CREATING MEANINGS AND SUPPORTIVE NETWORKS ON THE SPIRITUAL INTERNET FORUM "THE NEST OF ANGELS"

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ABSTRACT

Based on the ethnographic study of Estonian spiritual Internet forum The Nest of Angels, the article observes the process of sharing virtual social support and creating-confirming spiritual meanings. The forum, explicitly opposing the consumeristic side of new spirituality, has become popular and demonstrates the nature and various roles of contemporary spiritual angels. The study identifies two main modes in which the Nest and the presence of angels might be useful for users. Firstly, emotional support is shared, either by fellow users directly or by confirmations that angels will definitely help. Secondly, the Nest allows people to acquire knowledge both on spiritual and practical issues. As the Nest is dialogical, users can pose questions and find confirmations for their otherwise deviant experiences. Discussions in the Nest encourage everybody to interpret some situations and objects (like feathers) as signs from angels. This interpreting process might change people's perceptions of the world by adding a layer of positive emotions. The study demonstrates how the angelic presence (or at least endeavour towards the presence) helps to establish and keep the tonality of benevolence which functions as the cornerstone of this virtual space. The Nest supports a specific epistemological stance manifested in the angelic, traditional 'feminine' values of empathy, softness, and caring. Angels and the idea of angelic presence is the main factor helping to keep the 'high-vibrational' and benevolent atmosphere of the forum and empowering the users inside the traditional understanding of 'feminine softness'.

KEYWORDS: Angels • new spirituality • Internet •online ethnography

Estonia can be seen as one of the most secular countries in the world. With only 6 per cent of people attending church at least once a month (Jõks 2012: 301) it is not surprising that several comparative surveys about the importance of religion show the Estonian results to be the lowest in Europe or even in the world.[1] Furthermore, as Estonian national discourse holds a myth of 'free pagans' before Christianisation, Christianity has often been referred to as foreign and enforced (Altnurme 2005). In the context of overall indifference or even hostility towards the church, angels can be seen both out-

dated as well as the symbols of oppression. Therefore, the following evaluation by an Estonian theologian, Prof. Anne Kull, may have sounded plausible: "There is no place for angels in our modern world-views. If at all, we see them as blubber-cheeked putos among other Christmas decorations" (2004: 112).[2] At least several years ago in Estonia, the time for angels to be meaningful and to play an important role for a significant number of people seemed to be over.

However, in a nationwide poll in 2011, 48.2 per cent of Estonians agreed that "there are angels who help and support us", with only 37.1 per cent disagreeing (Jõks 2012: 296).[3] In an allegedly non-religious country like Estonia this result is surprisingly high, considering that the number of respondents who agreed that there is a God was almost 20 per cent lower (ibid.). This discrepancy can be seen as a sign that a new era for angels has begun. Fuelled by pop culture, new spirituality has revitalised angels in new contexts and roles. In the US, we can see the rise of the importance of angels from 1990s (Gardella 2007). The increasing popularity and the intriguing symbiosis between the ideas of new spirituality and traditional religious agents like angels has brought the topic into the focus of academic interest, as seen in numerous recent studies on angels and angel-practices (Gardella 2007; Draper, Baker 2011; Gilhus 2012; Utriainen, forthcoming).

Angels are adopted in different forms and roles in contemporary lived religion. The patterns of private religiosity in Estonia are based mainly on the ideas of new spirituality with only some Christian elements (Altnurme 2012). Angels are one of the most salient symbols bridging Christianity and new spirituality. Angels and angel practices demonstrate both the convergence and conflict between different religious discourses in everyday lived religions (for example, see White 2005). The 'official' religious institutions like the Lutheran church lack the capability to guide contemporary religious-spiritual beliefs and practices; new spirituality as an "open source religion" (Cowan 2005: 30) offers people better opportunities to develop their own understanding of religious-spiritual matters that can be seen as vernacular or folk religion.[4]

Spiritual angels are emptier symbols in Estonia than in the West: angels have not been very prominent in the Lutheran church (Paul 2008) and are also less represented in Estonian folk-tradition compared to some other mythological beings (see Valk 2007). Therefore, the discussions about angels in spiritual seminars or virtual spaces like popular Internet forum The Nest of Angels are significant. These places can be seen as religious-spiritual incubators where people can conceptualise and create the meaningfulness of angels (and other concepts) drawing on the teachings of spiritual books and (international) gurus.

This article observes such a virtual space – an Estonian Internet forum the Nest of Angels – where people actively discuss both spiritual and mundane issues. Based on ethnographic study of the forum, the article explores why and how angels become meaningful and significant for some Estonians. In analysing the remarkably benevolent atmosphere of the forum, the study demonstrates how the angelic presence (or at least the endeavour towards the presence) supports the functioning of the forum and helps to keep such a virtual space.

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The Site of Research

The Nest of Angels (the Forum of Enlightenment) – Inglipesa (Valgustumise foorum) in Estonian – was established in November 2009. Today,[5] there are more than 1,300 registered members and 34,000 posts on 2,450 topics. It has been visited more than 4.3 million times (50 users and 37 posts per day as an average). The founder and the main administrator of the forum – Kaledon (here and henceforth, all the names I refer to are people's registered usernames in the Nest) – says that his mission was to create a "High-Vibrational" place to allow people to be who they really are. One central principle is to enable people to get self-help, to purify themselves without expensive therapies. Therefore, the Nest distances itself from the consumeristic side of the spiritual milieu, described as the "spiritual service industry" (Bowman 1999: 188); or at least, while still following the same principles, the creators of the forum try to offer an opportunity for free exchange outside the consumer-spiritual therapist role model.

Although there are some other Estonian-language spiritual Internet forums, Kaledon explains that "those places I found did not give me 'a heroic feeling of being a bearer of light' [*kangelaslikku valguskandja tunnet*]".[6] At least retrospectively, it was his intention to establish a web site to celebrate the good side in humans and to empower its users. Kaledon uses sublime language to describe the forum's founding process:

> I felt that I have found my right way and myself, who I am, what I do, who I am meant to be. It is difficult to explain. […] Suddenly, I felt the present, the future and the past at the same time; it was like a wide field around me. And then, all three became one – the field of my aura.

This description belongs to the discourse of new spirituality. The Nest can be seen as Kaledon's self-realisation project.

When analysing an online phenomenon, the background of a wider usage of the Internet is relevant. According to Eurostat (Seybert 2011) survey results, 20 per cent of Estonians have never used the Internet; almost all the other 80 per cent are frequent users. Around 60 per cent of people aged 16–74 use the Internet daily and more than 10 per cent at least once a week. Previous studies conclude that the person's age is the main criterion for assessing the approachability of the Internet (Runnel 2008): although people's socio-economic status influences usage patterns (such as computers and broadband connections available at home), it is not so crucial when it comes to access itself.

The Internet has become an important religious-spiritual channel which has also changed people's expectations towards the church: religious institutions are expected to use contemporary online communication channels to establish a dialogue. Churches have a poor ability to create web pages that would meet people's expectations of dialogical communication; however, it is important because there are millions of people searching for God on the Internet (Waters, Tindall 2010). Holistic spirituality does not have problems of authority and control characteristic to churches or sects and takes the Internet as its natural habitat for virtual sharing, connecting and creating (Noomen, Aupers, Houtman 2011). Several studies conclude that modern people seek information

and support online (Burrows et al. 2000), so it is not surprising that the online discussion forum dedicated to angels has become popular in Estonia.

Online Ethnography?

Interactions that take place online have intrigued scholars since the Internet as a virtual space appeared. However, there is still a wide variety of views, ranging from enthusiasm to scepticism when considering virtual space as a legitimate (and necessary) realm for ethnographic fieldwork (Beaulieu 2004). As the possibilities offered by the online world are methodologically intriguing, there are several approaches and even separate terms to name (anthropological) research on the Internet: online ethnography (for example, Markham 2005), Internet ethnography, or virtual ethnography (Hine 2000); netnography (Kozinets 2010); or cyberanthropology (Budka, Kremser 2004). The discussion about methodological aspects of Internet ethnography is not exhaustively addressed in this article as it needs more elaborate attention.

However, the analysis of online communication can be rewarding: the Internet and especially discussion forums like the Nest of Angels allow the researcher to observe people's conversations, the meaning-making in its original form without any extra translation or recollection. Of course, online interactions occupy only a limited share of people's lives as participation in the Internet cannot be total. Roles and identities taken are probably even more volatile (see Suler 2007) than in people's real lives. It is methodologically problematic to locate the place of the online world in people's offline world (of course, in some studies it might not be even necessary). The sense of community and its boundaries is difficult to defy. However, the understanding of perceived communities that do not require direct contact has been accepted much before the appearance of Internet communities (most notably in Benedict Anderson's work on imagined communities of nations). As Wilson and Peterson (2002) suggest, there is no need to distinguish real and virtual communities in anthropological analysis. An analysis of Internet materials and communications brings anthropology closer to linguistics: the language is becoming more important and furthermore, specific communicative practices are emerging (ibid.). The Nest of Angels can be also seen as a speech community with its own rules and standards.

Another crucial aspect on which scholarly consensus has yet to be reached is online research ethics. On the one hand, the text is publicly available. On the other, people have not given their permission for the anthropologist to systematically examine their published material. When I started my research and collected the majority of the online material, all the texts in the Nest were open to everybody. However, to motivate people to register as users and to make the page unavailable for curious by-passers, the main site is now available only for registered users. Registering is, however, not a complicated process; even the real name or other personal information is not required. Users are not unveiling their identity and people refer to each other using their avatars. I have talked to several people, including the main moderator. They have been open for collaboration. My username in the Nest is 'researcher' which should give a hint of my true identity; in conversations I have been open about my aims and my intentions.

The study identifies two main modes in which the Nest supports its users. Firstly, emotional support is shared, either by fellow users directly or by confirmations that angels will definitely help. Secondly, the Nest allows people to acquire knowledge both on spiritual and practical issues. As the Nest is dialogical, users can pose questions, and find confirmations for their otherwise deviant experiences. Special attention must be paid to the tonality of benevolence which functions as the cornerstone of this Internet forum. The analysis points out the specific epistemological stance the Nest supports that is manifested in the angelic, traditional 'feminine' values of empathy, softness, and caring.

Virtual Community Care

One of the most eminent aspects of the Nest is the supportive relationship between users. The problems revealed in the Nest in a very open and trustful manner demonstrate deep emotional, social and financial insecurity and deprivation. The discovery of the Nest is giving new hope. For example, Südameke [diminutive of the word 'heart' in Estonian][7] writes in the "Let's say hello" section of the forum:

> Somehow I managed to arrive here, through tears and with my heart and soul broken … I hope that I came to the right place. I need to pull myself together and to restore my vitality – to direct the thoughts towards the right direction again.

This post gets several answers from different users who all encourage the newcomer by sharing similar experiences and expressing their gratitude that she found her way to the Nest: "So many of us have come here broken. There is no coincidence; it means that it was the right time to arrive here." Südameke rejoices after comments like this: "I am so full of happiness… I found so much sincere goodness here☺."

The idea of sharing good emotions despite physical distance is seen most clearly in the topic "hugging" where users virtually hug and caress each other, using both words and, mainly, special emoticons. It is visually impressive – pages after pages of similar moving figures, hearts, pictures of angels, etc., which together look like a children's playground. However, the emotions are deep and heartfelt: for example, people describe how they cry while reading the comments and seeing this "pure goodness". The emotional support and sense of belonging in the Nest can be seen as 'virtual community care'[8] where support from fellow users and the support of the angels are intertwined. There are some users complaining about more mundane issues like how to repel moles from your garden. However, even the problem with moles is presented in a grave modality suggesting that the emotional support is really needed. People seeking help or trying to share their worries admit that they do not have many other and better alternatives for getting help.

The sense of emotional commitment is visible even with topics that are not explicitly crying for help. Formulas like "angels are taking care of you!" or "with hugs from angels and me" function as constant reassurance that there are both good-hearted and caring people as well as angels around who do everything to make things better. In the Nest, people both seek support, and want to give support to others, who get the feeling

of being needed. Users often comfort each other by saying that angels will definitely help, which is itself a performative utterance and points to a rich and reliable source of support – the world of superhuman spiritual beings. As Terhi Utriainen (forthcoming) states: "Angels, as imaginary figures, are always present and ready to provide recognition and companionship. Their total promise to protect from loneliness makes them more reliable than any human companion or social worker could ever be."

Compared to the Finnish study about the modern usage of angels in everyday contexts[9] (ibid.), angels seem to be superior creatures in the Nest. For the users of the Nest, angels are rather guides in spiritual journeys and offer consolatory support during hard times. The relationship is not equal; angels seem to be more beyond reach in the Nest than for Finns who participated in Utriainen's study. Estonians writing in the Nest project angels as much higher beings than mortals; their help is extremely valuable but not always available. For instance, there is an explicit forum discussion on issues about which it is suitable to ask for angelic help. Most probably, angels in the Nest have more therapeutic aims due to higher insecurity in Estonia compared to Finland. In Estonian society there are socio-economic groups whose well-being cannot be taken for granted. This is visible from as the descriptions show that many Nest users are single mothers, unemployed, with emotional difficulties and low self-esteem – "being broken" is a common metaphor. Therefore, angels are often the "last hope" as users express; they are usually addressed with admiration and humility.

Meaning Creation

Participation in the Nest gives users not only emotional support but also an opportunity to discuss their spiritual-religious ideas and to find people to confirm their seemingly abnormal experiences. For example, 24-year-old female Elessandra found the forum and registered herself only to share her experience:

> It was a beautiful summer evening, already quite dark outside and the sky was coloured by the sunset. I opened a window and took pictures with my phone […] noticed, like what… like a violet bird or a small angel is on the picture. I became so excited and hurried to tell everybody. And this is how I made a fool of myself, everybody laughed at me […] It might be caused by my phone but it is so real. Could it be an angel?

Gardemea, a senior member, comments on Elessandra's post emphasising the richness of the world that includes spiritual beings. According to her, ordinary people occupied with everyday troubles just cannot recognise these high-vibrational creatures. Elessandra's example demonstrates how people who are ridiculed by their peers may find members in the Nest who appreciate their experiences (like visions) and confirm that they are not crazy but on the contrary, special in a very positive way. There are other explicit discussions about angel experiences and indications of the perceived threat of being considered mad. Young member AngelicBunny asks:

> How to establish a connection to angels? How to know if it is madness or a real angel's voice that you hear when you ask for something from the angels?

Tanya Luhrmann (2012) concludes in her study about charismatic Christians that the process of learning to hear God's voice and recognising his presence requires social support and guidance. It is crucial to know how to distinguish 'real' signs and learn to 'see', 'hear' and 'feel' the presence of the supernatural, which is regulated and supported. Compared to Christian churches, the Nest does not give such a strong platform; the guidance is rather subjective and often reflects an advisor's personal experiences. However, these discussions aim to accomplish the same function as sermons and materials that talk about experiencing God in charismatic churches.

In the Nest, the angels' major – and even absolute – attribute is their benevolence. However, more detailed and practical understandings about their characteristics or nature vary considerably. This is seen, for example, from several different experiences and ideas answering Teresa's question if angels are real or symbolic. Rainbow-Colored Little Ball writes that she does not see angels "as concretely as ordinary objects. It is not that I'm looking beside me and the Angel is smiling back at me:-D." Angels are "rather the perceived feeling of somebody's presence and warmth, and energetic sensations as well" for her. Representing a different position, Ruth recalls that she has seen an actual angel flying. She stresses that her senses were open and this experience filled her with a powerful and wonderful feeling (there are memorates in another discussions as well that describe the act of witnessing a physical angel but these stories do not necessarily follow the same pattern). Based on these experiences and opinions, Teresa concludes, expressing a more abstract understanding:

> This presence and warmth, yes, it may be this well-being that I just feel very very well with myself, you are extremely thankful and full of love and you sense it with every cell of your body – I have felt this huge warmth myself as well. Your heart is full of good emotions and gratitude. […] This comes from within ourselves, our soul – which means, this (Soul) is an Angel or a Fairy? :) Or the meeting with an Angel or a Fairy☺.

This discussion exemplifies a considerable variety of experiences and representations of angels, which is also present in the wider milieu of new spirituality.[10] Descriptions by Little Ball and Ruth follow the most common understandings in the Nest: angels do exist in reality either as shapeless figures constituting positive energy or with a real physical body familiar to the ones from the picture-books. Angels can also be symbols of positivity (Teresa's view) or just a language, formulas and patterns on the most abstract level (similar approaches are described by Walter 2011).

Compared to Terje Potter's analysis (2002) of angel stories that Estonians told in a Christian radio show, there is not such a prevailing structure of memorates in the Nest. Shared experiences are different: angels do not appear so much as defenders in dangerous situations (as was shown by Potter 2002) but rather giving hints of comfort in complicated life moments. In the discussions of how to see angels and to recognise real angelic signs, there is surprisingly high tolerance towards diverging views,[11] which makes it a friendly place to share ideas and experiences.

The question of recognising signs sent by angels is essential for users and with some signs consensus is more easily achieved. For example, it is believed that feathers are a clear indication of the presence of angels: there are many stories about people having noticed feathers at 'meaningful' moments (and some of the story tellers still keep the feathers they have found). Muusa describes:

> I constantly find white feathers everywhere; I still carry my awakening angel-feather [Est. *teadlik inglisulg*] in a certain place. I believe that it brings me luck. […] I believe that you start to see signs when the right moment comes in your life.

Keeping feathers as talismans is common practice as seen in a story by a user called Miracle, who describes how she found a white feather stuck in her child's hair when she went to collect her child from kindergarten:

> I was so happy and my child was happy. The feeling that I would like to cheer aloud. Probably the kindergarten teachers would have thought that I am insane ☺. But the feeling was really great and still is, actually. We keep this feather near the child's bed now.

Some other angelic signs seem to have no reference to angels; so, drawing these meaningful connections requires much creativity. For example, Mereliilia (Sea Lily) writes how she doubted that angels could give her answers but found 20 cents in her washing machine. She describes this "unbelievable" occasion with great gratitude and enthusiasm, emphasising how happy she feels now. Despite commenting on these interpretations sceptically, other users accept and confirm the validity of the explanation, for example, by calling this "wonderful news". One user doing this – Naida – gives her 'Angel-hugs' to Mereliilia and expresses a hope that she "will notice and get those messages even more in the future".

The Nest, where concepts and connections like these are created and confirmed, can be seen as a modern laboratory for folk-religious meaning-creation. For example, the main criterion to identify the presence of angel is a feeling of warmth and goodness. It is a central element that recurs in many different stories that was also clearly visible in previous memorates about feathers. Melodia explains:

> The signs from angels are miraculous and they leave the soul full of love. E.g. I cleaned the cupboard where my relatives keep their dishes and utensils. And suddenly, there are wonderful golden wings, certainly broken off from a Christmas decoration… But when I looked at them I felt such a miraculous feeling of love, with praise and gratitude. Such feeling that angels are caressing and saying that you are good.

The wings themselves might be ordinary and profane (Melodia's explanation of them being certainly a part of a broken decoration) but it is the inner feeling that gives the confirmation of angelic presence. The feelings of warmth and goodness are both the result of an angel being there and also further proof of its existence.

How is this 'Atmosphere of Benevolence' Upheld?

The discussions about the nature of angels or the signs of angels point towards a rather high tolerance of dissent. The likelihood of negative comments and feedback is low – an exceptional characteristic for online forums where 'flaming' and extreme criticism are commonly perceived by users as a threat (Burrows et al. 2000). The Nest has several mechanisms that uphold this 'atmosphere of benevolence': angels are the perfect symbols, guardians of this social space – their presence keeps the positive tone. This,

spiritual dimension, has a practical value as well because moderators have more free-dom to delete comments that distract from the "high-vibrational environment" as the creator of the Nest, Kaledon, expresses it. Therefore, the need to keep the forum worthy of angels is a strong incentive for members to follow rules and is justification for heavy moderation.

Angels also have an important function in the Nest as guardians of trust between strangers. There are some examples of similar web pages even in Estonia; sites for confessions that have become collections of funny, and most probably made-up sto-ries of people's 'ultimate' embarrassing or just difficult moments, which other visi-tors comment on mockingly (the best example in Estonia is the portal Pihid.net where "pihid" means "you confess"). Virtual relationships are more volatile than in real life and encourage a lack of responsibility for one's behaviour. As shown in an analysis of spiritual-esoteric forums, users usually do not have off-line contacts and the aim of par-ticipation is mainly to demonstrate one's expertise (Hiiemäe, forthcoming). Therefore, the discussions become easily offensive and the overall climate rather hostile.

The relationships created and held in the Nest are emphatically supportive. Besides the presence of angels, there are several visible tactics used to create and support this special 'vibe of positivity'. The style of communication as the endorsement of others' ideas and dulcet tonality verges on the ridiculous. In a section where new users can say 'hi' and introduce themselves (often only "hello" or few words like "hi everybody, I'm new here") there are tens of comments expressing gratitude that this person has arrived in the forum. The welcome sign at the top of the page says "Hello wonderful [user-name]!", and similarly in discussions the adjective wonderful is used heavily.

The importance of keeping this atmosphere (described by Kaledon as "good-hearted" and "high-vibrational") is explicitly emphasised. For this, powerful meta-phoric language is used: everybody should keep 'the cleanliness of our nest', 'send light to our Nest' or 'purify it with Light'. This creates parallels to home: cleaning and keeping the place clean is necessary, it is done both physically (pointing out posts that violate the overall tone) but more importantly, symbolically when everybody is asked to send light to the Nest. The term nest denotes a place shared by a family – in the Nest constituted by all the users and angels together. Due to these efforts, users may perceive an atmosphere that emphatically rises beyond everyday troubled reality like an oasis of good emotion in the desert of ordinary competition and conflict.

The language of angels – the discourse of goodness, benevolence – has a visual dimension as well. Bright colours, romantic New Age-style pictures, and specific emoti-cons are used heavily, visible also in the virtual identities of the users. For example, one of the most active members and my informant calls herself Rainbow-Colored Little Ball – this name just appeared to her when she had to find an avatar.[12] There are many users with names symbolising something good. Furthermore, the official rules even forbid users from taking a name that has 'negative energy': users are not allowed to call themselves Satan, for example, or to use an offensive or violent picture. Therefore, profiles presenting soft and feminine angels or colours and lights dominate.

The Nest gives a strong impression of a very feminine space. Firstly, there are only a few men among the users. According to the official statistics the male-female ratio is 1:5.8.[13] However, users have generally not marked their gender and in the list of users, overly feminine names as well as profile pictures dominate. Previous studies have similarly demonstrated that spiritual angels are popular especially among women (see Gilhus 2012; Utriainen, forthcoming). Women also pray more to angels (Cerulo, Barra 2008); Utriainen (forthcoming) even calls angel practices "women's therapeutic religion".

There could be several reasons for this tendency. Angels have cultural associations that resonate with a stereotypical understanding of women's nature: New Age angels are empathic guardians. Angels are also pictured as cute blubber-cheeked children. There are physical symbols like the softness of an angel's feathers, light when angels appear, etc. In the spiritual contexts, we can see angels often as a depiction and an essence of the pure goodness in humanity.[14]

Studies about prayer objects demonstrate that people with high social status typically pray directly to a supreme entity; people with lower status and self-esteem (often women) prefer more anthropomorphic beings (Cerulo, Barra 2008). The explanation might be an expected reciprocity: figures similar to you are more likely to hear your prayer and understand your problems. Angels, especially in the new spirituality, are relatively close to humans. Most of the users of this Internet forum do not belong to the highest status groups on the socio-economic scale, which is visible from their problems, the discussions about money, etc. Therefore, angels are easily appropriated by the users of the Nest.

Secondly, the impression of the Nest as a feminine place comes from the style and tone of the discussions. Several elements pointed out in previous studies as part of feminine rhetoric are prominently present in the Nest, for example genderlect, described by Hoar (1992: 127), or rapport talk (versus the masculine option – report talk). The aim of this article is not to (and my methodology does not allow me to) link specific communication patterns to different genders, however, previous studies like Lövheim (2004) point out the tendency in the Internet that male users appreciate the opportunity to debate with opponents whereas female users aim for mutual support and consensus of opinion. Angel values constructed in the Nest follow the stereotypically 'feminine' – soft, empathic, intuitive; masculine stereotypes, on the contrary, would be energetic, rational, active (see Greenwood 2000). Obviously, the concept of femininity is a vague construction that cannot be applied universally. However, the Nest is an interesting example of a creative space where these values are strongly reproduced.

In the wider family of new spiritual or religious movements, there are cults that address gender issues much more explicitly. For example, Goddess worshippers are advancing femininity in a rather straightforward way. For the Wiccan cult of Goddess, the woman's body contains and symbolises powerful feminine sexual force (ibid.). Similarly, feminist witchcraft holds a wider ideology of cyclic transformation (birth, growth and decay) which constitutes more a "woman's spirituality" (Luhrmann 1989: 52). Although, even in these movements, as Greenwood (2000) notes, the power dynamics and women's role depends on the particular group and situation; only feminist witchcraft gives a more practical political model for women's socio-economic empowerment. In addition, feminist covens might be slightly more egalitarian (Luhrmann 1989).

Angel practices have few similarities to the 'women's spirituality' seen in the Goddess cults. In the Nest, different gender stereotypes are re-generated prioritising softness and empathy. Therefore, angel practices empower its users in a very different way. Angels are important symbols and channelers here. From discussions and references to angels, it is clear that angels do not represent an ideal of the authoritative husband/ father but rather one of pure and unconditional friendship; or perhaps even more, they constitute the user's perfect self in a more divine, absolutely perfect form. Creating a role model, this soft, empathic and ready-to-help, better-than-ordinary self is the image according to which people behave in the Nest while helping and comforting others. Indeed, there are many explicit references by users themselves that some especially well-written posts must be beyond our world, coming directly from angels: "your post exudes such tenderness and love, like it would have been from Angels, and I guess it is ☺ I felt so wonderful and light after reading this."

It has been pointed out in previous studies that spirituality could open up "possibilities for them [practitioners, followers] to become *other* than who they had believed themselves to be, allowing them to move beyond their sense of despair" (Collett 2003: 84). In this sense the Nest enables people to play with roles and meanings beyond the everyday reality that can be full of problems and suffering. In that way, it points to a soft empowerment supported by the ideas of new spirituality.

Firstly, specific confidence might come from New Age ideas that declare the principles of empowerment and everybody's inherent right to achieve his/her goals. In practitioner's approaches these convictions can be even stronger. For example, in one discussion about Karma, user La Luna's concern that "MAYBE I won't get rid of it [Karma] ☹"[15] gets a quick reply from another user Mari: "Of course you will get rid of it, there is no chance that you cannot. It is written in the laws of the Universe that it will be given to those who ask." In the wider ideology of new spirituality it is all about asking. We all have a right to get what we want, which is an appealing understanding of the laws of the universe.

A second source of confidence comes from the principle of overall equality, which is an important value in the new spirituality. Despite a rather strict policy to keep the "high-vibrational" nature in the Nest, it is still open to everybody to start a new topic, to write about one's concerns, etc., which is part of the ideology of the forum. For example, user Erala chose to emphasise the principle of equality in her signature, which appears at the end of every forum post she makes:

> We all have the same ability to communicate with angels because spiritually we are all equally 'talented'. If somebody seems to be more talented, he or she has just believed and trusted her consciousness at the right moment.

Erala's idea is that all people are (at least declaratively) given the same amount of expertise. She perceives the Nest and angel practices as very egalitarian, although there are clearly power relations appearing in the Nest as well.[16] However, the quote gives a hint about how personal experiences and especially the ability to trust your inner voice and consciousness are seen as the source of talent.

A popular picture-book of angels (Astell 2006: 9) brings out a motto by Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) that illustrates the normative frame of interpreting sources of knowledge:

> I am well aware that many will say that no one can possibly speak with spirits and angels as long as he lives in the body... But by all this I am not deterred, for I have seen, I have heard, I have felt.

This quote characterises well the importance of people's own experiences and illustrates wider tendencies to trust more individual, subjective knowledge, even if it conflicts with well-known or respected principles. This tendency has been pointed out by Olav Hammer (2010: 57) in the context of the teachings in new spirituality:

> Ideally, knowledge and truth are construed as coming from immediate personal experience. In reality, however, much of the mental map is constructed by trusting the experience of others, especially other women. Subjectivists have shifted authorities: they rely not on the threatening, negative knowledge of institutional experts, but on the insights of close female kin and friends.

The Nest supports a special epistemological stance that has been described in the analysis of American women as subjectivism and connected knowing. Connected knowers are subjectivists who believe that truth is "personal, particular, and grounded in firsthand experience" (Belenky et al. 1997: 113). Acknowledging the limitations of this approach and without any universalistic claim (for example, that women mostly use this type of cognition) it seems to be a very accurate description of the mode cultivated and supported in the Nest. Subjectivists as described by Blythe McVicker Clinchy (1994: 34):

> [L]ook inside themselves for knowledge. They are their own authorities. For them, truth is internal, in the heart or in the gut. […] truth is personal: You have your truths, and I have mine. The subjectivist relies on the knowledge she has gleaned from personal experience. She carries the residue of that experience in her gut in the form of intuition and trusts her intuitions. She does not trust what she calls the "so-called authorities" who pretend to "know it all" and try to "inflict their ideas" on her. The subjectivist makes judgments in terms of feelings: an idea is right if it feels right.

Angels give people the strength to find solutions in themselves, rather than whispering answers in their ears. Several members of the Nest are rather intuitive. The correctness of inner subjective feeling is confirmed spiritually: the sense of inner confidence is seen as a sign from the angels. Similar tendencies are also shown in other contexts – women who feel 'deaf' and 'dumb' can paradoxically develop strong subjective authority by themselves (Belenky et al. 1997).

The atmosphere and rules of the Nest endorse the pattern of connected knowing. The empathic way to relate to others' ideas and personal problems is the cornerstone of the place: this specific "high-vibrational" goodness. Blythe McVicker Clinchy (1994: 39) points out the importance of narratives, as connected knowers are "looking for the story behind the idea. The voice of separate knowing is argument; the voice of connected knowing is narration. Women spend a lot of time sharing stories of their experience." The folk religious transfer of meanings is largely anecdotal (Draper, Baker 2011) and

finds Internet forums as highly efficient channels to share personal stories and memorates. In the Nest, it is common to answer with your own stories both to comfort and to give hope or guidance (for example, how to see and recognise angels, as seen in previous examples). Narratives, especially those from your peers, help to make sense of the world and give it a meaning (Besecke 2001).

There are similar tendencies demonstrated on a wider social level. For example, Anthony Giddens argues in his approach to modernity that through "'filter-back' processes […] technical knowledge, in one shape or another, is re-appropriated by lay persons and routinely applied in the course of their day-to-day activities" (1991: 146). People tend to trust 'lay' knowledge that comes from people similar to themselves, so much that it may come to take over 'expert' knowledge (doctors, scientists, analytics etc.). For example, Burrows et al. (2000) point out that web sites have great importance in people's decision making on health-related issues. Virtual community care and lay knowledge shared in the Nest supports individual's authority and may lead to distrust of official institutions – a tendency that is institutionally supported and amplified by new spiritual ideas, as pointed out by Hammer (2010). Participants in the spiritual milieu tend to trust stories by ordinary people. The validity of first-hand experience or experiences of others who are similar to you (transmitted in narrative forms) may take over the position of authority from official institutions like medicine, science or government.

Indeed, in the Nest, people demonstrate their distrust towards official institutions. For example, in a discussion about the Estonian 2011 national census, many users, including the initiator, were protesting suspiciously against its mandatory form. The originator of the topic wrote: "And it is an imperative for everybody. For some reason it was so vexing for me that I felt sick only because of this idea." The obligatory nature of the process is problematic for many users as it conflicts with the basic principle of everybody's freedom to choose – one of the central values of new spirituality. "'Mandatory' means that you cannot argue […] no free choice for us..." as one disappointed user states. This example shows that the high appreciation of individual decision-making creates hesitation even with a relatively standard procedure like the national census.

The idea of freedom to choose is expressed in discussions but also explicitly in Kaledon's manifesto of the forum, which emphasises that "we appreciate the gift given to Humankind – Free Choice". The angels and social support by other members reinforce the idea that everybody's personality and free will are valuable. This constitutes a solid ground on which to build one's self-confidence.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While keeping in mind the limitations of online ethnographic study, the Internet discussion forum the Nest of Angels provides an opportunity to observe the dynamics of a virtual support group and follow the process of spiritual meaning creation. As the plurality of narratives about angels suggests, spiritual angels are seen and described in various forms. Apart from some consensus with the signs from angels (for example, feathers), new spiritual discourse accommodates different memorates and conceptualisations of angels. The common and even absolute characteristic, however, is their good intentionality and benevolence. The stories told by the members of the Nest encourage

everybody to notice the signs sent by angels – mainly recognisable by the feeling of warmth, pure goodness, and happy emotions. The interpretation of signs and situations as angelic concomitantly means rejoicing at their presence. Of course, the Nest is a virtual space, and the overly positive communication means mainly just playing with happy emotions in a particular and presumably safe online environment. However, at one point, a feather falling from the sky could really make your day. When you smile constantly you finally feel at least slightly happier.

The Nest gives an opportunity to feel the presence of angels on many levels. People get constant confirmations in the discussions but also either by getting the social support needed or behaving themselves angelically when giving help and supporting others. Angels add a very special dimension of contingency, transcendence, the feeling of being removed from everyday problems. Of course, with online communities that seem to be better than real life, there is always the danger of unhealthy escapism, the desire to become absorbed in this utopian world. Although not the focus of the present paper, the problem of users spending "maybe too much time" in the Nest came from interviews with more active members of the Nest. The temptation of escapism to virtual reality should be analysed using more complex methodology – the example of the Nest could be applicable here.

The overwhelmingly supportive atmosphere suggests that a special mode of relating to the world is promoted in the Nest. People do not criticise others' ideas but rather express their gratitude if they think the same or consider some postings especially valuable. The ideology of the Nest and the community interactions support "connected knowing": being empathic, intuitive, and individualistic. As a rule, commentators do not aim to challenge diverging views (common elsewhere in Internet communication) but attempt to understand and support each other. The Nest as an Internet forum is a very suitable environment for sharing narratives and values. The trustful virtual relationships actualise the influence and the authority of people similar to users themselves and increase distrust towards traditional authorities, especially that which does not accept people's free choice and subjectivism. Therefore, although rather opposite to a feminist empowerment ideology, new spirituality and angels support a subjective feeling of self-confidence that is framed with 'feminine' softness.

Online communication in the Nest creates a multi-layered virtual network between the members and angels. In addition to active moderation and the strongly perceived normativity of keeping the place "high-vibrational", the angels themselves are guardians and guarantors of this intimacy, so knowledge and emotional support can be shared. Therefore, the success of the Nest to create a trustful atmosphere is not surprising. Angels are such desirable creatures that you really want to become similar with them. Angels' divine nature both supports people directly, but more importantly, gives a language of goodness and guarantees that fellow users, although not real angels, are trying to be at least slightly angel-like.

1 Some examples from questionnaires measuring the role of religion in Estonia: according to a world-wide Gallup poll (2007–2008) 86 per cent of Estonians reported insignificance of religion in their daily lives (Crabtree, Pelham 2009) and a Eurobarometer survey showed that only 16 per cent of Estonians express the belief that a god is still there (Eurostat 2005).

2 All the translations from Estonian to English are by the author.

3 Still, Estonian results demonstrating the importance of angels are low compared to other questionnaires. For example, 78 per cent of Americans express an opinion that angels are actively influencing their social interactions (Cerulo, Barra 2008: 378).

4 Angels are (and have been) important figures in folk-religious/vernacular practices. However, 'folk religion' is today a problematic concept (see the review in Bowman, Valk 2012: 4–5): the common "two-tiered model of 'folk' and 'official' religion" is losing its relevance.

5 These numbers characterising the Nest of Angels are taken from the official statistics of the web page and demonstrate the situation at the end of December 2012.

6 The quotes are taken from the Internet forum The Nest of Angels (see Sources) and translated from Estonian to English by the author.

7 In Estonian the diminutive is easy to formulate by adding the suffix "-kene" (or its shortened form "-ke") to the word. Diminutive forms can be used with every noun and even double and triple options are grammatically correct.

8 The term is mainly used in the analyses of health related web sites, see Burrows et al. 2000.

9 Angels themselves are popular subject for requests for help in everyday matters. Utriainen (forthcoming) describes angel practices as a "practical religion": like a woman's handbag which contains helpful tools for different occasions. In this sense, utilitarian values prevail; religion becomes very mundane, divine creatures like angels show available parking slots, offer fashion advice when buying clothes, etc. The changing meaning of angels is pointed out in other studies as well, from the messengers of God to "heavenly service providers" (see, for example, Walter 2011: 30).

10 The plurality of views is characteristic to the new spiritual milieu, where a wide variety of concepts of angels can be found. Angels in popular spiritual books are depicted either as born into humankind and living with us, some people might be angels themselves, or more traditionally, angels can be guardians, real agents, abstract spiritual energy, etc.

11 These views must be still "high-vibrational". Angels can never be bad or do harm – this is a strong norm in the Nest.

12 The name Rainbow-Colored Little Ball (author's translation) is in the Estonian original Vikerkaarevärvi Pallike where *pallike* is a diminutive of *pall* 'ball'. It is an interesting combination without any explicit connotations in popular culture either in books or movies. As the user described, it was a free association of her own, just something that she felt would characterise her well.

13 As at the end of December 2012.

14 There is very rich material for cultural analysis, from the long history of religious symbolism to the huge amount of angel images in modern pop culture (see the study by Gardella 2007, in Estonian context Hiiemäe 2012).

15 In the Nest, the prevailing opinion is that our problems are caused by Karma – previous-life misdeeds that are the burden we have to carry.

16 For example, some members have a greater skill in finding the right words. This is considered very valuable – the ability to express yourself in this overly happy and supportive language. Certain specific skills can be valued and give special expert power inside a group. Tanya Luhrmann (2012) demonstrates how among charismatic Christians the ability to experience vivid mental imaginary may become the source of authority. In addition, the main moderator and

some other users (who are mainly men) in the Nest have an aura of more intellectual experts; they use slightly more sophisticated language, quoting the Bible or other sources. There have also been serious conflicts with users who have violated the "high-vibrational" atmosphere of the Nest.

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