

privatization into all aspects of modern culture, including the religious domain. As Jeremy Carrette and Richard King argue, “From feng shui to holistic medicine, from aromatherapy candles to yoga weekends, from Christian mystics to New Age gurus, spirituality is big business. . . . Spirituality as a cultural trope has also been appropriated by corporate bodies and management consultants to promote efficiency, extend markets, and maintain a leading edge in a fast-moving information economy.”³¹

On the other hand, however, one could argue that this sort of commodification of spirituality is by no means unique to the New Age but has been part of American religious life from the very beginning. As we saw in chapter 1, the United States has been a diverse and thriving “spiritual marketplace” since at least the nineteenth century, with countless new religious groups and denominations competing side by side in an unusually free new spiritual atmosphere. Moreover, the transformation of religion into a highly lucrative business is surely not a phenomenon that we see only in New Age channels such as JZ Knight. If anything, the Ramtha business empire is fairly small potatoes when compared to that of Christian televangelists such as Pat Robertson or Joel Osteen, or megachurch preachers such as Rod Parsley. So is it really fair to single out New Age spirituality for adopting the language and logic of the marketplace? Or is it simply an easy target because it is still largely a non-mainstream and marginal movement?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

1. What is gained and what is lost when previously “esoteric” ideas become available to a mass consumer audience, as we see in New Age spirituality? Should we lament this as a kind of watering down and cheapening of older religious traditions for a general public? Or should we celebrate it as a kind of democratization of these traditions that makes them more widely accessible to ordinary people? Or is it more complicated?
2. How would you compare the role of female channelers such as Roberts or Knight with that of nineteenth-century Spiritualists such as Cora Hatch? Do gender roles, femininity, and spiritual authority seem to work in similar ways, or are they very different in the modern American context?
3. When we see channeling performed on TV, as on *The Merv Griffin Show* or in Shirley MacLaine’s TV miniseries, does that make it more difficult or less difficult to take it seriously as a “real” spiritual phenomenon than, say, a Pentecostal church service where people speak in tongues or a Santeria ceremony where people become possessed by spirits? Explain your reasoning.
4. As we saw above, some critics see a tension or contradiction between the “alternative spirituality” of New Age practices and the fact that so many of these practices have become commodified and turned into products for a market

economy (as we see, for example, at New Age conventions such as the Universal Life Expo or at stores such as the Crystal Palace in Sedona). Do you think this is a fair criticism of New Age spirituality? Or could similar critiques be made of more or less all religious life in the twenty-first century? After all, don't Catholics and Evangelicals sell a lot of books, DVDs, jewelry, and other merchandise too?

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

View a clip of either Jane Roberts or JZ Knight as they become channels for the entities Seth or Ramtha (both readily available on YouTube). Note the changes in body language, accent, mannerisms, and other physical attributes before and after the channel has begun speaking via the channeled entity. Discuss the ways in which channeling is similar to or different from other forms of religious communication with the divine (prayer, for example, or most forms of ritual). In what ways does twentieth- and twenty-first-century channeling seem similar to and different from the nineteenth-century Spiritualist mediumship discussed in chapter 4?

SUGGESTED FILMS

Out on a Limb. ABC Television, 1987.

What the Bleep Do We Know? 20th Century Fox, 2004.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Albanese, Catherine L. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007.

Brown, Michael F. *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Carrette, Jeremy, and Richard King. *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Ferguson, Marilyn. *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1980.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of*

Secular Thought. New York: SUNY Press, 1997.

Heelas, Paul. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. London: Blackwell, 1996.