of *the impression point* events in Stromberg’s description. However, the focus of the temporal dynamics of *the impression point* lies in a kind of *Eureka!* experience that is an intensive moment of insight (or gnosis). Such a dynamic matches with the narrations only in some cases. We thank Maria Balfer for advising us of this reference.

<sup>31</sup> In the following we use the CHE not only as a narrative, but as a process-related dynamic, and likewise with the ID.

practice yoga and meditation, followed by the preoccupation with other esoteric subjects such as Tarot, consulting the pendulum, and by further reading of Wiccan books, eventually finding an order of Western mysteries to which she still belongs. In her description the development was accompanied by a kind of CHE as she recognized a lot of similar concepts and exercises she already knew and practiced. There was, however, a phase of her life when she did not feel confident about her magical beliefs. The following quote can be seen as an example of the process of ID:

I often observed a certain see-sawing, which simply depended on how strongly one put oneself into which world. .. And eventually, eventually it changed sides. [...] there were, yes, quite individual experiences through which I simply noticed that there is something, and=and there is also, so to speak .. there are beings with whom one can work [...] yes, I don't know .. I think it is a decision. It is a decision to say at a certain point: this is now my worldview.<sup>32</sup>

By means of the second example we want to show the different qualities which are attributed to extraordinary experiences in a magical context. The interviewee grew up in a Roman Catholic parental house. Yet as a child he felt uncomfortable with the boring middle-class situation, and during his early adolescence he was attracted to Aleister Crowley, who represents an adventurous character to him, standing on the margins of society with no fear of infringing upon social taboos. The following years were full of meaningful coincidences which showed him the evidence of a 'magical' process, and which lead him to magical practice. This biographical phase can be seen as being characterized by a slow drift to magical beliefs (ID) as he became increasingly sensitized for such 'synchronistic' events. He then got in touch with the German section of the *Ordo Templis Orientis* (O.T.O.), and as soon as he was of adult age he joined the order. During his initiation he experienced an impressive ritual invoking the god Pan. The ritual was carried out by McMurtry, the former caliph of the Californian branch of the O.T.O. who was at this time an old and invalid man. McMurtry began to dance and went into an ecstatic trance – in no way fragile and weak. Then, something extraordinary and “fierce” happened: The neophyte observed suddenly, and without any guided imagery for introduction, an intensively glowing red ruby of an enormous size which appeared in the air – spontaneously “from out of nowhere”, as though it belonged to a second layer of reality which covers our day-to-day reality in a translucent manner. The interviewee reported:

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<sup>32</sup> All following translations of the interview quotes are made by the authors.



I felt such a fierce energy [...] Thus I really had the feeling: there is someone who deliberately can invoke extraordinary energies .. even ecstasy .. and self-abandonment .. and at the same time totally retain control of it. And that had an impact on me. I think the first thing I wrote in my diary after I had left: here and now [*knocking loudly on the table*] I truly realized for the first time that magic truly exists.

This quotation shows clearly that ‘magical beliefs’ and the experience “that magic truly exists” are not necessarily the same. Whilst the first seemed to be established before the interviewee attended the initiation, the second built up a new quality of belief in magic as a result of the extraordinary ‘paranormal’ experience during the ritual. We found such differentiations of the strength of subjective evidence among many of the interviewees. Thus, strong subjective evidence is not only a matter of belief and of purposeful interpretation, as the ID thesis suggests. This case also contains a further facet of becoming a magical practitioner: For the interviewee the membership of the magical order as well as the practicing of magical rituals constitute only a limited – even though important – biographical phase. This points to the fact that in the academic literature on Neopaganism only seldom are references given to people who moved away from pagan beliefs or who attended Neopagan groups, but never felt like *coming home* and left after a short time. According to one interviewee who has been a Wiccan high priest for many years, only a minority of beginners (about 20-30%) stay for more than a year. For another interviewee Wicca was an intermediate station between committed Christianity, a magical order, and a Western mystery school. Thus, we always have to keep in mind that in magical orders, but also in Neopagan groups, the tendency to change is relatively high compared to many other religious or spiritually orientated groups.

A further case of the ‘magicians’ sample should be mentioned briefly as it expands the spectrum of becoming a magician and of mapping magic. The interviewee, brought up in the Christian faith, became interested in magic and cabalistic rituals during adolescence, resulting in impressive experiences by practicing it. After his school days he studied Catholic theology and went to Rome to join the pontifical university. During this time he was active in the ceremonial services in St Peter’s Basilica, and it was there that he got a particular kind of CHE as he recognized the magical aspects of the rituals in this sacral Christian context:<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> After a few years the interviewee left Rome and the Catholic Church, returned to Germany, became member of the magical order *Fraternitas Saturni*, got rapidly ahead in the hierarchy of the order due to his commitment and, maybe, his magical talent. After another few years of rich activity, however, he left the order and became priest in a Christian non-conformist church (more detailed biographical vignettes of the magicians are provided in Mayer (*Arkane Welten* 65-131).

In the history and in the lived faith .. of this city, and also in=in the pontifical, particularly, in the pontifical, Vatican, liturgical system, I recovered a lot of what .. what confirmed my assumptions// inner assumptions. There are so much Egyptian, heathen, but also Jewish elements incorporated that it is a=a high magic thing which is carried out there. [...] The thing itself, this consecration event, takes center stage just like .. in every village church or chapel, but one realizes, the structure of this ritual itself .. that it is more reminiscent – if your are there in person – to=to a high Egyptian solar ritual carried out by Echnaton than to=to=to a piece// to a Lord's supper that Jesus carries out in any cloistered room

We now want to show that such a complexity of process-related dynamics in becoming a magical practitioner also can be found in a Neopagan context. The following cases stem from the Germanic heathen sample, and demonstrate the extremely tangled connections of the narrative explanation of CHE as well as processes of ID.<sup>34</sup>

### *Interpretive drift and Neopagan CHE within Ásatrú-biographies*

With the first example of a nearly 50-year-old man who works as an actor and singer/songwriter, we want to illustrate how two seemingly contradicting descriptions of the process of becoming an adherent of an 'alternative' religion can be elicited within one interview, depending on the questioning context. At the beginning, the interviewee answered the initial question on how he became an Ásatrúar with the narration of a typical conversion process (following the structure of a CHE narrative). He described himself as having been a person who had had nothing to do with religion at all until he took part in a Pagan ritual during a personal crisis at the age of 30. At that time he met a woman who introduced him to a form of nature spirituality that he thought he had had long before, just without knowing it:

Looking back, I see that I moved continuously towards my – now being aware – spiritual state, but then I did not recognize it, and for me it was a very abrupt, amazing incidence, an absolute paradigm change. (...) (This) woman who defined herself as a witch (...) performed a ritual with me, and this was my very first one, and I had the feeling that a bullet-proof glass pane was lifted up which had been between me and the rest of the world. For the first time in my life, I felt myself as being a part of nature, like being myself a blade of grass, a tree, an animal or something; before that I always had separated these things.

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<sup>34</sup> In Gründer more examples of the heathen sample are provided by which the author examines the process of conversion to Germanic Ásatrú (*Asatheismus*).

In contradiction to this conventional description of a ritual-based conversion he re-defines the process of becoming Ásatrú at the end of the interview. Answering a question concerning the personal importance of magical practices with runes,<sup>35</sup> he remarks that he had strong proof of magic by doing runic practices at least six years before getting in touch with paganism and becoming an Ásatrúar. He described a process of ID towards magical beliefs by becoming convinced by the ‘power of the runes’:

Because of my fascination with the runes, I did some experiments, although I did not believe in magic at all, but it just has to do with lettering (*in a calligraphic meaning* – the authors) (...) suddenly incidents ‘popped up’ into my life (...) it was very striking that very considerable things happened..

Although he considered that this could have happened by chance, he understood it as a result of his operations with runes e.g. his drawing of hidden runes into the cover sheets of his music demo tapes and the synchronous ‘taking off’ of his career as an artist. Eventually, his persuasion of the power of runic magic eventually led to give up this practice: “Finally, I let that thing with the runes be because I felt it was like having touched the power socket of the universe, and I’m not an electrician.” On the one hand, these experiences of subjective proof disrupted his pragmatically orientated magical practice with runes, and, on the other hand, they led to a reconstruction of his general interest in ‘Germanic culture’ and religion in so far as his ‘coming home’ to Ásatrú seemed to be already prepared by a magical worldview related to the magical power of the runes. Later on, he came back into contact with the runes again from a different perspective. He describes the connection between the magical symbolic system of the runes and his Ásatrú religion as follows: “Dealing with the runes caused my opening up towards the Germanic powers”, and: “The runes seemed to me to be like gates behind which I recognized the gods as strange and shadowy forces. Just like gates which enclosed a greater world”. We can learn from this example that questioning for conversion issues and for religious self-localization – the religious identity as a member of the Ásatrú religion, for which ‘magic’ is not essential<sup>36</sup> (in fact

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<sup>35</sup> The symbolic system of the old Germanic runes plays an important role within western esotericism as well as in Neopagan religions. Runes are used for magical interventions, talismans, amulets, and for divination (Gründer, *Asatheismus*).

<sup>36</sup> In fact, many Ásatrúar practice different forms of (runic) magic in order to get information or to influence things in their personal life – but these practices are (in contradiction to Wicca) mostly separated from the cult of the community. At least in most of the German Ásatrú groups magical practices are tolerated private options on an individual level some group members understand them as an expression of a lack of loyalty towards their gods in which they ‘trust’ (as the name Ásatrú means ‘trust in the Aesir-Gods’).

the cultic adoration of the gods stands in opposition to any forms of ‘forcing’ them by ‘doing magic’) – seems more likely to elicit CHE narratives than questioning for issues of magical beliefs or persuasions where the biographical reconstructions are more likely to contain structures which follow the dynamics of an ID.

The last case example presented here illustrates the possible complexity of a ‘custom-made’ process of finding a new religious identity containing the whole variety of different CHE’s, extraordinary experiences, and an ID, drifting from Roman Catholic socialisation to unspecified contemporary Paganism, then to Ásatrú-polytheism – and even back to a latent ‘paganized Catholicism’ as well. The interviewed person, a 35-year old woman, at first described her introduction into Neopaganism in the form of a common CHE-narrative at the age of sixteen while reading books on the subject of witches in the context of a school project on occultism:

There I had such a ‘clicking experience’ (...) I found it very fascinating, right, and this was the point that from then on I said: O.k., this, this (...) means something. Then I was calling myself just a Pagan woman or a hedge witch or whatever it was, I mean I just hadn’t got a fitting name for it.

From this point on she stabilized her personal animistic worldview by assuming the existence of other forms of non-human beings such as spirits of ancestors, elves and fairies – but not gods. During her studies of ethnology, the woman began with a research project on contemporary Paganism in Germany “partly out of scientific reasons, partly driven by curiosity”. During her ethnographic fieldwork she made contacts with Neopagan Ásatrúar groups which she did not like too much because of the importance of ethnicity (e.g. being of ‘German’ descent) for membership within some of these groups that conflicted with her own particularly Sinti descent. Nonetheless, she later found a partner who introduced her to (non-ethnocentric) Ásatrú-polytheism by encouraging her to experience ‘his’ Germanic gods. Within an Ásatrú Ostara ritual performed by her partner, she asked the gods to manifest themselves and to produce something. Shortly after, she reported the occurrence of massive paranormal phenomena within her flat:

[I]hen it became very enthralling; at this time paranormal phenomena began to occur within my flat. I mean true phenomena and ... with all that neat phenomena like fog inside the flat and some strange animals which weren’t truly there running around, and .. very, very, very strange! The cats flipped out too, and I thought: Hm, what am to do now? This was not exactly what I wanted, but it was perhaps a kind of initial event that was just meant in the way: Now it is up to you to do something.

At this point, and based on these experiences – a long time after having had her personal ‘homecoming’ into a diffuse animistic Neopagan belief system – a shift towards a faith in the

existence of Germanic gods was initiated by causal attribution of the paranormal phenomena as being generated by the power of these gods, and therefore as their evident ‘answer’ to the request made during the Ostara ritual. This evidence grew with further unorthodox operations:

[M]y ex-boyfriend had such a classical magic training as well; he then started with Ouija boards, and then we did such a Ouija board session and had Loki<sup>37</sup> as a guest, and this was an interesting session that simply lead me to admit that there are, in fact, gods that can have influence on our life, and that they exist even in this Germanic or Scandinavian manifestation.

This second stage of the described ID process was characterised by a special form of epiphany within a spiritualist setting. Although this evidence seemed to be very strong to the woman, she still had ideological concerns about those aspects of ‘the Germanic’ which, in the contemporary German public opinion, are often linked to Nazi-ideology:

Then, for a while, I had that thing like: Yes, but does it has to be ‘Germanic’? I don’t want to have anything to do with those stupid Nazis, yes, and at that time I had several disputes in my dreams with Wotan in which he told me that it makes sense, nonetheless.

The woman argued that her discussion in her dreams with the Germanic god Wotan encouraged her not to escape into the more inoffensive faith in Celtic gods (as she initially intended), but to try to revive the ‘better preserved roots of ancient Germanic religion’ from the many rural customs and legends in contemporary Germany. This was her main reason for (and tipped the scales into) becoming an Ásatrú heathen.

It becomes clear that the woman described a process of ID towards an initially refused faith in Norse gods by several stages of experience. In fact, her own beliefs seemed to be *forced* to drift in that direction by her own personal experiences. She therefore changed her denial of the personal relevance of gods for her life into faith by the interpretation of her experiences as evidence for the ‘power’ of these gods. This process was enabled by the Pagan worldview she adopted earlier, as well as by her boyfriend who provided suitable frameworks of meaning. A third statement describing her way to Ásatrú gives an insight into her self-interpretation of her motivation:

The basic-motivation? I come from a very strict Catholic family and .. even from Bavaria. That had the advantage that you find many living customs there in which the Wode<sup>38</sup> as well as Perchta<sup>39</sup> play

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<sup>37</sup> Loki is the Norse God of fire and plays an important role as a kind of ‘trickster’ within Scandinavian mythology (Dumézil). His ‘responsibility’ for that experienced by the interviewee seems evident.

<sup>38</sup> This is a relatively unusual shortened name for the old Norse God Wotan/Odin in German language.

a big role – although as ghosts and no longer as gods – but they are there and people know some things and stories and places where you can meet them. That’s the one side: I was already familiar with it. The other side was that I had a very critical attitude towards Christianity, I mean I couldn’t quite follow it. I was even at a convent school (*laughs*), and there were always those two things, that the Christians denied or rejected the animation of nature and I could not follow them in this regard because I experience nature as being animated, and I have perceived it in this way even since I was a child, and the other thing was [...] this very limited view: It has to be exactly this and that, otherwise you’ll go to hell – and I had always thought: No, I don’t believe this, that’s why I studied ethnology because I thought: that there have to be other forms of living than just this one.

The interesting point in this new synthesis of the two above-mentioned phases of ‘becoming heathen’ lies in the recursive structure in which the whole biographical process is integrated by the self-assumed roots of the woman in the rural Bavarian milieu. In her own understanding, she, in fact, ‘came home’ (as an *Ásatrúar*) to where she (in a more abstract sense) had always been: to an animistic Pagan worldview that relates to old religious traditions of her homeland – from which she felt alienated by the Christian culture.

### Conclusion: ‘Drifting back home – to where we always were?’

The examples in the last section should have made clear that simple generalizations concerning the processes of becoming a magical practitioner and of establishing magical beliefs are misleading and should be avoided due to the immense varieties of individual approaches. The CHE does not constitute a useful analytical category as its definition lacks clarity, there are too many different psychological or sociological processes which can underlie it, and as it took a life of its own as a narrative ‘identity module’: its serial character literally ‘concretes over’ the individual experimental narration, and its auratic experiential character respectively. Thus, one often comes upon subjective ‘explanations’ in the data which finally explain nothing except for the fact that the interviewee knows the narrative and applies it to the particular context. However, we do not want to degrade the *coming home* concept in general. From an emic perspective it will serve as a catchy label which results in identity and coherence, and which may be considered as an adequate description of an emotional process ending with new commitment. One can also take the CHE seriously from an etic perspective, but it must be used cautiously when investigating underlying processes which have to be differentiated from the covering narrative. In this view, a CHE can be detected without finding it directly verbalized in the

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<sup>39</sup> In South-German states today, many customs are focused on the figure of the *Percht*, which is interpreted by Neopagans as an ancient Germanic goddess of death and rebirth.

biographic narration,<sup>40</sup> and can be made productive for research as a process-related dynamic, in the same way as with the ID. Thus, the difference between the more socially formed CHE as a narrative and the more experience-formed CHE as a process-related dynamic has to be kept in mind.

The presented interview material also made clear that the two concepts of the ID and the CHE not must be seen as alternatives, but complementary, describing different processes and dynamics present in becoming a magical practitioner. To get a better understanding, a thorough discrimination of different Neopagan groups and magical orders as well as practicing individuals should be made (cf. Salomonsen 10, and Carpenter 403). A differentiation must also be made between religious self-localization and the establishment of magical beliefs, and, in addition, a cautious approach when dealing with different concepts of rationality is necessary, and approach which abstains from pejorative rational–irrational dichotomization (cf. e.g. Stoller 239-55). Not least, the investigation of individual motivations to become a magical practitioner and of individual approaches to magic can provide prolific insights. For example, not every magician interprets his magical practice as a spiritual path or religion per se. Some of them see it mainly as a technique, albeit linked to religious issues (Mayer *passim*, particularly 139-43). On the whole we warn against simple solutions and over-generalizations. The research in the field of Neopaganisms and of other new religious groups which have strong links to modern Western esotericism requires particular consideration. For example, multiple memberships (Salomonsen 64, endnote 9), individual syncretistic constructions,<sup>41</sup> a rather increased tendency to change the group and/or beliefs, and, thus, a rather decreased commitment have to be taken into account. These points indicate that it is worthwhile investigating not only those who became Pagan, and

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<sup>40</sup> This is particularly relevant for the magicians to whom the CHE is not an obligatory narrative. Quite the contrary: for some magicians, searching for the ‘new’, and for permanent change builds an ideal – in order not to stagnate.

<sup>41</sup> In this regard, we once again want to address Luhrmann’s work concerning the magician’s relation to faith, to religion, and to science. Luhrmann names magical practice “the romantic rationalist’s religion” (*Persuasions* 337). With this she expresses her idea that people who turn towards modern magic are searching for powerful religious experience, but not religion itself. Magic was “a modernist religion: it challenges the validity of religious dogmatism, authoritative symbology, and intellectual analysis, while gaining its inspiration from archaic primitive forms; and its structured ambiguity rests upon a deconstructed notion of belief” (*ibid.* 336). This is supported by Mayer’s study. Regardless of which approach the interviewees belong to, most of them see magic as a means to their search for spirituality and transcendence beyond the fixed boundaries of dogmatic religion and of rationalistic philosophical systems. For many, magic thus constitutes an individualistic approach to the realm of transcendence, unrelated to religion.

remained Pagan, but also those to whom the time of their membership and/or adherence was a transitional stage on their spiritual path.

One of the main aims of our study is to point out the strong influence of *personal experience* on the adaptation of any form of ‘alternative’ worldview. People take the high risk of stigmatisation within a Western civilisation that is deeply pre-structured by rationality and monotheistic religions because they feel *forced* to do so by their own lived experiences. Becoming a Neopagan or magician is not just an act of ‘choosing’ a spiritual way in a post-modernist manner of self-expression. Although one should not underestimate the power of empiricism within so-called magical or Pagan belief systems, no experience is understandable without paying attention to the patterns of knowledge by which it is interpreted. The German language contains the possibility to differentiate between *Erlebnis* (experience in the sense of a pure individual impression – *lived experience*) and *Erfahrung* (social form of experience, based on shared knowledge – *interpreted experience*) (Bauman). The personal adoption of Neopagan as well as magical belief systems is mainly founded on verbally expressed *Erfahrungen*. This means that the narrative structure of processes such as CHE and ID become essential for the communication of personal (non-communicable) *Erlebnisse*. It is the latter, however, which defines the biographical moment at which the patterns of knowledge of the former can ‘click into place’. This might be one reason why people often use mechanical expressions (such as ‘clicking experiences’) to describe the effect of their ‘homecoming experience’.<sup>42</sup> While forms of *Erfahrung* can be easily studied by researching the development of narratives or reconstruction of cognitive concepts, the auratic moment of the ‘experience of evidence’ (as *Erlebnis*) is buried within interview data under the flood of more or less common narratives. But where do Pagans really come *to* when they are ‘coming home’?

We believe that there is strong evidence for the pre-configuration or predetermination of alternative worldviews within the process of building up a psychological/cognitive structure of the person during enculturation. This does not at all imply that people regress towards an infantile worldview while ‘drifting’ towards an alternative form of organizing their world-knowledge: They re-arrange it on the basis of socially shared knowledge (*Erfahrungen*) and, of

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<sup>42</sup> The biographical ‘impression point’ (Stromberg) that initiates the rearranging and reinterpreting of the spiritual path and worldview by a person does not necessarily have to be rooted in an (externally caused) extraordinary experience. More often the process of self-understanding as being on a ‘path’ towards an alternative worldview comes to mind within contemplative situations, as well as in talks to other people on the subject (e.g. during interviews with scholars). The whole structure of ‘making sense’ out of one’s own biography can be understood as a ‘feedback-effect’ of the newly acquired belief system to the personality of the believer (Stenger 188).



course, against the background of their socialisation within our Western societies. Hermann Hesse once wrote “The person who returned home is another person than the one who always stayed at home” (25).<sup>43</sup> In a broader sense this phrase seems to describe the biographical construction of the identity of modern magicians and Neopagans quite well: By opening the self towards non-mainstream forms of knowledge, their cognitive model of constructing interpersonal reality ‘drifted’ away from common (mainstream) forms of interpreting experiences, but even within this process of alienation, different attempts at constructing a ‘new home’ (out of common concepts such as correspondences, causality, faith, ethics) are necessarily made. In some sense most of the adherents of ‘alternative spirituality’ do not really emigrate and leave their well socialized ‘home’ – they just ‘re-arrange the furniture of their flat’ in an uncommon way, but even this can lead to heavy stigmatisation within a rigid society.

Most of the Neopagans in Germany emphasise that the core or essence of their personal worldview was not changed when their belief-system changed. A person who understands himself as a ‘rationalist’ transfers this image, even towards his approach to magic; so he finds ‘hidden physical structures of the world’ within runic symbols, and a woman who understands herself as animist (since the days of childhood) merely enlarges her spectrum of animated beings on becoming an Ásatrúar. While certain magical concepts and esoteric beliefs as well as single religious concepts such as e.g. fate, predestination, belief in animal souls (the above-mentioned ‘furniture of the flat’) are as common and accepted within German society as the imagery of Germanic Gods in comic strips or Wagnerian operas, even a meaningful re-arrangement of these under the umbrella of a Pagan religion often violates the margin of religious tolerance. This may mark a substantial difference between Anglophone countries and German-speaking countries, where the attitude towards New Religion Movements is less tolerant – despite the fact that religious freedom is a constitutionally guaranteed right in Germany.<sup>44</sup>

Our discussion of the meaning of the concepts of ID and CHE for analysis of non-traditional religions and spiritualities respectively shows the necessity of differentiation between the importance of individual beliefs and practices for the formation of an identity as a Neopagan. The higher the social ‘pressure’ is directed towards an inter-individual form of (religious) commitment within a certain non-traditional religion, the more conventionalised narratives (such

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<sup>43</sup> Translation by the authors [„Der Heimgekehrte ist ein anderer als der stets Daheimgebliebene“].

<sup>44</sup> Robbins refers in his introduction chapter to the anthology *New Religion Movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* to the report of Melton which “clearly supports the idea that the situation is more favourable to alternative religions in the U.S. than elsewhere” (13). This anthology provides a survey on the situation for NRMs in different nations. Arweck provides a comparison of the situation in Great Britain and Germany in some perspectives on NRM in her monography *Researching New Religious Movements*.

as the CHE narrative i.e. a kind of ‘social home-coming’) dominate the biographical narration of the process of taking on an alternative worldview. The less important such social connectivity is for creating an identity (as magician, Satanist or Pagan in general), the more individual forms of CHE (understood as a process-related dynamic) or the ID phenomena mark the change of belief. Esoteric groups and non-traditional religions tend to stress the importance of individuality in very different ways. While for most magicians and Satanists individual approaches are essential (and many adherents practice solitarily), a lot of Neopagan religions such as Wicca or Ásatrú are community-orientated;<sup>45</sup> their collectivisation of heterogeneous individual experiences demands conventionalised narratives (as the whole system of religious knowledge is more institutionalised than the ‘flexible worldview’ in individualistic systems). But, as we can see with the presented case examples, all of the elements mentioned can occur in biographical narrations in a strongly interlinked manner; that is to say that, for example, even in biographical reconstructions of ways of adopting the Ásatrú religion where individual, and more pragmatically orientated magical practice is no big issue and much less important than in Wicca, elements of ID based on individual experiences with magical practice can play a crucial role.

Once again we have to return to the differentiation of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* because it gives hints at the relevance of multiple memberships and combining different non-traditional religious forms. As we mentioned at the beginning, a lot of NRM attach great importance to ‘having had lived (spiritual) experiences’. The emphasis on these *Erlebnisse*, together with the importance of (post-)modern individualisation and flexibility towards a worldview bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 19) or ‘Bastelreligion’ (Hitzler 279) under the label of a ‘spiritual society’ (Knoblauch), lead to the search for interpretative models provided by different religious systems. Since there are no perfectly fitting models within one system, a lot of new adherents do not mind using and blurring two or more systems, or to modify a chosen system according to individual requirements – on the personal level by private interpretations of given concepts, on the collective level by separations, differentiations, and hybridisation.<sup>46</sup> For experience-based religious movements,

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<sup>45</sup> In some respects, the community-orientation applies as well to solitary practicing Neopagans like e.g. the hedgewitches (see note 23), as their “ideological matrices” provided by the relevant (emic) literature or via the internet contain references to the importance of community (coven, circle, ancestors etc.; cf. e.g. Starhawk, *Dreaming* 92-134). However, huge individual differences can be observed in this respect.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. the last case example. As the Germanic Ásatrú Paganism was linked to right-wing Nazi-ideology until the 1970s, there have been many endeavours to build new Ásatrú groups with an accentuated distance to those racist groups, and the field differentiated into many varieties covering the whole political spectrum (Gründer, *Germanisches (Neu-)Heidentum*). A typical hybridisation of two different

magical practice can be a kind of ‘via regia’ to experiencing transcendence because of their (assumed) ‘paranormal’ character, which provides the practitioner with the feeling of strong proof, as we have demonstrated with our case examples.

There remain, of course, open questions which are worth investigating. Which kind of people, for example, is subjected to being forced towards heterodox beliefs and alternative world views, particularly world views containing magical beliefs, if there is a general pre-configuration or predetermination? And, in this connection, how important is the impact of personality traits or capacities such as ‘fantasy proneness’ (Wilson and Barber), or absorption,<sup>47</sup> or a particular fascination of the ‘occult’ sides of life? What role do extraordinary experiences during childhood and later on play? And what are crucial processes of socialization in this regard? Even though there have been different attempts to investigate those questions from the perspective of different academic disciplines, there is still a lack of convincing evidence to explain the particular biographical dynamics of ‘drifting away’ from orthodox beliefs, and ‘coming home’ to the new ‘old-fashioned’ spiritual path and magical world view.

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religious systems is *Celtsun Wicca* which refers to European roots of spirituality (*celts*) as well as to North American shamanism (*sun* dance).

<sup>47</sup> See Luhrmann, who discovered the high correlation between the individual capacity of absorption and the occurrence of intense spiritual experiences (Luhrmann, “Art of Hearing”, “On Spirituality”).

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