‘AND END HISTORY. AND GO TO THE STARS’:1
TERENCE MCKENNA AND 2012

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

Abstract

Terence McKenna (1946–2000) was a central figure in the underground New Age culture mostly referred to as ‘psychedelic shamanism’. In a book published together with his brother Dennis (The Invisible Landscape, 1975) he developed a grand macrohistorical theory called the ‘Eschaton Timewave’, which turns out to be at the very origin of the widespread contemporary movement of New Age millenarianism according to which the eschaton will arrive on December 21 2012. In this article I analyze the story of how Terence and Dennis McKenna developed their theory in an effort to make sense of a religious ‘revelation’ that happened to them during a psychedelic experiment in the Colombian Amazon in 1971; furthermore I analyze the theory itself, and the chain of reasoning by means of which it seeks to prove that a series of historical ‘cycles’ will all terminate in 2012. Although 2012 millenarianism has spawned a small library of popular literature since the mid-1980s, almost no research has been done into this phenomenon as such, its origins, its theoretical underpinnings, the authors responsible for it, or the current of alternative spirituality from his it has emerged. This article hopes to make a first contribution to correcting that situation.

Introduction

If one takes a look at the extraordinary range of intellectual fascinations that characterizes Garry Trompf’s scholarly oeuvre, Terence McKenna’s theory of the ‘eschaton timewave’ and the closely related grassroots current of utopian/millenarian expectation focused on the year 2012 surely seems a ‘Trompfian’ topic par excellence. When Garry and I first met, at the 1990 conference of the I.A.H.R. in Rome, we instantly became friends, and over the next days – walking through the city, eating pizzas out in the street, and, last but not least, on a memorable pilgrimage to James Frazer’s Lago Nemi – I was given a rapid introduction into his

---

1 McKenna (1993, 92).
mental universe, where such seemingly incongruous fields of study as Melanesian religions, the logic of retribution, millenarian expectations, new religious movements, macrohistorical models, early Christianity, gnosticism and new testament studies (the list is not complete) turned out to coexist and interact in ways which, for a young academic visiting his first major academic event, were both thoroughly bewildering and extremely exciting. With lesser minds, of course, each of these fields and attendant scholarly disciplines (anthropology, history of ideas, history of religions, biblical scholarship) would be more than sufficient for a lifetime; but over the following years, Garry merely kept adding further ones to the list, including my own field of research, Western esotericism. The protagonist of my present contribution, a contemporary esotericist named Terence McKenna (1946–2000), in fact shows some similarities to Garry in that he, too, was an omnivorous intellectual (although not an established academic) with an extraordinary breadth of interests, who dazzlingly combined a whole range of areas of research: in his case shamanism, alchemy, psychedelics, botanical research, ethnopharmacology, mathematics, millenarianism and utopianism, and, last but not least – macrohistory.  

2012 Millenarianism

Although scholars of contemporary religion do not yet seem to have caught up to the fact, one could easily fill a small library with popular books focused on a major event of world-changing significance that is widely believed to be imminent in 2012, or more specifically, on December 21 of that year. Parallel to this flood of publications, numerous websites are devoted to the same type of expectation, and it is now quite evident that we are dealing with a widespread and influential current of

---

2 For Trompf’s general ideas on ‘macrohistory’, see Trompf (1979a; 1979b; 1989). The concept is applied to Western esotericism in Trompf (1998; 2005). As for Trompf and millenarianism, at the time of our first meeting he had just published an edited volume Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements, which included a long article (Trompf 1990) partly devoted to the Brotherhood of the Sun: a Californian New Age organization which surely shared quite some concerns (such as UFOs) with Terence McKenna.

3 To my knowledge, the only academic publication about the 2012 phenomenon is a short article by Sitler (2006). In addition, I gratefully acknowledge the unpublished Masters thesis by my ex-student Sacha Defesche (2007).

4 The most comprehensive overview so far is Stray (2005) and his continually expanding website 2012: DireGnosis (http://www.diagnosis2012.co.uk).