
In discussions with New Age believers, on web sites and in the literature, one finds references to the primacy of personal experience, and to the need to follow one’s own personal spirituality. Individualism, in several guises, is perhaps the most highly prized norm of New Age religion. A sizeable body of scholarship appears to accept this professed individualism as an empirical fact. New Age religiosity is described as a market of religious elements, from which individual ‘seekers’ can pick and choose freely, in thoroughly detraditionalized fashion.

Matthew Wood’s important contribution to the study of modern unchurched religion should make us seriously question this wide-spread assumption. Based on extensive fieldwork in a variety of New Age-related activities, Wood notes that authority is in fact asserted again and again by the religious virtuosi of the New Age milieu. New Age discourse is in effect the result of complex negotiations between multiple authorities and their audiences.

An important characteristic of these authority figures is that they operate independently and promote no shared ideology. Wood coins the term *nonformative* to designate the fact that each of these individual authoritative practitioners participates in forming the attitudes and discourses of their audiences, but that none of them do so in a monopolizing or decisive fashion. The lack of coherent ideology is so pervasive that Wood (like scholars such as Christoph Bochinger and more recently Steven Sutcliffe) denies the usefulness of any common label, including the term ‘New Age.’ Perhaps, the author argues, the very fact that so multifarious a range of phenomena cannot easily be reduced to any common denominator has made scholars anxious to construct a generic label and to adopt the folk or emic theory of New Age that identifies ‘self-authority’ as the unifying trait.

The academic assumption that the claims made by practitioners and their audiences and clients are valid and that current forms of religiosity constitute a free-ranging ‘spirituality’ may be due to the dearth of serious theorizing about power in the sociology of religion. In particular, despite the intense interest in the works of Foucault and Bourdieu in most other areas of the social sciences and humanities, the relatively low level of impact on the study of religion is surprising. For an ethnographic approach such as the present author’s, the Foucauldian insistence that power pervades all social relationships, and the Bourdieuan emphasis on studying power in concrete practice, make these two writers appropriate theorists for a study of ‘nonformative’ power. Wood devotes a substantial chapter of his book (ch. 3) to discussing the potential contribution of these and other theorists to the study of religion in contemporary society.

The bulk of the book is devoted to the analysis of specific settings in which nonformative power is deployed: a meditation group, workshops dealing with
channeled messages, a ‘New Age’ fair, an occultist study group, and so forth. Each social setting involves an interchange, in which particular individuals who claim to possess particular spiritual knowledge interact with audiences that only accept this claim in a piecemeal fashion. Wood’s careful ethnographies document how individual participants in the various settings adapt the messages to their own situation and are careful not to commit themselves too fully to any one locus of authority. One of the members of a channeling group, for instance, is typical of this process in the way she integrated the messages she was given in this group with her own channeling experiences, her reading of Rudolf Steiner and Buddhist teachings, and the advice given and lectures presented by various other people.

Wood insists again and again throughout his book that ‘New Age’ is a vacuous label and that most previous scholarship is fundamentally flawed in that it has fallen into the trap of affixing the label to a reconstructed but actually non-existing shared discourse. The present reviewer feels that this case is overstated and at times presented in an overly polemical tone. If there truly is no substance to the term, it is hard to explain the instantly recognizable air de famille of so much contemporary religiosity.

The author is thus quite critical of most existing literature on New Age religion, but his approach does have intellectual predecessors. The suggestion that even very loosely structured and seemingly subjective forms of religiosity are based on social pressures and mechanisms of power is not entirely novel. In fact, more than a century ago Durkheim, perhaps the first theorist of ‘self religion,’ remarked in an essay (“Individualism and the Intellectuals,” 1898) that the religion of the individual, like all other religions, is socially constructed. In 1972, Colin Campbell published a classic analysis of the ‘cultic milieu,’ which attempts to capture both the rampant variability and the shared language of much untraditional religiosity. A loose network in which individuals are at first united by little else than by their interest in practices rejected by the institutional pillars of society, and can pick and choose their own practices from this heterogeneous mass, promotes variation. At the same time, the cultic milieu also functions as the cultural substratum for entrepreneurially minded individuals, who attempt to create more stable structures around their own particular ideas and practices. The insight that this power to shape the views of others is limited by the partial skepticism of the recipients can also be found in earlier literature. To take just one example, it is one of the more important points made twenty years ago by folklorist Gillian Bennett in her study of the reception of ghost stories (Traditions of Belief: Women and the Supernatural, 1987).

That being said, Power, Possession and the New Age is a truly important contribution toward understanding a fundamental mechanism of much contemporary religiosity. Little prima facie evidence speaks in favor of the New Age actually being a thoroughly individualistic discourse. Like any other world-view, ‘New Age’ concepts, practices, and discourses do not originate in the minds of free-floating, autonomous individuals, but are produced by historically situated