A Revisionist Perspective on Secularisation: Alternative spiritualities, globalised consumer culture, and public spheres[1]

Adam Possamai

The term New Age is highly problematic. During 1996-1997, I interviewed 35 Melbournians who would 'commonly' be described as New Agers. My method of selecting people for interview was via a 'network sampling', i.e. I selected my participants while networking in the milieu; however I did not restrict myself to only one network and I have tried to comprehend the different perspectives and practices of my interviewees to avoid study of this spirituality from a single vantage point. I found my participants involved in many spiritual practices, however each individual tends to specialise in one specific type of activity, such as astrology, automatic writing, Buddhism, channelling, crystals manipulation, feminist spirituality, meditation, naturopathy, numerology, palmistry, Reiki, spiritualism, Tantrism, tarot cards, or urban shamanism. This list actually understates the diversity of practice.

Seventy-one percent of the participants negatively criticised New Age, and nine percent, even if positive towards it, did not consider themselves as New Agers. Some negative comments were:

> It's like a train labelled New Age and everybody's jumping on it. And it started off very good, a very good term. But now there's a lot of people out trying to make big money on it for all the wrong reasons.

> And the other thing I find most irritating about the New Age movement is how gullible people are.

> So I guess I'm a bit of a, you know I'm not your typical New Age, totally immersed in it sort of person ... I mean my personal feeling is that I like to keep my feet on the ground a bit ... .

The term New Age creates problems when used in the field. Indeed, as Lewis realises:

For anyone researching the new age movement, the reflections found in 'Is "New Age" Dead?' raise several important issues. In the first place, because individuals, institutions, and periodicals who formerly referred to themselves as 'New Age' no longer identify themselves as such, studies built around a distinction between New Age and non-New-Age become more complex.[1]

Further, this term also lacks a clear denotation in the academic literature and among the likes of the New Age spokespersons listed by York[2] (such as MacLaine and Cayce).

Instead, I deliberately employ the expression 'perennism'[3] to distinguish it from 'New Age' to prevent confusion. Perennism is a syncretic spirituality which interprets the world as

- monistic (the cosmos is perceived as having its elements deeply interrelated and recognises a single ultimate principle, being, or force, underlying all reality; rejection of dualism, e.g., mind/body);

- whose actors follow the Human Potential Ethic (actors work on themselves for personal growth);

- and whose soteriology is sought through gnosis (the way to develop oneself is through a pursuit of knowledge, be it the knowledge of the universe or of the self, the two being sometimes interrelated). This expression canvasses what is popularly called New Age, neo-paganism and other forms of alternative spiritualities.[4]

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[1] Lewis in James R. Lewis, J. Gordon Melton et al., *Perspectives on the New Age*, New York, 1992, p. 2.

[2] Michael York, *The Emerging Network. A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements*, Maryland USA, 1995, pp. 48-88. York has analysed the spokespersons of NAS in a descriptive way and discusses the fact that some of these people tend to eschew the designation 'New Age' (*ibid.*, p. 49). It is not my intention to summarise the works by Ram Dass, Edgar Cayce, Ruth Montgomery, Shirley MacLaine, etc; for such an analysis, see York.

[3] This word, even if inspired by Aldous Huxley's 'Perennial Philosophy', is used as a sociological tool, and should not be confused with this philosophy. For this reason, I have chosen 'perennism' (based on the Latin root) rather than 'perennialism' (based on the English word) because 'perennialism' is often used as a synonym for perennial philosophy. See Antoine Faivre, *L'ésotérisme*, Paris, 1992; and Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, Oxford, 1996.

[4] Adam M. Possamai, 'Diversity in Alternative Spiritualities: Keeping New Age at Bay' in G. Bouma (ed.), *Managing Religious Diversity*, Melbourne, 1999,

The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation

The argument of this article is that perennism and its perennist symbols (i.e. material and/or cultural recipients of religious, spiritual and/or magical meanings such as tarot cards, crystals, and advises given by consultants in spiritual growth) are part of a consumer culture which, in conjunction with postmodernity/postmodernism (as described by Jameson[1] and Featherstone[2]), invades the public sphere and thus undermines the secularisation thesis. The case study of perennism will be dealt with after a brief review of secularisation theories.

Keeping Secularisation at Bay

Richardson[3] compares secularisation theory as something of a 'sacred canopy' for the majority of research in the social sciences of religion. However, this seems less the case in very recent years. Secularisation theory, not religion, now seems to be in crisis.[4] There is little dispute about one of the facts on which secularisation theory relied: that except for the USA[5], traditional institutional religion is in decline in modern society[6]. However, Nelson[7] contests the validity of

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pp. 111-124.

[1]   F. Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Culture', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, London and Sydney, 1985, pp. 111-125.

[2]   Mike Featherstone, 'Perspectives on consumer Culture', *Sociology*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1990, pp. 5-22.

[3]   James T. Richardson, 'Studies of Conversion: Secularization or Re-enchantment?', in Phillip E. Hammond (ed.), *The Sacred in a Secular Age. Toward Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985, p. 104.

[4]   *Ibid.*, p. 114.

[5]   Callum G. Brown, 'A Revisionist Approach to Religious Change', in Steve Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis,* Oxford, 1992, pp. 31-58; and Stephen R. Warner, 'Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 98, No. 5, 1993, pp. 1044-93.

[6]   See for example Danièle Hervieu-Léger, 'Religion and Modernity in The French Context: For a New Approach to Secularization', *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 51:S, 1990, pp. S15-S25; Michael Hill, and Bowman 'Religious Adherence and Religious Practice in Contemporary New Zealand: Census and Survey Evidence', *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, Vol. 30, No. 59.1, 1985, pp. 91-112; Liliane Voyé, 'Du monopole religieux à la connivence culturelle en Belgique. Un catholicisme "hors les murs"', *L'année socioliogique* Vol. 38, 1988, pp. 135-67; Karel Dobbelaere and Liliane Voyé, 'From Pillar to Postmodernity: The Changing Situation of Religion in

Wilson's[1] interpretation of these data and uses the same data to establish the illusion of secularisation. Hadden[2] and Brown[3] go even further contesting the validity of the data supposed to prove secularisation theory. The latter writes that

> there is no substantive body of data confirming the secularisation process. To the contrary, the data suggest that secularisation is not happening.

I do not adopt such a revisionist point of view. However, I accept that those data indicate a decline of religion in modern society but only in its traditional ecclesial structures. If traditional religious institutions have, in this perspective, lost their social significance, there are still people feeling and confronting a religious experience they cannot always easily express. In other research, it appears that people still believe in God (or something or someone else) and feel they are confronting a religious world beyond church walls. This issue is developed in detail by Hay[4] and supported by Ireland[5] who considers the multi-dimensionality of religion and the possibility that decline on the institutional dimension does not entail decline on the cognitive, normative and experiential dimensions. These are not so amenable to interpretation within a general theory of secularisation and tend to disprove the hard line secularisation thesis. Even in terms of religious identification, as presented by Bouma and Dixon[6] and Bouma[7] for the Australian case, extremist

Belgium', *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 51:S, 1990, pp. S1-S13; Bryan Wilson, *Religion in a Secular Society*, London, 1966; and Bryan Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, London, 1976.

[7] Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Cults, New Religions and Religious Creativity*, London, 1987.

[1] *Op. cit.*

[2] Jeffrey K. Hadden, 'Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory', *Social Forces*, Vol. 65, 1987, p. 608.

[3] Callum G. Brown, 'A Revisionist Approach to Religious Change' in Steve Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, Oxford, 1992, pp. 31-58.

[4] David Hay, *Exploring Inner Space. Is God Still Possible in the Twentieth Century?*, Middlesex 1982; and David Hay *Religious Experience Today. Studying the Facts*, London, 1990.

[5] Rowan Ireland, *The Challenge of Secularisation*, Victoria, 1988.

[6] Gary Bouma and Beverly Dixon, *The Religious Factor in Australian Life*, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 166-67.

[7] Gary Bouma, 'The Emergence of Religious Plurality in Australia: A Multicultural Society', *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 56, No. 3, 1995, pp. 285-

secularist theory is undermined. One could recall that Troeltsch[1] claimed in 1895 that religion was alive and abundant precisely because it was a time of ecclesial decline.

For Gauchet[2], the Age of Religions as a structure is over, but it would be naive to believe that religion is over in terms of culture. This leads sociologists of religion to understand secularisation as the 'privatisation of religion'[3]. Luckman[4] discusses 'invisible religion', a form of religiosity that has emerged in a period when the ecclesial religion was decaying, religion thus becoming a 'private affair'. As Beyer[5] notes, this idea has been put forward by many sociologists since at least the 1960s, a time in which, for Casanova[6], sociologists developed more systematic and empirically grounded theories of secularisation and distanced themselves from the past thesis that religion would eventually disappear from modern societies.

However, the dichotomy between 'public' and 'private' is rightly contested by Dobbelaere[7] and Rémy[8] who argue that the reduction of religion to a private affair is characteristic of a liberal or socialist ideology and should not be assumed to be a *fait accompli* by sociologists. As an example Rémy[9] explains that the concept of 'private' was used in the last century by the liberal bourgeoisie to justify the non-intervention in its 'business' of

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[1] Volker Drehsen, 'De l'usage possible du concept troeltschien de religion dans les sciences sociales', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, Vol. 214, No. 2, 1997, p. 256.

[2] Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion,* Paris, 1985, pp. 233-36.

[3] See Thomas Luckmann, 'Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion? The Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture -1989', *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 1990, p. 132.

[4] Thomas Luckmann, 'The Invisible Religion: The Problems of Religion', *Modern Society*, New York, 1967.

[5] Peter F. Beyer, 'Privatization and the Public Influence of Religion in Global Society', in Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Global Culture. Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity. A Theory, Culture & Society special issue,* London, 1991, p. 373.

[6] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World,* Chicago and London, 1994, p. 19.

[7] Karel Dobbelaere, 'Secularization Theories and Sociological Paradigms: A Reformulation of the Private-Public Dichotomy and the Problem of Societal Integration', *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 1985, pp. 377-87.

[8] Jean Rémy, 'La dichotomie privé/public dans l'usage courant: fonction et genèse', *Recherches Sociologiques*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1973, pp. 10-38.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

diverse authorities including the Church. Other fields of knowledge contest this dichotomy (e.g. radical feminism[1], homosexual discourses[2], and the study of mass media[3]). In these cases, and now in the case of religion, we have been shown – too concisely - the radical changes in the frontier between private and public, and the extensive interpenetration of the two spheres.

Kepel[4] claims that if religion did become limited to the private sphere in a certain phase of modernisation in many societies, around 1975, there was a reversal of this process around the world. Revived religious traditions no longer tried to adapt themselves to secular values but proposed alternative ways of organising society around sacred values. Kepel analyses some of these movements inside Judaism, Christianity and Islam and describes these religions as containing a high proportion of people who have a secular education but who want to submit reason to God's law. Following this line, Casanova[5] uses the term 'deprivatization',

> the process whereby religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, discursive legitimation, and redrawing of the boundaries.

The above emphasised that some politically and civilly orientated religions are now invading the public sector. This article will further the analysis of this re-invasion of religion in the public sphere by researching religions which are mainly orientated towards consumer culture (a dimension already touched by Eleta[6] and her analysis of popular magic). Perennism will be used as a case study. I claim that

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[1]   Neil Thornton, 'The Politics of Pornography: A Critique of Liberalism and Radical Feminism', *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1986, pp. 33-34.

[2]   G. Hekma, H. Oosterhuis and J. Steakley, 'Leftist Sexual Politics and Homosexuality: A Historical Overview', *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 29, No. 2/3, 1995, pp. 1-40.

[3]   See Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences. Insight, Inroads, and Intrusions,* Princeton, 1992, p. 101 and K. Thompson and A. Sharma, 'Secularization, moral regulation and the mass media', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 49, No. 3, pp. 434-55.

[4]   Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge Of God. The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World,* Pennsylvania, 1994.

[5]   *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

[6]   Paula Eleta, 'The Conquest of Magic over Public Space: Discovering the Face of Popular Magic in Contemporary Society', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* , Vol. 12, No. 1, 1997, pp. 51-67.

a wide range of people now consume 'New Age' (or what I would now call perennist) symbols; these being part of a global and postmodern religion (see e.g. Bauman[1])[2]. I will argue that perennist symbols are now produced in mainstream culture, and that they invade the public sphere through consumer culture. Indeed, as Baudrillard[3], and Fine and Leopold[4] argue, consumer culture is far from being contained in the private sphere.

Further, I argue that this consumer culture is part of the globalisation phenomenon - a new form of global capitalism (late capitalism, disorganised capitalism, or transnational capitalism). Beyer's[5] argument that globalisation de-secularises society will also be taken into account. I will also claim that the inscription of perennists symbols in globalised consumer culture (and in postmodernity) involves a reenchantment[6] with parts of the world presumed lost to secularisation.

Perennist Reenchantment

Lyon[7] refers to a shift from production to consumer capitalism and notes that the religious supermarkets of perennism are expressions of this shift. Heelas claims that the newest form of capitalism shows it to be

> bound up with modernity but in an apparently different fashion. In tandem with the triumphalist capitalism which developed

[1]   Zygmunt Bauman, 'Postmodern religion?', in Paul Heelas et al. (eds), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, Oxford, 1998.

[2]   However, Heelas (Paul Heelas, 'The limits of consumption and the post-modern 'religion' of the New Age', in Russel Keat et al. (eds), *The Authority of the Consumer*, London and New York, 1994, p. 110) thinks that there is no such thing as post-modern religion.

[3]   Jean Baudrillard, *La société de consommation. Ses mythes ses structures*, Paris, 1970, p. 126.

[4]   Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption*, London and New York, 1993, pp. 299-304.

[5]   Peter Beyer, 'Secularization from the perspective of globalization: A response to Dobbelaere', *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 1999, pp. 289-301.

[6]   As argued by Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, London, 1992.

[7]   David Lyon, 'A Bit of a Circus: Notes on Postmodernity and New Age', *Religion*, Vol. 23, 1993, p. 122.

during the 1980s, increasing numbers of avowed New Agers have become active in the world of big business.[1]

According to Heelas[2], there are, in Britain hundreds of training organisations promising to enlighten workers (mainly managers) with 'New Age' energies and motivations. Roberts[3] follows this line of thought and describes an anthropological study at a large international conference of 'New Age' management consultants and trainers. These studies, and others such as those by Hill[4], Van Hove[5] and York[6] underline a strong correlation between perennism, neo-liberal capitalism, and globalised consumer culture which has seen increasing prominence within (post)modern societies.[7] This consumer culture produces signs, images and symbols - some of them being spiritual and religious - and this will be addressed below after the presentation of the case studies from my field work.

There is no doubting the accessibility and widespread diffusion of perennism in globalised capitalism - even if its importance may be questioned. Two of my respondents, Robyn and Roger, whom I interviewed together in a 'New Age' shop, testify to accessibility. Robyn is a pensioner and organises 'New Age' festivals. Roger is a palmistry reader and also participates in Robyn's 'New Age' festivals. They are themselves active in giving the general public access to these alternative knowledges. Robyn organises 'New Age' festivals in the hope that some perennist ideas will stay in the minds of the people wandering past the displays.

> Robyn (Rb): The general people who are searching, even though it's not getting them into the depth of it, but it's obvious that

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[1]   Paul Heelas, 'The New Age in Cultural Context: The Premodern, the Modern and the Postmodern', *Religion*, Vol. 23, 1993, p. 106.

[2]   *Ibid.*

[3]   Richard Roberts, 'Power and Empowerment: New Age Managers and the Dialects of Modernity/Postmodernity', *Syzygy: Journal of Alternative Religion and Culture* , Vol. 3, No. 3-4, 1994, pp. 271-88.

[4]   M. Hill, 'New Zealand's Cultic Milieu: Individualism and the Logic of Consumerism', in B. Wilson (ed.), *Religion: Contemporary Issues: The All Souls Seminars in the Sociology of Religion* , London, 1992, pp. 216-36.

[5]   H. Van Hove, 'L'émergence d'un 'marché spirituel' religieux', *Social Compass*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1999, pp. 161-72.

[6]   M. York, 'Le supermarché religieux: ancrages locaux du Nouvel Age au sein du réseau mondial', *Social Compass*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1999, pp. 173-79.

[7]   However, Heelas *op. cit.* also refers to another wing of perennism that is not involved in pro-capitalism, is counter-cultural of modernity, and refuses to be involved in capitalist mainstream.

they come to this [New Age festival] because they're searching for something within themselves. And even though you present it in a light, fantastic way and fantasy and fun, there is a depth I believe.

Roger (Rg): Definite resonance. Going on within the world.

Rb: Yes, within them. And that's why they come along. And we have good, you know, happy people.

Rg: Good vibes.

Rb: Good vibes yeah. And they go away and even if you say did you have a good day, oh we had a lovely day thank you. But they don't understand the depth of the meaning of what's happened to them. There's something stirring within them. ... The New Age festivals just get them going and it's up to the person.

Rg: It's a catalyst. It brings it all together.

Rb: Yes. It just made good some spark in them that gets them going.

Rg: Inspiration.

Rb: Yes. That's what I believe.

Rg: Even if for some people it will remain out of their conscious awareness, they won't quite understand, remain unconsciousness, and it gives them some inspiration. Some sort of stimulation.

Rb: Yes. Something gets into their subconscious there.

Rg: That's right.

As Robyn and Roger remind us, there is a production of symbols in 'New Age' festivals that, according to them, stays in the mind of the religious consumer and may affect his or her beliefs (though the extent of this effect remains unknown).

Another respondent, Alice, also organises New Age festivals and produces perennist symbols which allow visitors 'to learn, to expand and to find out ...':

I started running these expos which I hadn't planned to do at the time. So I've been doing them for a few years now. The main reason for setting up this place was that I wanted to learn more about the New Age and I was getting frustrated that I was always missing out and didn't know when expos were on or didn't know where to go. So I decided to set up a place where people could come on a monthly basis, purely for that reason. To learn, to expand and to find out what was going on.

There are ways to produce perennist symbols other than by organising 'New Age' festivals. For example, Martina reads tarot cards in 'New Age' festivals and tries to encourage people in their lives; as she provides encouragement she communicates through and popularises perennist symbols:

> Even though I've been searching I've always been motivated about [New Age]. So I decided that what was needed ... was to go out... There was someone who was positive, motivated, spiritually looking, psychic, to give people hope. And that's what I set out to do. I set out to tell people that there was something there for them. ... So that's what I started doing, doing these festivals. Because I felt that I could, make a difference sounds so pompous, but be some encouragement to someone. I started studying again and I did a formal degree in motivational time management. And I realised that there was just, that this was, to motivate people is something that we don't do. And to motivate people with a light at the end of the tunnel, which I'm not saying I create a light at the end of the tunnel, but I could turn anything, not anything, yeah pretty much anything around to be positive. So people have something to aim for and focus for. And then it just grew and I just got to the stage where I just had regular clients and I was doing these festivals and people would come back.

Julian is just as committed to his project of sharing his knowledge and thus spreading perennist values and symbols:

> So I feel like down the track my girlfriend and I, if this all works out, that we'll know all our astrology and tarot and all that other stuff, and that we'll be able to start teaching other people. So yeah I feel like we'll teach people and we both like to write as well and I think we might end up writing books, and maybe, so I think, I see my spiritual path largely as I'm in a growth phase at the moment and at a certain point when I've learnt enough that I'm feeling comfortable with what I know and what I believe, that I'll start sharing it. So hopefully to help other people.

Phillip understands the proselytising value of the perennist paraphernalia he sells and spells out the connection between selling his cards, providing encouragement in everyday life and drawing his customers further into perennist belief:

You look at [magical] cards. There's some that sell very well and there's some that don't. I've got a card in there that I've designed, but if you want to create the impossible then this card will help you. And people buy them. People buy them. It's a very good seller actually. But it gives people that moral, well not so much moral, but it gives them that encouragement, because they will believe in it. See this is what again New Age is all about. People are looking for encouragement. Because there's none out there.

My informants produce perennist symbols (including services and merchandise) which construct a plausibility structure for perennist beliefs. Possibly, the more that is produced, the bigger the effect. Perennist symbols are ubiquitous in cities such as Melbourne and Sydney. Just as churches transmit a credo, 'New Age' shops selling their products project their symbolic universe. These objects for sale (books, tarot cards, crystals, CDs, aromatherapy products ...) have long lost any taint of the demonic and have become common products. 'New Age' festivals and psychic fairs proliferate.

Consultants, tarot card readers, clairvoyants and so on, offer their service not only in specialist shops and fairs, but also in more conventional shops (e.g. craft shops and galleries) and craft markets as well as from private homes. Many conventional book shops and music shops often have a stall specifically for 'New Age' books and recordings. An array of popular journals, magazines and fanzines diffuse perennist symbols. In Australia, the saturation is not as complete as in the U.S., but U.S. influences on the Australian scene are strong in this (as in other) aspects of popular culture. In the U.S.A., the market for 'New Age' books is estimated to be worth one hundred million dollars; there are one hundred 'New Age' magazines and also 'New Age' radio stations[1]. These practices and beliefs are part of what Eleta[2] terms popular magic, and, according to her, have become a consumer product in contemporary society.

In regional and rural areas, there are also major festivals several times a year. In Australia, there are regular events such as Confest[3] and in England, the Stonehenge Festival[4]. Consumption of

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[1]   Heelas, 1993, *op. cit.*, p. 112. For a more complete significance of perennism in mainstream culture, see Heelas 1996, *op. cit.*, Chapter 4.

[2]   Eleta, *op. cit.*

[3]   Graham St John, 'Going Feral: Authentica on the Edge of Australian Culture', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1997, pp.167-89.

[4]   Kevin Hetherington, 'Stonehenge and its Festival. Spaces of Consumption', in R. Shields (ed.), *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption,* London,

commodities and culture in the latter festival, becomes for Hetherington[1] an 'enactment of lifestyle' and is 'more than just shopping, it is a significant feature that helps to provide the stability while a new lifestyle is being created'[2].

It is still unclear how many people are influenced by these symbols inscribed in consumer culture. Bouma[3], using the categories from the 1996 Australian census (i.e., Scientology, Wiccan and Witchcraft, Satanism, paganism and spiritualism), finds that the 'New Age' religious groups are the fastest growing set of religious groups in Australia. Over thirty thousand Australians identify as affiliates of one of the constituent groups. However, as Bruce[4] notes, the popularity of 'New Age' cannot be measured by the number of 'New Agers' identifying with constituent groups but rather by the extent to which people are influenced in everyday life by 'New Age'. Further, as Andrew Ross[5] realises, though most perennist practices are confined to a minority culture, perennist ethical principles and orientations permeate mainstream culture. He even refers to the Oprah Winfrey Show, an American popular TV talk show (also popular in Australia) which is not avowed perennist, but popularises perennist principles such as 'growth' and 'potential', i.e. elements referring to the Human Potential Ethic described in the introduction in this article. The permeation of mainstream culture by perennism is also aided and abetted by training programs in the business world. Business spends between $3 and $4 billion on training in which perennist orientations and personal development and motivation techniques for achievement of a 'higher' or a 'better' self are employed.[6] So it is no surprise that an increasing number of perennists are active in the business world. [7] In England, hundreds of training organisations sell

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1992.
[1]   *Ibid.*, p. 87.
[2]   *Ibid.*, p. 97.
[3]   Gary Bouma, 'Increasing Diversity in Religious Identification in Australia: Comparing 1947, 1991 and 1996 Census Reports', *People and Place*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1997, pp. 12-18.
[4]   Steve Bruce, *Religion in The Modern World, From Cathedrals to Cults*, Oxford, New York, 1996, p. 197.
[5]   Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather. Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits*, London, New York, 1991, p. 27.
[6]   Heelas, 1993, *ibid.*, p. 112.
[7]   *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

employees a way of becoming enlightened. Heelas claims these training programs effect alternations[1] to perennism.

Aside from globalised consumer culture, another kind of production of symbols operates through the neotribalism (i.e. affinity networks as termed by Maffesoli[2]) of perennists. Perennists exchange cultural and material products through their almost continuous effective networking and thus spread perennist values in everyday life (see below). Perennists are not fixed in a social setting; they are nomads who interact with different sectors of society at large carrying perennist symbols with them.

In particular, some perennists are striving for what I term a critical mass through social networking. The work for critical mass through social networking refers to a paradigmatic shift in social life. It follows the description by Marilyn Ferguson[3] of the Aquarian Conspiracy - a qualitative change in everyday life. This can happen by a networking of many networks aimed at social transformation. It is called a conspiracy by Ferguson and it is, for her, a revolution of a new style. It aims at changing the consciousness of a critical number of people to provoke a renewal of the society as a whole. However, the changes have first to happen within individuals which, in turn, will cause change on a larger scale. The aim is to provoke a 'paradigm shift' in social structures and practices in the Kuhnian sense. The respondent Julia presents her view of critical mass brought by social networking:

> Western culture's becoming more and more alienated from a spiritual approach and a caring approach. But on the other hand you've got all these small community groups springing up all over the place that are quite strong and quite active and quite committed. And they're a substitute in a sense for what we lack in the Western culture at large. And I think those small

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[1]   Instead of using the more pejorative term 'conversion', I use the term 'alternation' which means 'relatively easily accomplished changes of life which do not involve a radical change in the universe of discourse and informing aspect, but are a part of or grow-out of existing programs of behaviour', from Richard V. Travisano, 'Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations', in Gregory P. Stone and Harvey A. Faberman (eds), *Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction*, Waltham, 1970, p. 601.

[2]   Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus. Le déclin de l'individualisme dans les sociétés de masse*, Paris, 1988.

[3]   Marilyn Ferguson, *Les enfants du Verseau: pour un nouveau paradigme*, Paris, 1981.

community groups or spiritual groups or whatever they are, are really having a huge effect on people's lives, because without them we'd all be stranded. ... Just general community groups where people will get together and try and work on a certain problem. Like the Save the Albert Park Group. Or there's a group that I belong to ...; and we talk about different social issues and things that are of a concern to people. Like the closing of Fairlea Prison. The exploitation of animals to make drugs. So it's a sharing of knowledge and it's happening on a small scale in a sense. You know we're not using the World Wide Web. We're talking to each other. And I'll talk to you and you'll go and talk to someone else and so on and so forth. I think that that sort of knowledge is not even really recognised largely in mainstream culture, but I think it's critical. It's a critical way of exchanging knowledge, and I think it's a lot more influential than we would think it is on the surface. Just handing someone a brochure about someone. It's like that concept, I don't know who coined it now, but a butterfly flaps its wings in Guatemala or somewhere .... And there's a tidal wave in Tokyo or something. And I think there's some truth to that. Just on a community level. You just spread the word.

Critical mass through social networking works through building on social change underway in everyday life, especially in a variety of social movements. It operates by the incremental effect of small actions. Work in, and on, one's community affects other communities and, from this, a snowball effect takes place. Through this, people involved in these social networks communicate perennist values and orientations by intentional networking. This neotribalism comes close to what Melucci describes as a contemporary movement, that is, a movement that has a variable density and resembles an amorphous nebula. His picture of contemporary movements could serve as a formal description of the perennist networks:

Movements in complex societies are hidden networks of groups, meeting points, and circuits of solidarity which differ profoundly from the image of the politically organized actor. ... One notes the segmented, reticular, and multi-facetted structure of 'movements'. This is a hidden or, more correctly, latent structure; individual cells operate on their own entirely independently of the rest of the movement, although they

maintain links to it through the circulation of information and persons. These links become explicit only during the transient periods of collective mobilization over issues which bring the latent network to the surface and allow it to submerge again in the fabric of daily life. The solidarity is cultural in character and *is located in the terrain of symbolic production in the everyday life.*[1]

These networks, even if they offer temporal and fragmented relationships, even if they stress individuality and everyday life; and even if they are not ritualistic at all, do transmit a sense of the sacred via transnationalistic New Age symbols. These symbols are not only contained in globalised consumer culture but permeate everyday life at large.

How can we evaluate the impact of this consumption of perennist symbols? In 1996 and 1997, I interviewed thirty five people, and discovered that 41% of them alternated to perennism by a consumption of perennist symbols, such as by reading significant books and by participating in 'New Age' workshops. For the remaining interviewees the consumption of perennist symbols has predisposed them to, and has reinforced in them. perennist ideas.

In a variety of ways, perennism appears to constitute a re-invasion of religion in the public sphere through the production and distribution of symbols. I would suggest we may be seeing a reenchantment (*Wiederverzauberung*) from below.[2] For Mike Featherstone[3] and Maffesoli[4] a feature of the times in advanced Western societies (or in the global village) is an aestheticisation of everyday life. This is a consequence of the rapid flow of signs and images in contemporary society. Among these signs, which are central to the development of consumer culture, are those of perennism and they, arguably, imbue aestheticised sensibility with a sense of mystery; of invisible power that might be harnessed for human use of enchantment.

By selling perennist artefacts, by running workshops and readings, by organising 'New Age' festivals, by encouraging people in therapeutic networks (or simply interacting with them by networking in a perennist social movement in Melucci's

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[1]   Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes. Collective Actions in the Information Age,* Cambridge, 1996, pp. 114-15. (Italics denote my emphasis.)

[2]   What Michel Maffesoli, *La contemplation du monde. Figures de style communautaire,* 1996, p. 66, calls 'a postmodern reenchantment'.

[3]   *Op. cit.,* pp. 67-68.

[4]   *Op. cit.,* 1996.

understanding), perennists produce, consume and distribute their symbols of alternative spirituality. As they do so, they may be establishing legitimacy and plausibility structures for a reenchanted world.

Conclusion

The distinction between private and public spheres can no longer support the secularisation theory. It can be argued that, by the invasion of global perennist symbols in globalised consumer culture[1] and in everyday life and by the reenchantment of the Western world, Western societies are becoming less secular.

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[1] Perennism does not seem to be the only religion (or spirituality) in this position: David Lyon, *Postmodernity*, Buckingham, 1996, p. 62, refers to a study conducted in Canada where Christianity has also 'become a neatly packaged consumer item'.