

**THE SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION: WHY RELIGION IS GIVING WAY TO SPIRITUALITY** by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *Blackwell, Oxford*, 2005, Pp. 204, £50.00 hbk, £15.99 pbk.

Reflecting on the lapsation of Catholics, a cynical theologian wondered what they lapsed into. This highly topical study of organised religion and holistic forms of spirituality in Kendal, Cumbria, provides many answers. It has a bold thesis that the turn of culture into subjectivism has established a climate in which organised religion is doomed to wither. Although those still in organised Christianity might flinch at its thesis, there is much to commend in this study. It is a subtle, stimulating, contentious work, alert, in command of the insights yielded from the ground of the study, and judicious in its speculations as to the future direction of religion in England.

The thesis is pursued through thick and thin, even if the coming of the spiritual revolution veers between the third decade of the third millennium (p. 45) and an advent within the next 30 years (p. 48). The interpretative framework of the study precludes organised religion surviving. While a holistic milieu is given a warm, personalised, liberating glow (pp. 27–9) organised religion emerges as authoritarian, restricted and profoundly unsubjective in ways that make it unfit for the cultural times (pp. 13–23). In the holistic milieu, the self finds its wholeness, and also its spiritual nourishment in a variety of practices. Compared to these opportunities for individually tailored avenues of spiritual relief, Christianity is deficient. The self is trapped in forms of deference not of its own making and worse, God is cast as distant, as a denier of subjective preferences and as an entrapper of the self.

Using a headcount of all going in and out of church and chapel in Kendal on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2000, the sociologists found 7.9% (2,207) of the town so attending compared with 600 (1.6%) from a five mile radius engaged in holistic forms of spirituality (by their own definition). As authors indicate, it is quite clear that the spiritual revolution has not yet taken place. It is by appeal to wider statistics and literatures that a thesis of inference is established. A bizarre range of opportunities is provided in the holistic milieu that increasingly reflects forms of spiritual empowerment taking place in the workplace and in the wider culture. Certainly, the climate of spiritual expectation has changed, and the study chronicles this well.

Despite these points, the study has a lot of weaknesses. It deals with a polarised view of religion, one that is either organised Christianity or the spiritualities of a holistic milieu. Those in the middle, affiliated to neither in terms of weekly commitment, are left out of the study. This militates against Christianity and its large pool of distant, but concerned occasional attendees who use church for seasonal worship, or for changes in life cycle. Because the study never ventures past the church porch, no indication is conveyed of the power of ritual and what the 7.9% find there that draws them weekly.

A second difficulty in the study is that spirituality is given a residual property that leans it towards an affirmation of the values of holism, a harmonisation of body and soul. This makes for an uneasy divide between the values of health and spirituality as being of religion. For some, yoga might have religious connotations, but for others it has stress-lowering properties, where meditation yields health and well-being. The porous nature of holistic forms of spirituality and the intermittent commitments they generate in a pick and mix religious economy might suggest levels of activity and engagement more apparent than real. The broadness of the term spirituality and its elusiveness of definition permits the recognition of a rich variety of practices that benefits New Age values more than the narrow definitions seemingly associated with organised religions. This point shows in the inadequate treatment of the spirituality of organised religion. Its subjective properties are siphoned off to the exceptional, to understandings that belong to mystical forms of theology. Routine forms of subjectivity in habitual religious rituals are neglected. Brief reference, however, is made

to the degree to which the Orthodox Church and cathedrals are providing a spiritual relief that appeals to the subjective (p. 144).

The study makes some novel points on the constituency attracted to holistic forms of spirituality. According to their estimates, 80% are women, most practitioners are middle aged and many have experienced downshifting in occupations. This process reflects a revolt against materialism and a need to experiment to find an authentic spiritual self. An intriguing facet of the study is the degree to which holistic spirituality has transmission problems. Although interests in holistic spirituality emerged in the 1990s, these reflect expectations formed in the late 1960s. A worry that emerges in the study is that the current young, lacking the sacred capital of these émigrés into holistic spirituality, might not have the resources to reproduce its basis in the future. The prognosis for a spiritual revolution seems bleak for both poles of religion.

KIERAN FLANAGAN