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Soc146 – The Occult Community  
2-28-2006s  
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*The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity.* By Paul Heelas. Blackwell Publishers, 1996. 266 pages. \$39.95 paperback.

Paul Heelas accomplished a difficult task in a short amount of space. To write a comprehensive, yet not encyclopedic book on the New Age is challenging for two reasons. For one the term covers such a wide range of phenomena that it seems impossible to cover in a single tome and treat as one coherent topic. Also, it can be difficult to delineate what belongs here and what does not. Second, the range of related opinions is so diverse, charged and often contradicting that to take one particular position brings the possibility of angering those who have different approaches to the subject matter.

Heelas solves the first issue by attempting to identify patterns within New Age. He creates a fine balance between examples and analysis. Occasionally his set of examples feels like a laundry lists, but then he quickly switches to draw out the reason why he provided the list. A key element of his approach is that he treats New Age as a movement. This method, as opposed to thinking of it as variations of one religion or part of the New Religious Movement, allows him to introduce a richer approach. It helps to resolve the second issue. If New Age is a movement, encompassing a range of practices and beliefs--and not an organized entity--than no single inherently limiting definition is necessary. I liked his re-appropriation of the term movement to its origins: "it refers to the assumption that humanity is progressing into a new era." (6)

The three major sections of the book (Portrayal, Appeal, Effectiveness) answer the what, why, and how questions. "Portrayal" is organized around the manifestations, developments,

"new" and significance themes. The first gives the basic introduction and characteristics of the movement. They provide the key of his understanding: "Unmediated individualism", "Self-ethic", "Self-responsibility and magical power", "Freedom", and "Perennialism." Heelas emphasizes that New Age is "detraditionalized, that is to say autonomy and freedom are highly valued." (29) It is not a coincidental element in his worldview, as in the same year he wrote this book he coedited the "Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity" volume.

The "developments" section, predictably, is about the movement's history. He moves smoothly between different approaches, including focusing on the founding figures (Blavatsky, Jung, and Gurdjieff), and geography ("eastern imports") and (counter-) cultural trends while organizes the section in a chronological order. Next he shows what New Age contributed to culture, including the focus on the self education and healing practices for the individuals and the organizations. Here, somewhat repetitively, he incorporates characteristics he described earlier into the explanation of how New Age "sanctifies capitalism". (95) Then he moves onto a qualitative (a travelogue) and quantitative (figures about the number of people involved and their economic impact) description of the movement.

In the book's second major section Heelas posits New Age as a set of answers to both the uncertainties of modernity (a crisis of institutions and materialism, a Weberian iron cage) and certainties of modernity (the aforementioned detraditionalized nature of the self.) He muses at length whether detraditionalization is a necessary condition for New Age (yes) and a sufficient one (no.) He also shows how New Age can play a role for different aspects of the self, the expressive, human, religious, and utilitarian.

The last section assesses whether New Age provides real solution for the individual and what it means for the future. To get an answer for the first question, Heelas explores whether, how and why "conversion" exists in New Age movement. His integrative approach includes such explanation for it as cultural validity, self-spirituality, choice, experience, socialization, and brainwashing. He discounts this last option, as all the others are more plausible. Regarding the future he barely ventures into specific predictions, because he does not wish to claim or disclaim truth value to New Age.

This is a crucial consideration throughout the book. He, an academic scientist, is not willing to discredit any views. As far as he, a modernist, is considered all beliefs are valid for the participants. His writing is not impersonal though, as he partially discloses his own involvement in the movement. His careful attention, synthesis of etic and emic views, and lack of anti-sectarian despise, makes the book enjoyable. The book is easy to read, because it is made up of 2-3 page long sections. Browsing through their titles gives a quick comprehensive view of the whole book.

If one is interested in specific segments of the New Age movements this book does not provide a comprehensive enough overview. But, through the extensive annotations and bibliography it offers a good starting point for further explorations. For example I got new information about Rajneesh, but did not gain enough insights to understand his philosophy and appeal to the close relatives of mine, who was a sannyasin for years. Maybe I need to read Heelas' 1986 book, "The Way of the Heart: The Rajneesh Movement."

On the other hand the book served me well. I had numerous tidbits of information gathered informally from the media and social relations, but did not have an overview of New

Age. A few years ago someone, who was not familiar with the term asked me to explain what it is and I could not. Now I can, thanks to Heelas.

Paul Heelas set out on a difficult task and accomplished it rather well in a short amount of space. To write a comprehensive, yet not encyclopedic book on the New Age is challenging for two reasons. For one the term can and does cover such a wide range of phenomena that it seems impossible to cover in a single tome and treat as one coherent topic. This also means that it can be difficult to delineate what belongs here and what does not. Second, the range of related opinions is so diverse, charged and often contradicting each other that to take one particular position brings the possibility of angering those who have different approaches to the subject matter.

Heelas solves the first issue by focusing on trends and attempting to identify patterns within New Age. He creates a fine balance between providing plenty of examples and analysis. In the process of comparing and contrasting them he draws conclusions what is common among them. Occasionally his set of examples feels like a laundry lists, but then he quickly switches to draw out the reason why he provided the list.

The other key element of his approach is that he treats New Age as a movement. This method, as opposed to thinking of it as variations of a single religion or placing it within the New Religious Movement framework, allows him to introduce a richer approach. This helps Heelas to resolve the second issue. If New Age is a movement, encompassing a range of practices and beliefs--and not an organized entity--than no single limiting definition is really necessary for what it is. I liked his re-appropriation of the term movement to its origins: "it refers to the assumption that humanity is progressing into a new era." (p.16)

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The last section attempts to assess whether New Age provides real solution for the individual and what it means for the future on a larger scale. To get an answer for the first question, Heelas explores whether the "conversion" exists or makes sense in regard to New Age. His integrative approach includes such explanation for the conversion as cultural validity, self-spirituality, choice, experience, socialization, and brainwashing. He discounts this last option, as all the others are more plausible. Regarding the future he does not venture into any specific predictions, because he does not wish to claim or disclaim truth value to New Age

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Not enough context in terms of mainstream religion  
Dated, not enough emphasis on marketplace mentality  
Value change, where doubts and post-modernity are positive values  
Personal yet not enough

On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of Festinger *et al.*'s *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), Diane Tumminia's study of the Unarius group meticulously demonstrates just how far the social sciences have progressed in attempting to present fair and accurate research on the subject of failed prophecies. Festinger and his research team have since been criticized for their misinterpretation of an historical event, misunderstanding of millennial group organization, rigid outsider objectivity, methodological negligence, and failure to recognize alternative reactions to prophetic disconfirmations. Tumminia acknowledges the importance of *When Prophecy Fails* and the subsequent critiques that have followed, and contributes in a major way to the study of failed prophecy by: 1) reflexive techniques of making her presence a part of the narrative, 2) presenting thick descriptions of Unarius members and dialogue that they shared with her, and 3) applying the "mundane reasoning" thesis to the analysis of this subject.

Tumminia's *When Prophecy Never Fails* is a compilation of over a decade and a half of ethnographic research, in which she presents an overview of activities and events of the Unarius extraterrestrial contact religion. Founded in 1954 by Ernest and Ruth Norman, Unarius is an eclectic new religious movement that incorporates a host of New Age beliefs and practices and postulates relationships with extraterrestrial beings. Unarians are perhaps best known for their millenarian prophecy that envisions the coming of thirty-three spaceships that will usher in a period of enlightenment through elite knowledge possessed by the thousands of scientists believed to be piloting these spacecrafts. Rather than focusing on the oddities of these claims, or critically underscoring the ironies of a group that sustains or even amplifies its belief after a disconfirmation, Tumminia instead presents a sincere and believable depiction of individuals practicing their "science" of Unarius.

Based on apprentice participation, Tumminia illuminates a rather personal side of this group by attempting to tell their story in their own terms. Throughout the book, Tumminia also tactfully inserts reflections on her own involvement within the group. She makes a careful effort to reconstruct previous events that occurred prior to beginning her research by gathering and interpreting various testimonies from Unarians, as well as by analyzing Unarius literature and videos. The overall account describes a tightly-woven relationship between herself and members of the group, never dismissive of Tumminia's effect on the group and/or vice-versa. This feature is an indication of how crucial, visible, and self-conscious a researcher's presence has become -- since the work of Festinger *et al.* -- and the consequential construction reflexive narratives.

The book contains an introduction, ten chapters, three appendices, and a photo gallery. In addition to reviewing literature on failed prophecies and mythology, the chapters also explore Unarian mythmaking processes, profiles of key figures within Unarius, the mode by which Unarians deal with disconfirmation of prophecies, the loss of their leader and the re-organization of their group thereafter.

The appendices and photo gallery are especially helpful. The first appendix is a chronological history of Unarius; the second is a series of brief narratives that describe the relationship between Ruth Norman and her planetary contacts; the third is an annotated list of Norman's perceived incarnations. The photo gallery is a collection of twenty pictures ranging from Unarius artistic depictions of Ruth and Ernest Norman and spaceships to photographs of various Unarian activities taken by members themselves. Because the photographs at times deal with such unusual content, their presentation in color would have magnified their impact. Overall these photographs and appendices are necessary elaborations and fully complement the written text.

In the Festinger *et al.* study, the team of social psychologists argued that experiencing disconfirmed prophecy might actually serve to reinforce beliefs, or to establish what is known as cognitive dissonance. They suggested that under certain specified conditions a disconfirmation of prophecy would actually increase proselytizing among group members. In contrast, Tumminia borrows Melvin Pollner's (1974) "mundane reasoning" thesis which states that a member's sense of social structure is reinforced through a perceived corpus of factual accounts provided by, and in conjunction with, other members of the group. In the case of Unarians, Tumminia argues that the failure of prophecy is not necessarily an indication of a falsified event, as the Unarians have already presupposed a factual reality that spaceships either have often visited earth secretly or have been deterred from doing so by the negative energies from human beings. Tumminia calls these rationales "interpretive tools" for sustaining beliefs (p.47). For

Unarians, incorrigible realities—or those established realities that will always be perceived as truth—are simply not falsifiable. According to Tumminia, the Unarians reconcile their beliefs with supposed disconfirming events by affirming that their belief system, being incorrigible, never fails. This contrast between the simple rational model of Festinger *et al.*—where disconfirmed prophecies were adjudicated by outsider social scientists—and Tumminia’s use of mundane reasoning—that shows the group’s support for member’s common sense reality—is a conceptual improvement in the long list of studies about failed prophecy.

Scholars and students of new religious movements may find this book particularly helpful for understanding extraterrestrial contact religions. Indeed, anyone interested in exploring the contactee community through the thoughts and actions of believers themselves will find this to be a valuable reference. Rich in detailed description and thoroughly developed dialogue, this book would also be a useful teaching tool for a course on ethnography or religion.

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