

Book Review: Peter Heehs: *Spirituality without God: A Global History of Thought and Practice*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 286 pages.

Peter Heehs's book and historical examination, *Spirituality without God*, comes at a timely moment in the discourse on spiritual practice. The idea that one can be 'spiritual but not religious' is not quite a brand-new thought but has become in vogue with the rise of New Age religious practices over recent decades. At the outset, Heehs reminds us that, in fact, those living without God—atheists and agnostics—are a growing group, according to data on religious affiliation. When New Age spirituality emerged, some of these new, or newly synthesised, practices were dropped on fertile ground; in many post-industrial societies, members of the middle-class bemoan their mundane and disenchanting lifestyles and are losing touch with established religions. Claiming to reject religion, outdated concepts of God, or God as such, these new spiritual movements have become popular approaches to soul-searching in which affiliation and external dogma give way to esoteric universalism and the authority of subjective inner experience.

“When disbelief in God met subjective spirituality the outcome was spirituality without God” (p. 31), Heehs asserts, before taking the reader on a journey through 3,000 years of time and places on the Asian continent. Drawing on the Upanishads and Vedic literature, Buddhist doctrines, Jain scriptures, Chinese thinkers, and Roman and Greek mythologies, Heehs explores the nontheistic philosophies and portrays the rising significance of theism and its attached concepts of God, death, and the afterlife. His main argument is that the rejection of or indifference about God, while embedded in a spiritual practice, is *not* a new phenomenon, but has been around since long before the New Age movement, way before Nietzsche, and without the terms atheism or agnosticism even being coined. Although some of today's largest religions (by number of adherents) emerged on the Asian continent, Heehs's historical exploration also shows us that Asia has been the place where nontheistic spiritualities were theorised and practiced as early as 3,000 years ago. Following up the history of thought and practice on spirituality without God, the book also explores the growing semantic gap between the *religious* and the *spiritual* that has made both terms a rather conflicting, if not opposite, pair. 'Spiritual but not religious', as mentioned before, remains an important self-definition of many practitioners. Heehs goes on to explain how some spiritualities came to be, in essence, not caring, not needing, or rejecting (belief in) the supernatural.

Spirituality without God by Peter Heehs is an interesting, timely, and equally relevant read for the religious scholar, practitioner or layperson alike. Not least, it benefits from the author's in-depth understanding of—especially South Asian—religions and scriptures, which shows while reading and following his processing of a complex comparison of thought and history of thought. The many tales recounted from various traditions allow an emic glimpse at the traditions at hand through the stories

and symbols of oral traditions and scriptures, and yet, Heehs writes in a refreshingly unengaged way, meticulously sticking to his historical method.

The book's focus remains on traditions that emerged from Asia, excluding others, for instance, from Africa, the Americas, Oceania, as well as Pagan traditions and nature religions. Yet, it provides a good overview and starting point to understand spiritual practice beyond the supernatural. It would be interesting to see a follow-up analysis in the (para-)psychological understanding of the supernatural, and the deification or de-deification of ideas, stories, and prophets over time, and especially since the Enlightenment. More recent spiritual and secular groups use their own understanding of sanctity, out-of-this-world, and holiness that have even been adopted by secular market logics. Has the idea of the supernatural or of God disappeared and become obsolete, or is it changing according to rapidly developing social needs and conditions? How does the supernatural connect with the natural? And will the supernatural eventually need to remain a distant, mystical, beyond-grasp entity to remain *adore-able*? In a documentary on India that I watched recently, the filmmakers portrayed Ganga worship and interviewed an environmental scientist who was working on a study on the Ganges river: "As a scientist", the man said, "I believe nobody should ever come in contact with the water of Ganga, it is dirty and infectious. But as a Hindu, I believe in its holy quality, so I bathe in it every day". Ultimately, Heehs's exploration has made me wonder: if considering spirituality without God is not new, quite possible, and does not pose a defect, where does it leave us in terms of belief in the supernatural or God in theistic traditions and spiritualities that internalise the abstract supernatural? Is it a given, a need, or a choice?

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