

# ***Spiritual Transformation, Healing and Altruism***

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION, HEALING, AND  
ALTRUISM: INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM

*by Joan D. Koss-Chioino*

*Abstract.* This essay introduces the five articles that follow, whose aim is to show how altruism emerges out of spiritual transformation and is integral to healing process in four kinds of ritual healing systems—popular, folk, an indigenous religious healing tradition, and complementary and alternative medicine represented by consciousness transformation movements. In this introduction I situate these largely marginalized religious and spiritual practices within the context of the religion-science discourse, which has focused for the most part on the relationship between the established, mainstream religions and the dominant biomedical system. Antecedents of two of these types of religious practices, Spiritism and consciousness transformation movements, were part of the development of the psychological sciences in the nineteenth century but lost ground in the twentieth. Despite discrimination and persistent negative attitudes on the part of the established religions and biomedicine, these healing traditions have not only survived through the twentieth century but appear to have gained both followers and interest in the twenty-first. In future decades, at least for complementary and alternative medical practices and perhaps also for spirit healing centers, there may be a reversal in status through greater acceptance of their unique combination of scientific and religious perspectives.

*Keywords:* altruism; complementary and alternative medicine; *curanderismo*; religion-science discourse; ritual healing; spirit healing; Spiritism; spiritual transformation.

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Spiritual transformation, hypothesized to be a highly significant, potential life experience for all human beings, is being newly appraised; it is undergoing a definitional process over time (Hefner and Koss-Chioino 2006). The goal of the essays in this section is to further this endeavor as one contribution to a developing field of interest. This interest is partly the result of a recent growing focus on spirituality and health in research and clinical practice. Twenty-three multidisciplinary research projects in spiritual transformation—many related to health—are being carried out by the Metanexus Institute–sponsored Spiritual Transformation Scientific Research Project (Katz 2004). Spiritual transformation from different perspectives and across diverse contexts was the featured topic at the 2005 IRAS conference on Star Island.

There are a number of terms and studies that refer to spiritual transformation, especially its central aspects and consequences. Terms include “conversion,” “personal transformation,” “rebirth,” and being “born again” (Christians). Its appearance in people’s lives is frequently associated with healing. Spiritual transformation is well known across cultures through descriptions of indigenous and folk healing as well as fundamentalist Christian churches and charismatic movements (Csordas 1994; Csordas and Lewton 1998; Glass-Coffin 1998; Katz 1993; Koss-Chioino 1992). It is sometimes associated with severe illness, both mental and physical (Ironson, Kremer, and Ironson 2006). Many questions can be raised: What are antecedents and consequences of spiritual transformation? Does everyone have the potential for the experience? Does spiritual transformation occur only in special people, and, if so, which ones? The matter to which we attend in the articles that follow is the relationship between spiritual transformation and altruism in the context of healing.

*Altruism* is a nonreligious concept of eighteenth-century vintage that recently has been given more attention and study, perhaps because the current climate of world conflict and destruction has led to many persons thinking more about the positive side of human being (see its background in Vieten et al. 2006). The concept appears in most world religions (Neusner and Chilton 2005). There is also the influence of the relatively recent focus in psychology on “positive psychology” and the recent interest in basic virtues (Post et al. 2002; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). The essays in this section explore how altruism is integrated into healing process in four types of healing systems: *curanderismo*, a folk tradition popular in Peru and other Latin American countries; spiritualism/spiritism, widespread in Latin America, the United States, and Europe; an indigenous healing tradition among K’ich’e Maya peoples; and complementary and alternative medicine represented by consciousness transformation movements, widespread in the United States and Europe as well as many other countries.

The first essay (Koss-Chioino 2006) describes a model of ritual healing process derived from the extensive anthropological literature on spirit healing in cultures across the world and based on long-term study and participation in Spiritist healing practices in Puerto Rico and the United States. The model shows how altruistic behavior emerges—both as a compulsion and as a capacity—from the spirit medium’s initiatory experiences of connection and oneness with the universe. These experiences center on spiritual transformation involving communion, communication, and lifelong engagement with spirits.

In the second essay, Bonnie Glass-Coffin (2006) describes how she spent several years as participant-observer and apprentice with women *curanderas* in Peru. She demonstrates how women healers use the experience and metaphor of the mother-child relationship in their healing work, instructing their clients to use acceptance, compassion, and altruism as part of their everyday realities—rather than transcendence—in order to master their distress. She recalls her own spiritual journey that emerged while in Peru and how the feminist model of motherhood led to her understanding how sharing and connection are integral to the curandera’s healing techniques. Glass-Coffin speaks “from the heart” when talking about her own experiences of healing and transformation in the context of her study of Peruvian healing.

Third is T. S. Harvey’s article (2006), which describes Mayan healers’ work, relying on linguistic cues to the deep meanings inherent in traditional healing process and a deep understanding of how these people think about self and other in ways unfamiliar to most medical practitioners. He shows in some detail how healers and their clients transcend the dichotomy of otherness to arrive at “sympathy,” a community of being, through the healing process.

The fourth essay, by Cassandra Vieten, Tina Amorok, and Marilyn Mandala Schlitz (2006), describes a systematic study of well-known teachers and scholars of consciousness transformation movements in the United States, mostly in California. Spiritual practices and spiritual transformation are central to these movements. Using an in-depth, structured interview, the study sought to uncover commonalities in transformative experience across forty-seven different traditions. Widespread parallels were found. Vieten and her colleagues describe them using the words of the interviewees. An important finding is that, across these diverse traditions, compassion and altruism seem to emerge as natural consequences of feelings of oneness and connection integral to the transformation experience.

Completing the section is a unique review of these four articles by Edith Turner (2006), who discussed the symposium at the American Anthropological Association meetings in 2005 in which three of the four papers were presented. Despite geographical, cultural, and social differences, the

healing systems represented in the four essays demonstrate close similarities with regard both to healing process and the emergence of compassionate and altruistic behavior.

The data upon which these analyses are based are drawn from case studies of both popular and traditional healing systems in Puerto Rico, Peru, Guatemala, and the United States, but these types of systems are widespread across world cultures. They differ in many ways from biomedical healing, particularly in their focus on spirits and spirituality. Although the notion that spirituality should be a part of biomedical healing—particularly psychotherapy—has of late gained some ground, its advocates are relatively few. Biomedicine was developed as a rational healing system from the Age of Enlightenment, gaining full acceptance (and predominance) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its fundamental characteristic is that it is based on science and logical positivism as the ideal, honored always in theory if not in practice. In contrast, the latter part of the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of spiritualism and other movements in Europe and the United States based upon a belief that spirits of the dead “pass over” into another plane of existence but can affect the living world. When syncretized with folk religious healing practices, spirits play a prominent role in causing and healing illness and other life problems, communicating through healer-mediators. Similar beliefs echo throughout the vast majority of popular religions in the world, but the dominant sectors of Western culture and biomedicine have labeled such beliefs as irrational at best and superstitious at worst (Hufford and Bucklin 2006).

The reader of *Zygon* may justifiably question the inclusion of this section on spiritual transformation and altruism in a religion-science dialogue. To supply a brief explanation to relate this work to the *Zygon* discourse I quote from an article I wrote thirty years ago:

The underlying (hypo)thesis of this article is that if Spiritism had not been arrested in its social evolution by Euro-American cultural imperialism in the medical sciences, it would have likely developed into a prestigious, more systematic and highly organized social movement instead of the cult religions and “occult sciences” of its present status in Latin America. Moreover, its better cultural fit as a treatment for many emotional disorders would have enhanced its (stated) functions as a credible ideology and an organization supportive of healthy societal change. Clearly, cultural domination expressed through technological (*i.e.*, *scientific*) prowess has produced psychiatry as the queen of the mental healing sciences and psychology as its favorite handmaiden. Yet both the psychological sciences and Spiritism share a common birthright and ultimately derive from parallel intellectual currents of the last half of the nineteenth century. Although the psychological sciences have most certainly won the twentieth century field they are part of a . . . bias on an aseptic science without a soul. Spiritism’s enduring quality may be the interrelating of science and religion (*by late nineteenth century scholars including the founder/codifier of Spiritism, Leon H. Rivail as well as by educated groups of twentieth century and twenty first century Spiritists*). (Koss 1976, 23)

The other religious healing systems in this section are also committed at least in part to a scientific perspective, even though their proofs may be experiential rather than or in addition to experimental. This is less the case for curanderismo and Mayan healing, although the curanderas and Mayan healers do use ethnoscience (science based on culturally patterned classifications and use of the products of the natural world through repeated observations and trials). The increase of research projects by practitioners of complementary and alternative medicine is seen as necessary for legitimization, given doubt in their techniques and disparagement by the biomedical establishment. In Rustum Roy's laudable diatribe against the danger of scientism's being the popular religion of our technology-driven, contemporary (mainly Western) world, he sees a "ray of hope" in "whole-person healing" (that is, alternative and complementary medicine) (Roy 2005, 841). Roy advances this movement as hopeful because it is healing that includes science, technology, and spirituality.

It must be observed that this approach to healing illness has been labeled *integrative medicine* by physicians and practiced by many notable medical doctors (growing in number), including the widely published Andrew Weil, who is a strong presence in the Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona. The description on the program's Web site describes integrative medicine as a partnership with patients, more interested in prevention than cure, focused on healing rather than disease as well as the natural healing capacity of all human beings. Spirituality, a strong element of the practice of many if not most *nonmedical* practitioners of complementary and alternative medicine, as described in the essay by Vieten, Amorok, and Schlitz (2006), is not mentioned. One wonders if alternative and complementary nonmedical practitioners will lose their spiritual base in order to gain more prestige and power at a time when biomedical practitioners and clinical psychologists are discussing how possibly to regain (from pre-twentieth-century roots) or integrate spirituality in health and mental health care.

Given my personal interests, I would point out that there are hundreds of popular religions with spirit-based healing rituals and long traditions, both in their countries of origin and in the United States (Barnes and Sered 2005; Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003). They are most often viewed by scientists and theologians as occult practices based on superstition and denigrated as being something other than religion. Many factors are involved in the development of this negative perspective on popular religions and ritual healing by the dominant social groups in Western societies. The basic explanation is that many of the practitioners come from stigmatized, low-status, ethnic minority groups (African American, Latino, Native American) or are immigrants to the United States from rural villages or tribal areas on whom the neocolonial gaze is almost as strong as during the period of actual colonization of their societies. These

groups are the “other”—foreigners to a way of life that favors attendance at established churches, a homogenized and uncontested religious belief system with God as the most important nonhuman being, particular standards for social behavior that include the English language, and so on—all the trappings of life in middle America. Whether expressed openly or not, ethnic minority persons (as a group) and immigrants are looked upon as low in status because of their lack of formal education, relative poverty, low-status occupations, and different cultures.

There is another factor, far more complex but perhaps more important: the abhorrence of many scientists and theologians of a worldview that includes an important sector of spirit beings or gods who are always potentially active in and meaningful to the daily lives of living (incarnate) human beings. The term used in Western cultures for decades to refer to these Other beings has been *supernatural*, a term that has almost disappeared from the anthropological lexicon. It stems from the dichotomy “natural/supernatural,” implying that there is a qualitative difference between that which we readily observe around us and something beyond nature and therefore “unnatural.” But the concepts and percepts of most cultures do not agree with this modern, scientifically driven dichotomy; they accept spirits or gods as part of the behavioral environment largely determined by their culture. This is not to assume that all modern, educated persons in the West always reject spirits or gods as part of their life-world; there is much evidence that many persons have transformative experiences with spirits but rarely share these experiences openly (see Gallup and Jones 2000; Hufford and Bucklin 2006).

In many countries of the world—in Latin America and the Caribbean, for example—educated persons, politicians, government officials, and physicians, as well as many following scholarly and intellectual pursuits, for well over one hundred years have believed in spirits and attended Spiritist sessions adhering to the doctrines promulgated by Allan Kardec (1803–1869) (Koss 1976; Moreira-Almeida, Lotufo Neto, and Koenig 2006). In 2004 there were seventy Spiritist centers in the United States largely organized and run by middle-class, highly educated persons (*The Spiritist Review*, n.d.). This is only one small part of this type of religious practice, which might be referred to as communitarian spirituality because it develops from an expression of the spiritual needs of particular communities, in this case mostly but not exclusively Latin Americans. (The Spiritist movement is international.) Widespread expressions of communitarian spirituality can be found among African Americans (Jacobs 2005) and new forms of traditional spirituality among Native Americans (Cordero 2005). This is clearly the subject of an entire paper, perhaps several. This brief introduction only touches the surface of an extensive, lived phenomenon. My message is that religious studies and theologians, as well as the religion-

science dialogue, have largely overlooked the religious and spiritual practices of a good portion of the population of the United States and Western Europe.

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