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Religion in a Time of Crisis: Pagan Experiences of Liminality and Communitas During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Calgary, Alberta

Maddi Tolmie

University of Victoria—mtolmie@uvic.ca

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted social norms and positioned people within a prolonged space of liminality wherein individuals experienced danger, vulnerability, and freedom due to an existence without associated social rules or taboos. A liminal existence, in Victor Turner's definition, means to be between social structure or to exist in a space of anti-structure—the middle stage of his explanation of the process of a religious/social rite of passage (1974). I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic represented an instance of Turner's (1974; 1997) anti-structure and that the resulting sensation of crisis communitas was a form of healing for some religious practitioners and communities. To investigate this hypothesis, I worked with a group of Pagan women in Calgary, Alberta, to inquire about their perceived shifts in the self and their community during the pandemic. This research explores the social experience of the COVID-19 pandemic for religious communities—namely the associated danger within liminality; the stage where practitioners began to feel unsteady in their lack of structure and identity, and the lifting of the veil; where the sensation of communitas brought together the Pagan community to use magic and ritual as a form of healing during mass crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, anti-structure, (neo-)paganism, crisis communitas

associated with a liminal stage of existence — notably the danger between the practitioner and the self, practitioner and community, and practitioner and the changing of their ritual practice. Practitioners were also faced with realizations of deficiencies within the structure of their everyday lives and greater society; an awareness brought forth by their liminal existence within a space of anti-structure.

Theory

Anti-structure and Liminality

Influenced by the Enlightenment and the scientific study of human life, many early anthropologists turned to new theories of human change and diversity. This included structural functionalism, a theory popularized by Emile Durkheim (1960) and Radcliffe-Brown (Kuper and Radcliffe-Brown 1977). This theory conceptualized societies as organisms — a series of social structures working together to create a functioning system of human experience. Within this functionalist view, culture was seen as a by-product of the mechanics of social structure ultimately working to serve a purpose in maintaining social structure as a whole (Joseph 2003). Society was therefore viewed to be the manifestation of these cultural layers of social structure shaped by the social interaction between humans and the creation of symbols and vessels for culturally specific reasons. Structural functionalists posited that social structure within a given society must be based on communal institutional factors and a shared sense of morals which are socially acceptable. This is comparable to understanding themes of anti-structure and *communitas* within Turner (1974)'s works; where social structure occurs, there must also be space for social taboos to exist. While structural functionalism is now a theory of the past, many of the concepts that informed Turner (1974)'s anti-structure and *communitas* continue to influence anthropological thought today.

Within structural functionalism, social structure is a combination of norms and rules which govern interactions between people, such as their social status. These norms are culturally specific and maintained through social, political, and legal sanctions and taboos. Taboos or rules are present as social roles and

The COVID-19 pandemic was a global period of suspended social norms where governments instructed citizens not to socialize with people outside of their 'bubble' and to keep a social distance of six feet away from those not included in their households. People began working from home, socializing online, and attending school on virtual platforms. Masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer became fixtures of daily routines. In addition, there was a period of social change for the world, a period of existence between governmental mandates, vaccines, and a new sense of 'normal.' The world was temporarily bonded by a period of isolation and crisis, evoking Victor Turner (1974)'s concepts of anti-structure, liminality, and *communitas*. Turner's theories on human cultural experience, including rites of passage, ritual, and religion, all comment on groups of people coming together to participate in moments outside of society's structure, ultimately resulting in a sensation described as *communitas* (Turner 1974).

In short, *communitas* is a group experience created when social structure and norms are suspended. *Communitas* can be enacted through religious gatherings, global crises, or natural disasters where social structure is suspended, and individuals' bond over the lack of structure within the shared crisis. Within this experience, individuals often pass through liminal in-between stages of identity wherein they experience danger, vulnerability, and freedom due to their existence without associated social rules or taboos. In this paper, I view the COVID-19 pandemic as crisis *communitas* (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021), a form of anti-structure, which practising religious groups, in this case Pagan practitioners, experienced. Themes present within this work surround the danger

often interact together to either repress or elevate an individual's social standing. If an individual acts in a way that does not align with the taboos enforced by social structure, they are marked as deviant or dangerous. People can move between different social positions throughout their lifetime based on changes in their social status due to factors such as age, occupation, social rank, or income. Each social role has explicit expectations and rules for individuals to enact when transitioning to their new social standing. However, within these transitional spaces, it is possible to see where structure within society may become muddled through the shift in social processes accompanying this change. Turner (1974; 1997) notes that these disjuncture between roles and social expectations show a lack of agency represented on the individual level within this transitional space. This meant there was a period between social transitions where one does not hold any status within any given social structure. To explain what occurs in these in-between spaces, Turner (1974; 1997) studied the puberty rites of the Ndembu in Zambia where he observed a phenomenon described as *anti-structure*.

Anti-structure is described as the in-between spaces within social structure, where individuals enter a liminal space as they progress from one social role to the next. For example, anti-structure can be seen within the stages of a rite of passage as an individual's identity changes. Within Turner (1997)'s explanation of a rite of passage, ritual is contained in a three-stage process whereby the novice enters a space of anti-structure and is stripped of their current social identity to pass through the ritual to enter their new social identity. In this space within ritual or social transitions, they no longer socially exist as their previous identity but are not entirely aligned with their future identity (Turner 1997). When a person exists in a space of anti-structure, they are often regarded as dangerous or in danger as they are not required to follow any form of social rules or structures within greater society. Turner (1997) identifies that spaces of anti-structure are also opportunities for marginalized people to view and critique the inner workings of their society's social structure. Settings where individuals come together to engage in a collective

experience without the presence of their structural identities is where anti-structure is identified.

Additionally, Turner (1974) identifies ritual practice as a central space of anti-structure where communities reflect and challenge the structural paradigms of society. Through ritual, neophytes often separate their everyday existence from the holy, creating a liminal and separate identity between them. Through this separate identity, the individual no longer interacts with the world through their social identity in public spaces. In a social identity, societal structures dictate social rules through which one can interact with society including sex/gender, income, ethnicity, age, and sexuality. Inside a space of holy worship, separated from their structural public identity, the new ritual identity levels the neophyte to the same social status and role as the congregation. This can only occur in a liminal space.

As previously mentioned, many stages of human existence are marked with universal experiences of social change as rites of passage. These rites can accompany ritual transition or the societal transition of an individual from one social role to the next. This transition is marked by three phases: 1) the separation between the individual and general society; 2) the presence of a liminal existence; 3) the reintroduction of the individual into society and their new social status and role (Turner 1997; Kapferer 2019). During the first stage of a rite of passage, the neophyte is symbolically detached from their original placement within their cultural group or context. The second stage marks the neophyte as an ambiguous entity — passing through a period of existence where they are placed on the margins of society and in between social roles. At this stage, Turner (1997) was particularly interested in and expanded the idea of this marginality as *limen*, or liminality, the state of being betwixt and between. The final stage of a rite of passage involves the actualization the neophyte's passage into their new role and status. Once the neophyte has successfully moved through these three stages, they are more stable in their social roles; they are expected to engage with the world through their new structural position

and associated rules/taboo (Turner 1974; 1997).

Liminality accompanies the second stage of a rite of passage where an individual exists within the realm of anti-structure and between two social roles. This liminal existence is what describes an individual associated on the fringe of society as *in danger*. It marks the individual as socially *dangerous* since they are not expected to adhere to their associated social sanctions or taboos. In this stage, Turner (1974, 242) identifies individuals to hold a sense of power due to the freedom to explore the criteria for their existence within society and accompanying sanctions and roles.

Through the passing from structure to structure, rites of passage and instances of anti-structure are also equated to what Turner (1974) calls *communitas*, or the sensation of social togetherness, which appears when a group exists outside of the social structure. In this sense, *communitas* is equated to anti-structure, as it encompasses the sensations attached to the human emotions of belonging to a shared moment outside of social sanctions. Turner (1974) says that *communitas* is not a tangible object. Instead, *communitas* is a sensation resting in the chests of a group observing a Sunday sermon, beating in the hearts of a crowd watching live theatre, and is a moment that humanity flecks to for instances of peace and healing from the pressures of society. *Communitas*, within a ritual event, results from physical interactions between people within a shared ritual process. This means that within Turner's (1997) definition, *communitas* can only be enacted socially when a group is physically in the same space.

According to Turner (1997), instances of *communitas* and liminality are sought out by people due to an innate human need to experience the sensations of belonging. *Communitas* is a fleeting experience that cannot exist within social structure. However, the process of *communitas* moves through many modalities before returning to 'normal' as a social structure. Turner (1997) identifies three primary modalities through which *communitas* moves: 1) existential or spontaneous; 2) normative, and; 3) ideological. Existential *communitas* is representative of the Pagan

experiences within this paper and occurs during counter-cultural movements within anti-structure. This is exemplified by the 'hippie' culture but can also be seen within liminal spaces such as music festivals or raves where individuals do not interact with the group through their regular structural identities (Turner 1997). When applying a Turnerian lens to the modern age, through the framework of existential *communitas*, we can see the creation of a specific form of a social and communal bond in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the pandemic is an example of *crisis communitas*, wherein a shared experience of an apocalyptic phenomenon, a form of anti-structure, bonded a group of people for a short period.

Communitas is created within a specific, socialized, bounded space (Jencson 2001, 48). Crises bond people as crises are examples of anti-structure. To cope with crisis, *communitas* emerges in moments of anti-structure within social breakdown, creating a suspension of hierarchy and social rules with the added phenomena of extraordinary togetherness, emergent social energy, coordination of thoughts and actions, and a shared sense of empowerment (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021; Turner 1997). As the COVID-19 pandemic isolated people under mandates and restrictions which dictated and re-framed day-to-day interactions, we can see a correlation between the ritual setting of *communitas* and the pandemic (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a period of Turnerian anti-structure, through which people were suspended in a prolonged space of liminality. This was a period of anti-structure as people were separated from their previous daily structure and identities were levelled into a uniform human existence of following governmental mandates and instructions to terminate interactions with people outside their immediate homes. Many people lost their jobs and sources of income during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, additionally losing their social-structural identities. In applying a Turnerian lens, this means that there was a lack of social rules and taboos placed on people through the previous social structure enacted by their daily 9-5 existence. People were then suspended in a state of existing between social

mandates and rules, argued to be a state of prolonged liminality. I assert that within this anti-structure, the previous societal taboos or norms could no longer be enacted, thus meaning that society was resting betwixt a new social order — ‘a new normal’ as it became known within popular media.

Wicca & Neo-Paganism: A Brief Description

Applying Turner (1974; 1997)’s concepts of anti-structure and *communitas*, I explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on a small Pagan community in Calgary, Alberta. Today, Neo-Paganism, sometimes shortened to just Paganism, is described as a religious identity in which practitioners recreate rituals of pre-Christian religions and create new rituals to connect with the spirit and cycles of the Earth (Zwissler 2018). Under this overarching descriptor, Wicca is an example of a Pagan religion that anthropologists have described as *New Age*; a religion that has grown in popularity since the 1970s, and which is esoteric and follows a nature based ritual practice (Neo-Paganism 2017).

Wicca draws inspiration from what early modern Christianity labelled as ‘other’ or taboo. Wicca is a duotheism—worshiping both the feminine in the form of the Goddess and the masculine in the form of the God with a higher importance placed on the feminine in connection to Mother Earth as the form of the Goddess (Zwissler 2018). Wicca traces its origins to Gerald B. Gardner, an Englishman who published works on the claim that he had discovered and joined a coven of witches in Hampshire, England, in the mid-19th century (Vance 2015). Gardner’s publications attracted initiates to the religion during the mid-twentieth century, with the growth of the religion within the Western world during the 1970s–1980s credited to word of mouth. Most influenced by this religion were feminists, spiritualists, environmentalists, counter-culture movements, and believers in anti-authoritarianism in the United States (Vance 2015; Zwissler 2018).

There is overlap between New Age and Pagan religions with Wicca representing a specific form of contemporary Paganism (Zwissler 2018; Lunn-Rockcliffe and Nicholson 2018). Paganism is a religious system which

critiques the structural oppressors faced by practitioners, similar to the experiences within anti-structure brought forth by Turner’s (1997) theories. For example, Luran Vance (2015) writes that, through the lens of Wicca affected by second-wave feminism, women were instructed to become ‘witches’—sexually free, independent, and assertive. Wicca was seen as a way to reclaim empowerment and access to the feminine divine. It was tied deeply to progressive politics, especially on topics of environmentalism, feminism, and anti-militarism (Vance 2015). Women’s bodies and bodily processes are not sexualized or rendered impure within Wicca; instead, they are celebrated. Within Wicca and many other Goddess-centered Pagan religions, the feminine is privileged over the masculine due to the incorporation of valued qualities such as nurturement, connectivity, and care all personified within the maternal figure of “Mother Earth” (Vance 2015, 118). Through all these qualities and ideals represented within Wicca, it is no surprise that this religion developed in tandem with the effects of second-wave feminism, progressive politics, and environmentalism of the 20th century.

Methods

Within this study, I interviewed five practitioners of Paganism who borrow ritual practices specifically from Wiccan and other new religious doctrine. All the practitioners articulate their religious identity as fluid, taking part in rituals and practices from many different cultural and religious backgrounds. While they all do not identify with the term *witch*, all the practitioners engage in many Earth-based, Goddess-centered practices from both Paganism and Wicca.

To begin my project, I contacted a local occult bookshop in Calgary and asked for consent to use their location to source participants. After gaining consent from the shop’s manager and owner, I was put into contact with an employee, Angel, who became my primary community liaison for this project. Through Angel, I connected with three of her practicing Pagan colleagues, and I was contacted by a fourth practitioner from posters hung within the shop. From there, I hosted a

casual meet and greet with the practitioners in the back room of the Bookstore. During this meet and greet, I introduced the practitioners to who I was; my intentions in talking to them; the goals and topics covered within the project; and the theories of Victor Turner (1974; 1997).

Based on this conversation, I created my list of interview questions for the recorded interviews. These questions included how they articulated their religious identity; how their craft changed during the pandemic; how they felt the Pagan community changed during the pandemic; and how they felt the use of the internet and restrictions affected their practice. After I completed the recorded interviews, I listened to the audio multiple times, taking notes and partial transcriptions. My decision to use a combination of group and personal interviews was intended to create a conversation on the topics of Turner's (1974; 1997) theories in relation to personal experiences. To explain these theories and to collaborate with the group, I felt it best to begin my study with a group interview to discuss shared experiences. From this shared conversation I was able to make meetings between each practitioner and myself, to dive into the personal experiences of the pandemic, aided by the background knowledge of our first group session.

Meet the Practitioners

Within this project, it is important to note that all five practitioners interviewed are connected to the Bookshop as either a customer or as staff and that all regard the shop as a community haven. All participants identify as women between the ages of 23–40. Four are white, and one is of mixed race. The topic of gender did not come up in conversation; however, all participants identified with the pronouns she/her. Three women worked steadily during the pandemic while two did not hold steady jobs during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns.

In the winter of 2021, after contacting the occult Bookshop within Calgary, I connected with Angel, a 28-year-old self-described “little hippie anthropologist” and spiritual practitioner. We met for coffee at the end of the winter semester to discuss how the pandemic affected the Pagan community. An alumna of

the same anthropology program as myself, Angel was familiar with anthropological theory. Our conversation became centred on how to understand best the social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic using anthropological ideas. Angel is a highly involved practitioner within her community who takes on the role of spiritual guide and healer for those who enter the Bookshop. Always open to a conversation and eager to give advice, Angel was the perfect choice to act as the community contact for this project, to connect me with other Pagan practitioners within Calgary.

Luna, a 35-year-old Pagan, works as what can be described as a “jack-of-all-trades” around the shop. Having been at the store since it opened in August of 2018, Luna has been working closely with the owner to create a welcoming space stocked with tools, books, and gifts for the beginning and advanced occult practitioner. Alice, a 36-year-old Pagan and recent immigrant to Canada from Ireland, lends a unique international perspective to this project. Alice works alongside Angel and Luna at the Bookshop, a welcome change from her previous job running an occult shop in Ireland during the pandemic. Through her experience in Ireland of managing staff and a back space within the shop for therapists and healers of many kinds to access, Alice managed to find creative ways to help people access her shop in relation to government restrictions and found pride in providing tools to people to aid in their spiritual healing.

Sappho, an incredibly accomplished 40-year-old mother and teacher, has numerous skills, including being a doula, Reiki worker, sound healer, and Witch. Sappho finds peace within her work of helping people heal through Earth-based practices, away from the influence of the medical system. Coming from a place of personal trauma from the Western medical system, she reflects on her personal health choices to remain unvaccinated and talks about a period of community turmoil and fear. Sappho is a regular at the Bookshop and contracts her healing services to those who may call upon her for help. Ray is a mixed-race 23-year-old Pagan practitioner who does not enjoy limiting her religious identity to labels. Currently working as a receptionist and aspiring to

become a forensic medical examine, Ray spent her pandemic studying at a university in Ontario before moving back to her home province of Alberta. Being the youngest practitioner within this study, Ray often turned to social media such as Reddit, TikTok, and Instagram to find a sense of community within isolation.

The Gathering

On a particularly snowy evening in February of 2023, I met with Angel, Luna, and Alice in person to discuss my project in detail. Aided by the slow burning of a stick of incense, a conversation developed around topics of isolation, fear, and confrontation, highlighting tales of resiliency and empathy from the greater Pagan community. According to the group, in the early months of 2020, there was an intense apprehension within the community regarding a negative shift in energy before the pandemic. Something intense was on the horizon, and the community braced for uncertainty. In March of 2020, apprehension transformed into the terrible reality of a viral global pandemic. This airborne infection caused the death of millions globally and spurred a new fear surrounding the dangers of everyday human interaction (Duffin 2022). Governments created mandates and regulations, reducing city streets to a dystopian landscape. Regulations included capacity maximums on group gatherings that severely impacted religious groups in many ways.

The two themes I identified from my conversations within this study included danger and vulnerability during a liminal period, and healing through *communitas*. The initial lockdowns of the pandemic caused an instance of anti-structure for the world, shutting down the institutions, norms, and routines through which people felt safe and understood their social-structural identities. This 'new normal' within anti-structure was therefore accompanied by a heightened sense of danger and vulnerability. Due to the lack of social-structural identities and rules that people were expected to adhere to, this danger was stressful yet liberating as people had no social rules or norms to follow. Within this chaos, many people lost their primary income sources and routines. In this context of upheaval, people's

normalized social identities constructed through social structure became unsettled. This opened a liminal space of unknown opportunity and fear. This unsettling was not uniform or homogenous for society during the pandemic; but rather, different communities experienced these emotions affected by many factors such as race, class, gender etc. My research is looking at a community of Pagan women, who experienced the pandemic in relation to their personal identifiers and experiences.

Within the context of my research, this upheaval manifested itself into a movement within the Pagan community towards self-reflection and shadow work. Additionally, there was a theme of community growth towards empathy and a need to heal others mentioned throughout the pandemic. This caused a change from magical practices centred around the self, to practices devoted to community healing and protection. Many people clung to their religious practices, often holding onto physical tangible divination tools to remain grounded during crisis. Within this, *communitas* was an act of group healing for practitioners throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Danger and Liminality

Liminal bodies are often associated with being both a danger and in danger as they drift between identities. Since COVID-19 is a form of anti-structure, as previously mentioned, all practitioners presented an overarching theme regarding this period in association with danger and fear. In the initial stages of lockdown, the world was told to disregard how social structures had affected their daily lives. New systems were rushed into place to protect public health, changing how people interacted. No longer able to return to work or the safety of the associated routine, people were drifting in a liminal existence, contemplating their place within society and how they value their time. This liminal existence was noted by every participant in this study, with the most common remark regarding the loss of work and the associated identity. In reflection on this phenomenon, Alice said,

I found many people found who they were, because they weren't doing their 9-5 job, they were actually allowed to connect to themselves... I am happy that

people realized their value as a human being, that were not just supposed to do a 9-5 and then eat and drink and go to bed... They realized there's more to life than just that.

As liminal bodies are considered socially dangerous due to their lack of associated social norms, it is easy to notice fear in the personal reflections from this period of social crisis. This liminal existence within the pandemic created tension between the practitioner and the self, and between the practitioner and their community. The social norms in which people interacted within everyday life were suspended, and the fear of contracting or passing on a deadly virus began to dominate the community's thoughts. Danger was associated with the lack of social structure, accompanied by a liminal existence and the immediate threat of harm from the coronavirus. This fear is echoed in Luna's thoughts on the initial beginnings of the pandemic,

I would say for the first while, it was really high stress. And I think even people were coming into the store stressed already because we're now existing in a way that we never have before, where there's rules and regulations, and you have to wear mask and sanitize your hands.

In addition to being regarded as dangerous, liminal bodies within Turner's (1974; 1997) theories are also seen to have an air of freedom. This freedom manifests within the lack of social rules associated with this in-between stage of identity, meaning that they can interact with the world without the labels of their social structural oppressors. Within this new sense of freedom, people began to re-evaluate how they were existing and contemplated if they were truly happy with how they were spending their time and energy. When asked about her initial reflections on personal change within the pandemic lockdowns, Angel said,

Freedom was a big one for me. I think freedom after, like, a period of aimlessness. And kind of being like 'okay... What do I do?' Definitely entering that liminal space and being like, I don't

have what I used to have, I'm not doing what I used to do, so I guess I have to figure out how I'm definitely entering that liminal space and being like, I don't have what I used to have, I'm not doing what I used to do, so I guess I have to figure out how to spend my time now.

This dangerous liminal period also revealed intense instances of personal change for all practitioners within this study. This is known within Turner's (1974; 1997) theory of liminality to be the associated stage where liminal bodies can see the flaws within their society's structure. Within the context of this study, it is noted that this liminal space can also bring to light the flaws within the structure of one's personal life or relationships. Many of the women said that personal relationships changed or ended for them during the pandemic. When asked about personal changes during the pandemic, Alice tilted her head back and reflected on the beginnings of running an occult shop during lockdown,

I ran that place on my own for a few months, which was strange. Went through a lot of personal stuff myself, breakups, moving house.

With this realization of change from the community, there was also a noted movement towards the practice of shadow work and personal development within the practitioner's spiritual practice. Shadow work is considered one of the most personal and darkest parts of a practitioner's journey. In shadow work, one must turn inwards to face their darkness, to heal themselves before they can work to heal others or move forward with their practice. This process involves many ritual acts from mundane journaling and self-reflection to the ritual calling of spirit guides to help give clarity and guidance. Reflecting on the changes to the greater Pagan community, Angel said,

The pandemic happened and it was like a coming-inward and then facing what is inside. And now that that has happened, I feel like there was definitely a lot of shadow work in the second half of the pandemic.

The ritual process of shadow work came through as a result of the temporary presence of a liminal existence. This movement was used to confront the realizations of the practitioners of where the structure of their everyday life was ineffective. This period of isolation within lockdowns united the community under a new space to explore their identities outside of their structural 9-5 status and taboos.

Continuing this reflection, Angel noted a personal realization that came from this period of shadow work for her,

...The shadow work kind of- it's like... This is the path you're supposed to be on. And I was like 'oh, I haven't been thinking about that,' and now here I am! I am so pregnant! My shadow work involved a lot of realizations on, yeah, I want to have a family, and children. I had a relationship end during the pandemic, and another one start and- and I would say that this was all interwoven with the magical work that I was doing at the time.

When asked about changes within her practice during lockdown, Alice noted a change between who she was at the beginning of the pandemic and who she is now. Initially, she regarded her practice to be more aligned with the Irish store's atmosphere of Buddhist ideals and spiritual teachings. Now, working at the Bookshop in Calgary, she has noticed a change towards a practice that draws more so on the occult since restrictions were lifted. This represents a change in identities within Turner's (1974; 1997) concept of a liminal existence, between the stages of a rite of passage from one identity to the next. Alice continues,

I feel my Buddhist love and light that I used to have in the Irish store is definitely not who I am anymore. So, I completely changed from love and light to the completely underground side of this work, which I know is more suited to me, which is a nice thing that happened for me.

This transition for Alice highlights the liminal existence that revealed to the practitioners where they needed to create personal change.

For this community, the pandemic was an extended period of a liminal existence where time seemingly slowed, and space opened for people to reflect on their identities and what they needed to change to become their highest selves. This was not only reflected within ritual practice but also in the changing of mindsets and understandings of the world for the practitioners. When reflecting on the notion of change within her personal practice, Luna had a similar awareness when asked about her thoughts,

I think that was probably the biggest change for me... It wasn't so much in like ritual and things like that, and it was more... I don't want to move through the world like I'm everything, like I'm the best and everything should aspire to be as good as I am... nothing else matters because its consciousness isn't on the same level as mine or something like that. And instead, it was everything matters in some small way, everything serves its purpose, and I should be respectful of that. I'm not trying to leave this place worse than when I found it.

When discussing the change between herself and her relationships, Sappho found it increasingly difficult to find space within the Pagan/spiritual community where her health choices were as respected as her religious choices. Being shunned from her spiritual community due to her vaccination status, Sappho found a new sense of community with people whose health choices aligned with hers. Reflecting on these friendships, Sappho remarks,

We aligned there, just on that one topic, but nothing else... What happened when everything opened up, we started to see each other in a different light. When everything opened up it was like 'these are not my people.'

When I questioned her further regarding this realization, I asked her if she saw her religion as separate from her personal opinions. Sappho replied,

I do. I mean, I think religion or spiritual practice can inform your opinions I

suppose. But I find that spirituality collides with values. I think people will join a church because you assume that these people will have the same values. You'll probably sit next to each other in the pews thinking they all have the same values.

It is hard to separate religion from politics and increasingly difficult to separate the political movement against vaccination from Christian protestors. In Sappho's case, her decision to remain unvaccinated was separate from her religious values despite restrictions that were consequently placed on her daily life. In this period of liminal change, it is apparent that the shift between health values versus religion briefly aligned her with a different community, separate from her religious values. In this experience, Sappho found herself separated from her religious community and aligned with what can be described as a community of sense.

A community of sense is formed based on the sensation of belonging and the fulfillment of needs from other people and does not take into account the social-structural formation of the group; meaning the particular histories between groups, social status, or economic conditions are not considered when forming a community of sense (Parmigiani 2021). In the example of the COVID-19 pandemic, New Age religions associated with naturopathic Earth-based lifestyles found themselves aligned with alt-right Christian protestors arguing against vaccinations. For some, these two groups are not thought of to have shared commonalities or values, as reflected by Sappho and her relationship with her blood family and Christian in-laws. However, during the pandemic, many people from different social groups found these communities of sense where they were able to connect over the shared value of remaining unvaccinated. Sappho remarked that she felt distanced from her spiritual community due to her health values and choice to remain unvaccinated. Specifically, she mentioned hurtful comments expressed by members of the Pagan community on social media when she spoke about her health values during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this experience, Sappho, scorned by her religious community,

temporarily found a new sense of belonging in a group whose health choices aligned with her own. This new community of sense offered her temporary reprise; however, once the restrictions lifted, she quickly realized that the community of sense she gravitated towards did not align with her spiritual values. This thrust her into a new space of anti-structure as she began to rebuild and connect with her spiritual community after the lockdowns and restrictions were lifted.

The Lifting of the Veil: *Communitas* and Healing

Crisis *communitas* is realized when a large group of people share in the experience of anti-structure, often due to some natural disaster. This disaster within the natural world has detrimental effects on our social world, often suspending social norms and structure. This is represented by the recurring theme I noticed during interviews around the "lifting of the veil," as mentioned by Luna and the initial group meeting. The phrase "lifting of the veil" is steeped in religious metaphor and is known as an imaginary veil floating between the heavens and the Earth within religious iconography. This metaphor was brought up repeatedly in reference to the noticed changes in identity and community. Reflecting on this phrase and experience, Luna says,

I think that's what that was, the biggest change with COVID for me anyways, and for a lot of people. I think what I saw was a lot of stuff was revealed and a lot of stuff continues to be revealed with every year that passes since this happened. It was realizing...that the world as it functions is not how it's supposed to be. Like this is not how it's supposed to actually work but this is where we are, and I think we're finally at a point where we're seeing things that are broken for the first time.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, with ample free time and the absence of watchful eyes to enforce social norms, Pagan practitioners began to turn inwards to make changes within their lives through shadow work, before turning outwards to help send healing to the larger community. All the practitioners interviewed

showed a general recognition of a movement towards empathy for the larger community after the first initial wave of lockdowns. Angel remarks that this is an integral part of shadow work, that, once healing has been completed for the self, there is a call to heal others and the greater world,

I also feel like, after the shadow work, once people find their place that they need to go, they start not only healing themselves but also others. There's a call to heal others and even the planet collectively.

During pandemic lockdowns, in response to government-mandated social distancing, a change was noticed on online forums and platforms such as Reddit and Instagram towards connecting with other practitioners for personal healing and health. Practitioners began to call out virtually for prayers and well wishes for themselves and their family members and to express the need to pray communally for global healing. This was described by Ray when asked about changes within the greater spiritual community during the pandemic restrictions,

...A lot more healing, a lot more protection charms were going about almost begging for good vibes, you know, asking to pray for one another basically.

In both instances recounted by Angel and Ray, there was a general pull from the community to understand group pain, and an additional need to heal together in the collective sensation of *communitas*. Luna regards this pull as a move towards empathy within her practice as well,

In the beginning, that's kind of where my head was at. Like, okay well, I can, like, use this to get things that I want, but thankfully that quickly changed to realizing that witchcraft was not about getting what I wanted. At least not my practice, it was about what I can do for others, what I can do to be a better person for those around me, how can I be better, how can I serve the world better.

Communitas is forged in moments of anti-structure and is created from the collective emotion arising from ritual, rite, or crisis. Religion, in this case, can be seen as a form of *communitas*, relying on group values, empathy, and ritual sensation to create a moment of calm in a storm of uncertainty. *Communitas* offers a healing space, a break, outside of the pressures from social structural identities.

In a similar context, religion and religious communities can be a space for healing. When put into practice during a global pandemic, it is evident that the communal cries for protection and grounding bonded the Pagan community over the need for healing. In alignment with this understanding, Alice occasionally ran her shop in Ireland against the government's social distancing mandates. When reflecting on the changes noticed within her job due to the restrictions, Alice revealed,

...For the government to tell me that I couldn't give someone their daily need? I was like 'good luck to ya,' I can't do this to people. So, if they really need their box of incense, or they really need or their sage to do their cleanse because they're in their house all day long with this anxiety going on amongst people, or they're unhappy... yes please, I says, message me! Here is the PayPal, pay for the items and come to the door!

Religion was also a personal tool used by many practitioners in the management of their mental health. Practitioners often used physical tools of divination as a way to keep themselves grounded and as a magical act to gain positive insight into their future outside of their liminal existence. Sappho reflected that within her practice, she felt that she was able to stay mentally stable during the pandemic while aided by tools of divination,

I think Tarot was the one thing that got me through COVID I would say. Because the tool itself is physical, I can touch it. Energy work I can't touch it. I can feel it, I can experience it, but the cards anchored me here. Because I could touch them, I could shuffle them.

Laughing, Sappho remarked that she believes she paid the Bookshop's rent due to the many Tarot and oracle decks she purchased during the initial lockdown. Paganism, in the context of COVID-19, was used as an escape from the pain and chaos echoed across the globe. The ritual practices reflected by the five practitioners within this study offered space for personal emotional development, and to engage with the healing and comforting sensation of group *communitas* and understanding in a time of crisis.

When referring to the liminal period of realization around the reality of society's structure, the topic of the social justice movements that arose during the pandemic came up in many of the recorded interviews. For example, my participants raised social movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement as an example of communal realizations of injustices. These uprisings were an effort to change the future structure of society before the inevitable return to social rules and norms after a period of a liminal existence. Reflecting on this change and its effect on the Pagan community, Angel says,

The bigger things that were happening in the world, all the other stuff that came out during the pandemic, that was happening in people's individual lives as well... Almost like an 'we're not going to stand for this anymore' type of thing? Now that people have done that everybody is getting right into their power. I'm seeing a lot of people coming in and doing just hefty spells. Now they say that they feel more confident, that they have found their place and their path.

Thoughtfully, Alice reflected on a similar theme she noticed within the larger social world stating,

I find it's just weird, like, looking at it astrologically around the planet, how much stuff has erupted since the pandemic because we were told to be quiet and to go into our houses. People have decided 'actually, hold on a minute... We don't want to do this

anymore.' So, people have started to stand up for themselves more.

Within Victor Turner's (1974; 1997) theories, *Communitas* is a physical sensation that arises from group experiences. Furthermore, the physical communion and bonding of humans is integral to the creation and experience of *communitas*. Within this study, it has become apparent that this definition of *communitas* must be re-examined for the digital age.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, physical group meetings were banned, and fear developed around being within six feet of a person outside of your social bubble. In the previous examples, crisis *communitas* speaks to the group emotions expressed virtually and physically because of forced isolation during a global pandemic. To cope with this emotional crisis, the community turned to connection through the joining of online groups, seeking and calling for community healing, and through the shared emotions of stepping into personal power. Within the testimonies given by these five women, we hear examples of shared community experiences during isolation. The community came together in many instances to support and share in religion, towards the goal of personal and greater community healing — the result of crisis *communitas*. While the community could not physically gather to support one another, the sensation of community support, of togetherness within religion, was felt between all five women.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual realm did not replace or equate to the experiences of *communitas* prior to lockdowns. Rather, virtual worship and interaction through an online community became a liminal space *within* liminality. The virtual experience of religion and community did not equate to the in-person experience, but acted as a metaphorical Band-Aid until restrictions were lifted and people were able to interact without fear. The importance of the in-person sensations of *communitas* were more organic, less sanctioned, and preferred, without interactions through a computer screen. This research demonstrated that during this time, virtual platforms held space for *parts* of the experience of *communitas* through religion until community could once again return to in-

person contact. Had the virtual space been as meaningful as the physical interactions of community, then perhaps the community may not have or felt the need to return to in person worship. The COVID-19 pandemic challenges Anthropologists' understanding of social theory, especially in the rapidly developing digital age. In this instance, it is the forced isolation and shared experience of the COVID-19 pandemic that bonded the Pagan community and forced practitioners into a space of liminality, where religion was used as medicine to heal.

Conclusion

Victor Turner's (1974; 1997) theories of anti-structure, *communitas* and liminality are representative of the Pagan religious experience of crisis *communitas* during the COVID-19 pandemic. Liminal existences allow people to experience freedom away from their social structural identities but also harbours innate emotions of fear and vulnerability. This liminal period led to a turning point for the practitioners in re-evaluating how they spent their time and energy. All practitioners that I interviewed felt that they had noticed changes in their relationships, religious practices, and understanding of the world. This was a confrontational part of the pandemic which showed these liminal individuals where contention hid within their everyday lives and society. This led to intensive shadow work followed by the group instance of *communitas* and empathy for other Pagans within their community. Many people began supporting each other through this period of communal healing, sometimes going against social distancing mandates and regulations. Many people also used their religious rituals and divination tools as medicine to stay grounded and sane during such an intense period of crisis. Through instances of crisis comes a sensation of community, and through community comes empathy and belonging.

The stories from the Pagan practitioners within this study offer an understanding of human coping through crisis. In this context, religion was used as medicine and as an act of self-care and healing for all five of these women. Turner (1974; 1997) argues that *communitas* is a powerful emotion that leaves humans searching for the feeling until they can

find their fix again. This 'fix' exists within the community, within the gathering of groups undergoing a shared experience adapting and reacting to social change. Coming from the understanding of the emotion of *communitas* being created from these spaces of anti-structure, I argue that it is an innate human need to chase after the feeling of support and understanding from their social peers as they experience a form of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pagan practitioners worked to heal their inner selves before feeling drawn to heal their community. Therefore, the combination of religion, support, and community-built resilience within these women and helped them survive one of the greatest viral crises of their generation.

In such a turbulent emotional time in human history, the theories of Victor Turner (1974; 1997), when applied to religious groups operating under crisis, represent the innate human need to return to belonging within a greater community and social structure. While the initial COVID-19 lockdowns harboured emotions of deep fear and panic in reaction to the reality of a deadly airborne virus, developing instances of *communitas* provided a safe space for healing. This healing is represented within the accounts of these five practicing Pagans from Alberta. The stories these women share represent a tale of resilience and kindness within communities during an incredibly dark time of human history, a testament to the power of community and emotions of belonging during crisis.

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