
The New Age and the (Re)Enchantment of Modernity

John Walliss

Sheffield University, UK

In this paper I would like to examine in what manner one *might* in a general sense speak of the New Age in terms of a re-enchantment of the world wherein, to reverse Berger's (1973:118) famous pronouncement, despite the protestations of the astronomer and the astronaut the sky is re-populated with angels and - one might add - a whole menagerie of deities, mythological figures and alien craft (1). My position will not, however, be that the New Age represents in and of itself a simple re-enchantment of the world (as many New Agers would argue) but rather that although it does in some ways represent at least a popularisation of 'the spheres of the irrational' it serves more to highlight some of the problems surrounding the notion of enchantment, disenchantment and, indeed, re-enchantment.

In a dis-enchanted world, Weber (1970a, 155, 139) argues, 'the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life'; the magical, 'mysterious incalculable forces' give way to 'calculation', scientific rationalism and bureaucracy. The bulk of this paper will therefore be given over to the analysis of the manner in which one may speak of the New Age in terms of a re-enchantment of the world; in particular the claim that it marks a 'return' of magic, mystery and - in particular - the *non* - or - *irrational*. The general argument put forward will be that the idea of a shift from enchanted past through disenchanted present to (possible) re-enchanated future is too simplistic a conception of any form of social or cultural change as it ignores the possible overlaps and ambivalences occurring between categories.

'The Spheres of the Irrational'

At the most obvious level, then, re-enchantment may be seen to signify a resurgence of what Weber termed 'the spheres of the irrational'; magic, the occult and the paranormal. Thus, the central theme of much New Age discourse pertains to the emergence of a 'new age', namely the *Age of Aquarius*, that is said to herald the 'Death of God' - the end of the 'Picean' Christian age - and, according to New Agers, the beginning of an age of 'love, peace and harmony', holism, human consciousness and the emergence of a pluralistic all-embracing spirituality to the West. For example, Philips (1997:24,26) writing in the New Age magazine *Prediction* claims that 'like an oyster, humanity is opening itself to reveal the pearl of a new consciousness...[and that within this 'Golden Age of Enlightenment' humans will become]...magicians with the power to create with thought alone'. Linked to this emphasis on the 'new', there is in varying amounts the rejection of the institutions and belief structures associated with the 'old' - specifically organised religion, instrumental rationality and scientific materialism - which are seen to have not only failed in their utopian promises but also to have brought the world to a crisis situation. For example, orthodox religion (specifically Christianity) is rejected as dogmatic and authoritarian while the rejection of instrumental rationality and materialism are seen as necessary steps in the quest to rescue mankind and the eco-system - now personalised as the Earth Goddess or *Gaia* - from destruction.

In sum, the New Age, particularly in its semi-millennarian guise, is envisaged as the emergence of a radically new era or global world order hallmarked by a rejection of the 'old', particularly the external voices of authority associated with for example organised religion, scientific rationalism or materialism, in favour of the authority of the sacralized individual (Heelas, 1992) and spiritual 'paths' from the pre-Christian era or from non-western, non-scientific cultures. This is often linked with a re-manifestation of the notion of the 'Noble Savage' (Bowman, 1995); the belief that these cultures were 'more in touch' with the core human - *enchanted* - values that are seen as lacking in contemporary - *disenchanted* - Western culture and that, ironically, the drawing on of the past will facilitate the transformation - *re-enchantment* - of the future. Thus, Philips (1997:25) speaks of 'a mysterious journey to humanity's roots and the ancient wisdom' while William Bloom states that 'New Age culture particularly respects the [spiritual] tools and paths of the past and of

indigenous peoples' (Perry, 1992:35). Similarly, Herman Slater (1988: ii, 86), the editor of a compendium book of pagan rituals - holds that neo-paganism 'is based on valid beliefs from the distant past....ancient sources, restored and updated by scholars from various Pagan groups...[adding that]...different peoples have called the God and the Goddess many names. All the names are the true name, for it matters not what they are called'.

This could therefore seem to suggest at some level the beginnings of a re-enchantment of the world. However, on closer inspection it may be seen that the New Age manifests a much more ambivalent orientation to the forces of disenchantment. Despite their overt hostility towards it, science, particularly what is referred to as the *new science* of quantum mechanics, is often used by New Agers to justify ancient beliefs or to lend them 'scientific credibility'. The New Age has a 'a love hate relationship with the modern world' in that it rejects science and yet still uses it where possible to validate its teachings (Peters, 1991). For example, while Slater (1988:3) feels 'sad for those who are bemused by reason' and Button & Bloom (1992) cite it is a 'villain' of the New Age, Danah Zohar (1991) draws on Quantum theory in *The Quantum Self*. Similarly, Laurie Cabot, a practising Witch, defines a witch as 'a person versed in both scientific and spiritual truths' and states that 'the ancient power of magic is both spiritual and scientific', adding with some chagrin that 'in recent years I have met many 'New Age' people who ignore the need to ground themselves scientifically' (Cabot & Cowan, 1990:14,7).

Indeed, one might go further and argue that the New Age exemplifies some of the worst excesses of the dis-enchanted world, namely its unashamed consumerism and celebration of pastiche and kitsch. For example, Heelas (1996a) speaks of the emergence of 'Spiritual Disneylands' while Jan Moir warns that Glastonbury

is in danger of turning into a New Age theme park., [describing how] packed hugger-mugger into the tiny streets, New Age-y outlets abound, with fey names such as the *Star Crystal Shop*, *Pendragon*, *Starchild* and, indeed, the *Brigit Healing Wing*, a sort of beauty salon for the soul (Moir, 1993:8)

Similarly, Pat Kane (1995:12) points out how the UK tabloid press 'moved instantly to exploit this occult consciousness' citing as examples Mystic Meg providing 'News of the World' readers with a 'lucky lottery six-pick wheel' each week, conveniently matching magic numbers to particular star signs', and the manner in which the *Sun* newspaper urged

'readers to rub their lottery ticket 'on our psychically charged red dot to increase your chance of the jackpot''.

However, this emphasis on consumerism may in some way point to the another sense in which one may discuss a re-enchantment of the world. In his *Science as a Vocation*, Weber comments on how, as a reaction to scientific rationalism, 'among the German youth' of his day there was an ethos of 'romantic irrationalism'; a craving 'not only [for] religious experience but experience as such' (Weber 1970a:143). Likewise, a number of commentators have spoken of an 'resurgence of the sensual' in the contemporary world (Mellor & Shilling, 1997) with the 'profane' objects of consumer culture adopting a 'sacred' status (Featherstone, 1991). For example Michel Maffesoli (1996) speaks of the emergence of 'Dionysian values' and the correlative move from 'head' to 'heart' while Featherstone (1991:67) and Lash & Urry (1994) discuss an *aestheticization of everyday life* and aesthetic reflexivity respectively as an *immersion* in an experiential world of fantasy, desire and sensory overload associated with 'the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society' and in particular with consumer goods.

One also finds this 'craving for experiences' manifested at numerous levels within the New Age, from the casual 'titillation seekers' through to the serious, fully-involved self-religionists (Heelas, 1996c). For example, to draw on my own fieldwork, a common theme throughout my interviews with those involved with the organisation I was studying (the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University) was the emphasis placed on experience both as a motivational factor for continued involvement and also, for more involved members, as a way of experiencing the 'sacred'. For example, on the periphery of the organisation attendance is motivated largely by 'the peace and quiet of the centres', 'the friendliness of the members' and, most importantly, the perceived sense of physical, emotional or psychological relief gained from sitting quietly in a room and thinking peaceful or positive thoughts. Likewise, for others - in particular those *bricoleurs* who 'borrow' from a variety of groups or belief systems - the perceived benefit of the meditation experience is valued over and above - and often to the exclusion of - the 'theological' aspect of the practice. For example, one such individual told me that during the meditation course the meditation teacher began discussing the intricacies of the Brahma Kumaris', world-rejecting theology and to quote her directly 'I thought 'no, this isn't for me' and I nearly didn't come back. Then I had a chat with [the teacher] about it and said 'Even if I don't swallow it all, I like the

meditation and I like the other things that you're saying. Is that OK?' and she said 'Yes, that's fine'".

This experiential level is also a significant factor in both conversion and binding committed, world-rejecting members together within the movement through their shared, emotional experience of the 'sacred'. During everyday life, during meditation and particularly at meditation classes, these members claim to be seeking to transcend their lower, bodily selves and achieve experiential contact (yoga) with the 'sacred' both within themselves and as manifested through God. In doing so - whether individually or in a group - they are also expressing a solidarity based on remembrance and 'soul consciousness' that distinguishes between insiders and outsiders, the 'chosen' and the 'forsaken'. The sacred community of committed Brahmins also serves to provide both a sense of individual purpose and identity - although this is largely a result of being a member of a 'community of remembrance'. A common narrative told by such individuals is that before becoming involved with the movement they felt that they did not fit in or *belong* in 'society' or in specific institutions - such as the church - or felt that their life had no purpose. However, through '(re)discovering' their 'true' identity through meditational experiences they claim to have also '(re)discovered' their true purpose.

In sum, in relation to the New Age, one could at a simplistic level speak of a re-enchantment of the world in two broad, interlinked ways; as a revival or re-surgence of, firstly, magic, myth and the mysterious and, secondly, the sensual and the experiential. However, to do involves the acceptance of two - albeit implicitly articulated - claims. Primarily, the historically and anthropologically dubious claim that there was 'once upon a time' a now lost, enchanted past where magic, the mysterious and the sensual were the dominant characteristics of individual and collective life. In this regard, it is perhaps significant that both the New Age and Weber's notion of enchantment draw influence from eighteenth century Romanticism, in the latter case from Schiller. One could, for example, draw parallels between both in terms of their critique of scientific rationalism, their belief in an ancient Golden Age of culture and the 'Noble Savage', the essential goodness of humanity corrupted by society, the emphasis on expressivism and life as 'a work of art' (see Featherstone, 1991) as well as the influence of the 'mysterious East' on both (Heelas, 1996c). One could go even further and argue that both develop themes both explicit within Christianity, for example the Biblical Fall, and implicit, for example the influence of Judaic and early-Christian Millenarianism. This belief in a linear historical narrative from perfect

(enchanted) past, through imperfect (dis-enchanted) present to re-enchanted near-future also reflects in the second issue raised; that dis-enchantment and re-enchantment are all-or-nothing processes; that, for example, both cannot co-exist and interact in the same culture or historical period. The New Age in particular demonstrates how a particular phenomenon may simultaneously manifest characteristics of enchantment and disenchantment. Thus, as outlined in the first part of this paper, while on the one hand the New Age may be seen to herald a re-enchantment of the world due to its emphasis on magic, the mysterious etc., on the other hand, it is also characterised by some of the worst excesses of the disenchanted world, not least its consumeristic hedonism and celebration of kitsch and pastiche. This is further exemplified by the New Age's utilisation of science (with a capital 'S') as both a 'villain' - a symbol of disenchantment - and also, more interestingly, as a force of re-enchantment. In this latter guise, science does not serve to strip the sky of angels but may actually repopulate it with pictures of the heavens sent back by the Voyager missions and the Hubble Space Telescope and the tantalising possibility of life on other planets. Indeed, a number of scientific writers have self-consciously adopted an 'enchanted' manner of talking about their work. Stephen Hawking, for example, played a *cameo* role in the Sci-Fi series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and writes in his highly popular book, *A Brief History of Time*, that the quest of science is to understand "the mind of God" (Hawking, 1988:175). Such metaphysical claims are also put forward by Richard Dawkins (1978:1) who similarly speaks of scientific inquiry into issues such as 'is there a meaning to life? What are we for? What is man? [sic.]' and von Frassen who argues that metaphysics now sounds 'so passé' because it has been 'far surpassed by theoretical science' and asks "Do the concepts of the Trinity and the soul, haecceity, universals, prime matter and potentiality baffle you? They pale beside the unimaginable otherness of closed space-time, event horizons, EPR correlations and bootstrap models" (Green, 1999: no pagination).

In this way, rather than speaking of a simplistic shift from dis-enchantment to re-enchantment it would perhaps be more beneficial to speak of sites - for example (new) science, consumer culture, celebrity culture and the New Age - where both processes co-exist and interact in a dynamic manner so as to produce potential sites of 'enchantment' within the contemporary world. The question thus shifts from *does the New Age represent a re-enchantment of the world or a (further) disenchantment?* - the question addressed in the first section of this paper and found in both cases to be inconclusive - to *how do New*

Agers create sites of possible 'enchantment' in the contemporary world?.

Bibliography

- Berger, P.L., 1973. *The Social Reality of Religion*. (Orig. 1967) Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth
- Bowman, M., 1995., The Noble Savage and the Global Village : Cultural Evolution in New Age and Neo-Pagan Thought. *Journal Of Contemporary Religion*, 10 (20), 139-49.
- Button, J. Bloom, W., Eds. 1992. *The Seeker's Guide : A New Age Resource Book*. London, Aquarian/Thorsons
- Cabot, L. Cowan, T., 1990. *Power of the Witch : A Witch's Guide to her Craft*. Michael Joseph, London
- Dawkins, R., 1978. *The Selfish Gene*. Paladin, London
- Featherstone, M., 1991. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. Sage Publications Ltd., London
- Foucault, M., 1991. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge, London
- Green, D., 1999. Opposites Attract: The Transformation of Uncertainty in Pagan Identity. Paper Presented to the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group Annual Conference, Durham, 7 - 10 April 1999.
- Hawking, S., 1988. *A Brief History of Time*. Bantam, London
- Heelas, P., 1992. The Sacralization of the Self and New Age Capitalism In Abercrombie, Nicholas and Warde, Alan Eds. *Social Change in Contemporary Britain*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 136-167.
- _____ 1996a, October 5. Face To Faith : New Age comes of age in Spiritual Disneyland. *The Guardian* (Feature), 18
- Heelas, P., 1996c. *The New Age Movement : The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Oxford, Blackwell
- Hetherington, K., 1996. Identity Formation, Space and Social Centrality. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 13 (4), 33-52
- Hetherington, K., 1997. *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia & Social Ordering*. Routledge, London
- Kane, P., 1995, January 4. In Thrall to New Age Thrills. *The Guardian* (G2T), 12
- Lash, S. Urry, J., 1994. *Economies of Sign & Space*. Sage Publications Ltd., London

- Maffesoli, M., 1996. *The Time of Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. Sage Publications Ltd., London
- Mellor, P.A. Shilling, C., 1997. *Re-Forming the Body: Religion, Community & Modernity*. Sage Publications Ltd., London
- Moir, J., 1993, August 4. Summer Lives : The Heal Thing. *The Guardian* (G2T), 8
- Perry, M., 1992. *Gods Within : A Critical Guide To The New Age*, SPCK, UK.
- Philips, F., 1997. Age of Aquarius. *Prediction* 63 (11), 24-26
- Slater, H., Ed. 1988. *A Book of Pagan Rituals*. Robert Hale, London
- Weber, M., 1970a. Science as Vocation. In: Gerth, H.H. Mills, C.W., Eds. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. (Orig. 1948. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London. 129-56
- Zohar, D., 1991. *The Quantum Self*. Flamingo, London

Notes

An earlier version of this paper (*The New Age and the (Re)Enchantment of Modernity*) was presented as a working paper at the Paper Presented to the University of Sheffield, Dept of Sociological Studies 'Culture & Policy' Research Cluster 'Enchantment, Disenchantment & (Re)enchantment in the Modern World' Seminar Series, 29th April 1999. I would like to thank those present for the discussion that followed in the development of this paper. I would also like to acknowledge the influence of Dave Green of the University of the West of England, in particular his *BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group* conference paper on heterotopia and pagan identities (Green, 1999), in my understanding of the 'enchantment' of contemporary scientific narratives.

All articles are copyright of their respective authors

ShOP Feb 2000

ISSN: 1470-0689

The New Age has a "love hate relationship with the modern world" in that it rejects science and yet still uses it where possible to validate its teachings (Peters, 1991). For example, while Slater (1988:3) feels "sad for those who are bemused by reason" and Button & Bloom (1992) cite it as a "villain" of the New Age, Danah Zohar (1991) draws on Quantum theory in *The Quantum Self*. In sum, in relation to the New Age, one could at a simplistic level speak of a re-enchantment of the world in two broad, interlinked ways; as a revival or re-surgence of, firstly, magic, myth and the mysterious and, secondly, the sensual and the experiential. However, to do involves the acceptance of two - albeit implicitly articulated - claims. *Modernity and Re-Enchantment* - edited by Philip Taylor July 2007. Doors opened wide to encourage foreign investment and trade also facilitate the passage of foreign missionaries and the dissemination of new currents in Islam, Buddhism and Christianity to the remotest regions of the country. In early 2005, the renowned Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh made his first return to his homeland in thirty-nine years, speaking to huge audiences in many locations and holding dharma talks attended by Communist Party officials. Later that year, the Vatican's envoy met with state leaders, ordained a new generation of clerics and opened a new diocese. Disenchanted enchantment challenged the Weberian view that modern reason and enchantment were fundamentally opposed. It also rejected the view, famously expressed in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that modernity's faith in reason was itself an irrational illusion "that modernity is inherently "enchanted" in the negative sense of being deluded." Thus, the received discourse of modernity and enchantment has not been a neutral story, but a normative one. Disenchantment stands for secularization, but also discontent. In addition to the new genre of detective fiction, the new genre of science fiction also aimed at reuniting reason and imagination after their artificial sundering by scientific positivists.