

REVIEW ARTICLE

RELIGION, CONSUMERISM, AND
THE MODERNITY OF THE NEW AGE

PETER PELS

PAUL HEELAS, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Oxford: Blackwell 1996. ix, 266 pp., Plates, References, Illustrations, Index. £45.00/£13.99/\$44.95/\$21.95.

In *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, Evans-Pritchard memorably described the way in which Azande scepticism and rationality helped to maintain their system of belief in witchcraft, all empirical contrariness notwithstanding. Many twentieth-century social scientists have been equally tenacious in shoring up their system of belief in the face of contrary evidence, especially when defending the supposed existence of socio-historical processes like 'rationalization', 'secularization', 'civilization', or 'modernization'. Such an attitude seems peculiarly world-renouncing today, at a time when a global broadcaster like CNN asks Uri Geller—the former psychic spoon-bender, later unmasked as a fraud—to give an expert commentary on the multiple suicide, in March 1997, of the members of the 'Heaven's Gate' cybersect, who wanted to reach the 'next level' by leaving their earthly 'vehicle' and returning to their extraterrestrial source, a UFO passing the earth in the slipstream of the Hale-Bopp comet. This CNN expert, despite his scepticism about the

visions of 'Heaven's Gate', prefaced his comments by saying that 'of course, UFOs exist'—showing that, like Azande, we use scepticism to make our beliefs more convincing. A book like Paul Heelas's *The New Age Movement*, which studies an important breeding-ground of such modern magicalities, must therefore be warmly welcomed, not only because it may provoke critical reflections on the articles of faith of social-scientific 'sceptics' (such as rationalization and secularization), but also because it may give precedence to the study of the phenomena that their beliefs are trying to marginalize or define out of existence—especially since the author's training (he took a doctorate in anthropology at Oxford) suggests that he will bring the accomplishments of anthropological theories of religion and magic to bear on the subject.

The New Age Movement is the first comprehensive and affordable book on New Age to appear (it has an equally comprehensive but more expensive competitor in Wouter Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture*). Its great merit is the clear and unambiguous way in which it opens up the field by defining it in terms of what Heelas calls the lingua franca of self-spirituality: 'The great refrain, running throughout the New Age, is that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated—or, in the New Age sense of the term, been "brainwashed"—by mainstream society and culture.' This indoctrination obscures and cripples the power of the 'real' Self: 'To experience the "Self" itself is to experience "God", the "Goddess", the "Source", "Christ Consciousness", the "inner child", the "way of the heart", or, most simply and, I think, most frequently, "inner spirituality"' (pp.18–19). The New Age emphasis on self-spirituality is rooted in late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century forms of modern occultism (such as spiritualism and its successor, the Theosophical Society). It is an optimistic, 'detraditionalized' faith that internalizes religiosity in such a way that persons seek to rely on an 'inner voice' and reject any outside authority or tradition, especially in the form of established religion. The latter, in presupposing a normatively defined public self, devalues the person and excludes non-believers from its faith and worship, while 'the New Age shows what "religion" looks like when it is organized in terms of what is taken to be the authority of the Self' (p. 221). Although it turns out to be difficult to draw 'hard and fast boundaries' around the object 'New Age' (p. 117) in terms of religion or spirituality, Heelas makes it clear that, in spiritualizing the secular and transforming older religions like Christianity and Buddhism in its image, New Age is the first candidate for the post of the religion of modernity.

Heelas is particularly good at pointing out the wide range of what can fall under 'New Age': from world-rejecting to world-affirming, from countercultural re-enchantment to the affirmation of mainstream business magic, from anti-modern to explicitly modernist, New Age finds its way to everyone—just as nineteenth-century occultism was both working-class and aristocratic, both progressive and conservative. His identification of New Age as 'perennialist', that is, as seeking a hidden and similar core of wisdom in all religions, rather than defining an exclu-

sivist faith, is worth much further investigation. Perhaps his most important contribution is the way in which, helped by his research on 'cults for capitalism', the New Age bank BCCI and the role of New Age in neoliberal 'enterprise culture', he does away with the idea that New Age is tied to the countercultural. At first sight, says Heelas, New Age implies a break with modernity (pp. 3, 153); but 'the most controversial point to be made in this volume' is that New Age in fact also exemplifies—even more, sacralizes—long-standing cultural trajectories of modernity (pp. 136, 154). This invitation to subject specific cultural aspects of modern society to analysis—that is, to anthropologize modernity—is in itself sufficient to justify paying serious attention to this book.

Yet, while the culture of modernity is its main subject—and the book certainly offers important insights into it—Heelas rarely makes use of the arsenal of anthropological analysis in formulating his views on New Age. Especially in the field of religion and magic—where anthropological theory has been a guide to other social sciences—this is a puzzling omission. He prefers the analytical insights available from sociology (a sociology that is predominantly Durkheimian, does little with Weberian insights, and leaves out Marx altogether), from religious studies, and from psychology—all disciplines that have provided core ideologies of modernity and that sometimes tend to stay too close to the modern 'native point of view'.¹ Likewise, Heelas sometimes seems to reproduce modernist self-conceptions and the ways in which New Age thinking legitimizes itself. He regularly shies away from discussing theoretical insights that could be unpleasant to New Age thinking. He never mentions the frauds and charlatans of the New Age, which the emphasis on fraud and illusion characteristic of the anthropological theory of magic would have brought forward; his repetitive assurance that real New Age converts are not consumerist seems intended to keep at bay Marx's insight that commodity fetishism and consumerism constitute modernity's *Alltagsreligion*. Finally, he rarely seems to realize the extent to which the methodology and rhetoric he employs abolish the boundaries between his own analytical stance and the points of view of the people researched, making him take over the moral sentiments of New Age itself. In the remainder of this brief essay, I would like to discuss in more detail these three issues: the contributions that the anthropology of magic and religion may make to studying New Age; the extent to which New Age is modern because it is indissolubly linked to its 'spirit of consumerism'; and the extent to which the modernity of the New Age is based on a merger with academic methodology and rhetoric itself.

At the outset, however, it seems necessary to affirm that it is impossible to demarcate New Age. New Age is a discourse (or, as Heelas puts it, a 'lingua

¹ Heelas's references to the anthropological theory of religion are restricted to Geertz's ubiquitous 'model of/for' definition of religion (pp. 169, 173–4; cf. Geertz 1966), a reference to Turner's 'communitas' that, I feel, rather draws it out of context (p. 158; cf. Turner 1974), and, of course, Durkheim's notions of religion and the sacralization of the self.

franca') developed in the nineteenth century that produces its own social practices as much as it penetrates into others. The New Age character of much present-day Christianity, and the fact that humanistic psychology has always had a considerable 'New Age' component, show that the discourse of self-spirituality has no respect for the institutional boundaries by which many social scientists identify their objects. This explains why Heelas's attempts to draw boundaries around his object—despite the fact that he agrees that no 'hard and fast boundaries' exist—constantly fail to produce any clarity. New Age is, as the title of the book suggests, a 'movement', yet it is not a 'new religious movement' (p. 9) although participation in New Age can be measured by participation in new religious movements (p. 111).² That one can draw boundaries around New Age is suggested by the statement that one 'steps inside' New Age by conversion (pp. 181ff.), but is contradicted by the statement that New Age requires no great 'leap of faith' and that, rather than conversion, it is effective practices that turn someone into a 'New Ager' (p. 173). New Age's self-spirituality is said to be distinct from the strictly secular, yet there are also forms of magical efficacy that fall in between the spiritual and the secular (p. 168). These forms of magical efficacy are closer to the expressivism and therapeutic experiences of practical psychology, from which one can gradually shift into New Age *without* a moment of 'conversion' (p. 197)—just as there is no sharp break between Freudian psychoanalysis and New Age, although the former has nothing to do with self-spirituality (p. 116). It is also hard to say how many people are 'in' New Age because many New Agers despise the term, because New Age organizations themselves are often those who provide figures on numbers of participants, and because polls give figures for New Agers in the USA ranging from only 20,000 up to 60 million (p. 112). Commercial indicators of New Age membership (of the sales of books, magazines, crystals, tarot decks, etc.) are, according to Heelas, more reliable (p. 114), but this seems to contradict his assertion that a consumerist attitude towards New Age items excludes genuine conversion to it (p. 186 n. 3), for the commercial indicators do not exclude those who merely seek pleasure (p. 203) or are fascinated by the occult rather than New Age *per se* (p. 166). In other words, it seems to be as difficult to demarcate New Age as it is to say who 'belongs' to 'it'.

In a situation where the object researched has no clearly identifiable social boundaries (because it is a discourse that does not respect such boundaries), it is difficult to see the use of a concept like 'conversion' (on which Heelas bases his chapter about the effectiveness of New Age 'self-understanding'; pp. 181–200). Recent anthropological theory shows that our present understanding of conversion is founded on a Protestant Christian heritage imparted to social-scientific theories

² Let alone that we can start asking whether Heelas's use of 'movement' (much like that of other scholars of religious movements) does not reify as an object what should be studied as a process. See Fabian 1981.

of religion, theories that tend to reify (systems of) belief and abstract them from the social practices and power relations that give them meaning (cf. Asad 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). It is significant that Heelas's ambivalences about whether or not to speak of 'conversion', which pervade his text, only disappear when he wants to show that New Age training does indeed make a difference to participants—after the fact (p. 181 ff.). Our understanding of conversion is, indeed, based on narrative self-descriptions of those who have already been converted, after the fact, and is, therefore, close to the 'native point of view' of the convert. I think a critique of 'conversion' would have made Heelas more sensitive to different and more flexible concepts of religious change—for instance, the physical transformation suggested by the notion of initiation, or the idea of *Lebensführung*, propounded in Weber's 'Protestant Ethic'—that would have been less indebted to the 'native point of view' of New Age practitioners. 'Initiation' in particular would also have brought him closer to the anthropology of magical transformation (in the case of initiation, of the body), which Heelas, surprisingly for an anthropologist, completely ignores.

In fact, theories of magic would seem to be more appropriate for the analysis of New Age than notions like 'conversion' and 'religion'. After all, anthropologists from Frazer and Mauss onwards have argued that magic is, compared to the publicity of religion, a private and secret activity, and much more experimental, variable, and experiential than the public system of beliefs, dogma, and ritual suggested by the concept of 'religion'. But although Heelas repeatedly affirms the magicalities of the New Age, he never brings such theory to bear on his subject—in fact, he rarely discusses the fact that New Age perennialism, which seeks a hidden core of wisdom in every religion, directly derives from the attitudes propagated by the 'occultism' of the Theosophical Society, which itself drew on the 'theosophical enlightenment' of a world heritage of magical and esoteric knowledge (cf. Godwin 1994). But if it seems that the anthropology of magic would have been useful to Heelas (as it was useful to Tanya Luhrmann in her study of a sub-section of the New Age, namely pagan magic),³ it would also have confronted him with the issue of deception and illusion, inherited by anthropological theorizing about the occult from the Protestant denunciation of 'papish knavery' or folk healing. Nowhere in the book does Heelas address this core feature of talk about New Age. The fact that there are few New Age practitioners who do not somehow have to deal intellectually and practically with an environment of sceptical disbelief and accusations of fraud and charlatantry, seems to have no place in Heelas's conception of it.

Another point at which Heelas tends to side with New Age practitioners' self-conceptions is in his heavy emphasis on the 'detraditionalization' by which they

³ Cf. Luhrmann 1994. Although Heelas refers to her work, he does not deal with its insights.

are characterized, an issue that is related to his equally ambiguous—and, I would add, impossible—attempts to distinguish true New Age from consumerism. Heelas commendably moves away from naive modernization theory's insistence on rationalization and secularization as features of modernity by arguing that modernity is corrosive and detraditionalizing, and that it *therefore* makes people 'conversion-prone' (p. 143). His statement that detraditionalization is a 'necessary condition' of the appeal of New Age is fully correct and a core feature of his definition of what New Age discourse at the empirical level is all about. But elsewhere, Heelas has argued that detraditionalization involves a shift of authority from 'without' to 'within' and has recorded his surprise that this view was not shared by other social scientists, betraying the fact that he in fact believed detraditionalization was not just a modernist ideology, but an accurate analysis of modernization processes as well.⁴ Although a paper by Nikolas Rose convincingly demolishing the detraditionalization thesis has appeared in a book co-edited by Heelas (cf. Rose 1996)—and although his book recognizes, somewhat belatedly, that the New Age corpus is itself a tradition (p. 207)—he tends to maintain the New Age 'native point of view' of a distinction between 'other-directed forms of life' (p. 157) and detraditionalized selves. This often leads to a confusion of the concepts of 'tradition', 'authority', and the 'past' at the analytical level (see especially pp. 214–15). The notion of 'tradition' that New Agers oppose reproduces some core features of modernist 'folk theory', particularly in the way in which it defines 'traditional' authority in terms of religion and magic. Max Weber did that as well, but at least he discussed different forms of authority (legal-rational and charismatic) standing next to the traditional. Edward Shils argued (1981: 21–3) that the conception of 'tradition' as being religiously and magically constituted was an ideology derived from the Enlightenment, and that for social analysis, one should recognize that reason, science, and bureaucracy are transmitted by tradition as well.⁵

In his tendency to use 'detraditionalization' as social theory rather than as a modernist fantasy, Heelas suggests that the detraditionalized self of New Age is an empirical fact rather than a construction of New Age rhetoric—thus again reproducing that rhetoric itself. But as Rose argues (1996), the subject is constituted by an 'infolding' of external forms of authority. One of these external forms of authority is a discourse that tells persons to seek authority in themselves, but it usually stands opposed to other forms of authority—by no means all 'traditional'—

⁴ Heelas cites Paul Piccone and Anthony Giddens as fellow-believers in 'detraditionalization' (in Heelas *et al.* 1996: 2), but it would have been more appropriate to associate his ideas with Norbert Elias's ideology of 'civilization', based also on a presumed historical movement from *Fremdzwang* ('control by others') to *Selbstzwang* ('self-control') (1982: 313).

⁵ Heelas cites Shils extensively where the latter affirms how an ideology of the self counters 'tradition' (p. 160), but he does not acknowledge that Shils's analysis implies a complete devaluation of the detraditionalization thesis for sociological theory.

that suggest that the unified self is a desirable illusion rather than an empirical fact. Colin Campbell has argued that the middle-class personality, caught between its desires towards personal perfection and the attempt to satisfy those desires by consumption, is characteristically multiple. Like Heelas (pp. 42, 217), Campbell identifies the New Age rhetoric of self-spirituality as being rooted in the Romantic critique of the Enlightenment, but he goes much further by arguing that it is therefore intimately *linked to*, rather than opposed by, consumerism. In his brilliant revision of Weber's classic, Campbell suggests that the development of a 'romantic ethic' was responsible for the emergence of the spirit of consumerism, in which the day-dreams of the bourgeois personality, its feelings of incompleteness and personal lack of fulfillment, were satisfied time and time again by consumption. The relevance of Campbell's notion of the bourgeois double personality for New Age is perfectly captured by Kate, one of the main characters of Cyra McFadden's *The Serial*:

To think she herself had grown up *programmed* like that, just taking it for granted that 'success' meant a house in the suburbs, two cars and an FHA mortgage. True, she *had* a house in the suburbs, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, but she would have been the first to insist that none of this stuff really *meant* anything. What did matter was being true to yourself, getting centered, and realizing, as another friend had so eloquently put it recently when she and Kate were rapping about self-realization, that 'life was part of existence'. (McFadden 1976: 107; cf. Campbell 1987)

Like Kate but unlike Campbell, Heelas does not seem to realize that New Age's *desire* for 'getting centered' in the self leads, in the vast majority of cases, to a radical splitting and decentering of the personality between the authorities-that-be (whether those of the labour market, shopping mall, or state bureaucracy) and the authority of the self that is desired. This splitting of the personality between day-dream and despised reality is, according to Campbell, the essential ingredient of fashion, the spirit that keeps consumerism moving. Therefore, contrary to what Heelas and many other New Agers want to suggest, New Age does not stand opposed to consumerism; rather, it seems to lie at the very heart of the cultural complex that keeps consumerism moving.

To be sure, it is difficult to acquire a sufficiently distanced and critical view of modernity and its spiritualities when many of the analytical devices that one can use have long been part of the construction of spiritualities of modernity as well. Anthropology itself was complicit in this. The Theosophical Society would not have emerged without the theory of an Aryan race propounded by orientalist and ethnologists; Yeats and AE would not have joined the Order of the Golden Dawn, and Gerald Gardner would not have invented modern witchcraft, or wicca, without the inspiration of *The Golden Bough*; while Carlos Castaneda's fictional Don Juan would not have been as convincing had Castaneda not emulated the model of pro-

fessional ethnography and received a Ph.D in anthropology from UCLA. Psychology was even more involved in the history of New Age. Almost all founding fathers of psychology (Wundt, James, Freud, Janet, Charcot) were experimenting with the phenomena of mesmerism, extra-sensory perception, and telepathy before a more disenchanting behaviourism became the academic norm (cf. Hacking 1988, 1995). As Heelas himself notes, psychology and psychotherapy were crucial in the emergence of a New Age phenomenon like the Human Potential Movement. Modern magic in general has, from Blavastky and Crowley onwards, been thoroughly psychologized (cf. Hanegraaff 1996: 433).

Heelas recognizes that anthropology and psychology are involved in the construction of New Age and that, even if New Agers often see academic inquiry as harmful to experiential wisdom, they write in ways that are difficult to distinguish from the academic (p. 10). But he does not analyze these ways of writing themselves. Had he done so, he might have noted that these ways of writing include modifications of the genre of the confession (for Foucault, the foremost technology of the self of modern society), such as those used in the anthropological fieldwork report, the sessions of psychotherapy and the narratives of conversion charted by the polls and questionnaires that Heelas uses as sources of data.⁶ In trying to explain why New Age 'makes a difference' to people, he not only falls back on the questionable concept of conversion, accounts of which are elicited by questionnaires after the fact, but also provides explanations in terms of either what New Agers would say themselves ('Self-spirituality is true' [p. 187]; 'The East is right' and it works [p. 197]) or a psychological language ('harmful ego-games', 'role-playing routines', 'physiological arousal' through powerful experience; pp. 188, 191) that, I feel, does not break with the language of New Agers' own accounts—something an analysis of scientific discourse and narrative conventions might have achieved. The only argument from psychology that would have been a critique of New Age practices—that New Age sometimes involves 'brainwashing'—is countered by the argument that, on the contrary, New Age training makes participants 'more rebellious or anti-authoritarian' (p. 196)—an argument that dismisses a central element of the discourse on New Age in the same way as the omission of the discussion about fraud and charlatanism.⁷ Most important, perhaps, for his attempt to outline how New Age relates to modernity is the fact that he never really discusses the tradition of scientism that is so characteristic of New Age discourse, and that is particularly prominent in the way in which notions of personal experiment and experience—inherited from a Baconian view of science

⁶ The correspondences between confession, conversion and ethnography are discussed in Stewart 1994.

⁷ Heelas's only sociological explanation of why New Age makes a difference is the role of 'socialization' (p. 192), but to this, rather underspecified explanation one may object that New Age tendencies towards sacralizing the individual will (in the wake of Aleister Crowley's reinvention of 'magick') amount, if anything, to a desocialization.

as domestic experiment that lost force in the course of the nineteenth century and was displaced on to occult practices like Spiritualism and Theosophy (cf. Shapin 1988; Pels 1995)—pervade the ways in which New Agers construct the authority of their opinions and selves.

In conclusion, one might note that Heelas's book contrasts sharply with that of the most widely read ethnography of New Age by an anthropologist, Tanya Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (1994). While Luhrmann clearly took her cue from the modernist scepticism that also characterized Evans-Pritchard's analysis of Azande witchcraft, and thus epitomized the extremes of the anthropological 'stranger's perspective' towards culture, Heelas's book can almost count as an 'auto-ethnography' of New Age—be it a very good one. This suggests that another swing of the pendulum is needed. Although our understanding of New Age can certainly build on Luhrmann and Heelas, new insights must come from someone who is *both* an unbeliever in New Age *and* an unbeliever in the standard legitimations of modernity. The merit of Heelas's book is that it shows that New Agers are often believers in both.

REFERENCES

- ASAD, TALAL 1993. *Genealogies of Religion*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- CAMPBELL, COLIN 1987. *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Consumerism*, Oxford and London: Blackwell.
- COMAROFF, JEAN, and JOHN COMAROFF 1991. *On Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. 1, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- ELIAS, NORBERT 1982. *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Vol. 2, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- FABIAN, JOHANNES 1981. 'Six Theses Regarding the Anthropology of African Religious Movements', *Religion*, Vol. XI, pp. 109–26.
- GEERTZ, CLIFFORD 1966. 'Religion as a Cultural System', in Michael Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London: Tavistock.
- GODWIN, JOCELYN 1994. *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, New York: SUNY.
- HACKING, IAN 1988. 'Telepathy: Origins of Randomization in Experimental Design', *Isis*, Vol. LXXIX, pp. 427–51.
- ... 1995. *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- HANEGRAAFF, WOUTER 1996. *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, Leiden: Brill.
- HEELAS, P., S. LASH, and P. MORRIS 1996. 'Introduction: Detraditionalization and its Rivals', in P. Heelas, S. Lash, and P. Morris (eds.), *Detraditionalization*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- LUHRMANN, TANYA 1994. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, London: Picador.

- MCFADDEN, CYRA 1976. *The Serial: A Year in the Life of Marin County*, New York: New American Library.
- PELS, PETER 1995. 'Spiritual Facts and Super-Visions: The "Conversion" of Alfred Russel Wallace', *Etnofoor*, Vol. VIII, no. 2, pp. 69–91.
- ROSE, NIKOLAS 1996. 'Authority and the Genealogy of Subjectivity', in P. Heelas, S. Lash, and P. Morris (eds.), *Detraditionalization*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- SHAPIN, STEVEN 1988. 'The House of Experiment in Seventeenth-Century England', *Isis*, Vol. LXXIX, p. 373–404.
- SHILS, EDWARD 1981. *Tradition*, London and Boston: Faber and Faber.
- STEWART, SUSAN 1994. 'Psalmanazar's Others', in Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- TURNER, VICTOR 1974. *The Ritual Process*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.