

WHOSE BROAD EXPERIENCE? HOW GREAT THE AUDIENCE?

by Joan D. Koss-Chioino

The dialogue between science and religion appears to be increasing in extent and importance. One problem it might explore is that violence and chaos are fast becoming the norm rather than the exception in our world. Can an integrated religion-and-science field offer ideas or solutions that neither discipline alone is able to achieve? Can moral imperatives be carefully aligned with applications of science and technology? Can scientists and their sponsors accept and carry out their work with a view that is integrated with their spirituality? Might this eventually thwart the use of scientific applications toward destructive ends and serve to unite not only disparate fields of study but also highly diverse groups of the religious?

These are very large and serious questions. A small first step might be for the field to include the multitude of small religions on the world stage. In his *Zygon* editorial of March 2007 Philip Hefner points out that the religion-and science field lacks breadth because its audience is limited and narrow in its vision of the scope of its subject matter. There are ways to expand that vision: first, to bring an anthropological (world) perspective to this issue; second, through this perspective to explore how to considerably broaden the base of experience upon which the religion-and-science dialogue rests by including hitherto excluded popular audiences; and third, to be concerned with cultural diversity and expand views of what constitutes the experience and study of "religion" and "science."

In these comments my anthropological perspective will become obvious. At the outset I want to note that for anthropologists all human behavior is of abiding interest. This interest is parallel to that of other human (or behavioral or social) sciences. However, a great difference is that anthropologists seek out behavior, in both their own and foreign cultures, that usually is distinct from that already described and understood. Each ethnographic study has a certain uniqueness; replication, so important to other sciences, is rare. When it occurs it often causes difficulty because of

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disagreements over study results, both data and interpretation, as in the ten-year controversy between Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman over Mead's view of Samoan culture and rules for sexual conduct, on which one of her most famous books is based. (Mead's information was the result of ethnography and Freeman's the result of historiography.) Given this aspect of the anthropological legacy—which relies on interpretation rather than demonstration—I wrote the following in *Zygon*:

In this introduction I situate . . . 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 . . . 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. (Koss-Chioino 2006, 869)

The articles in the symposium that followed my introduction explore how healing process in these marginalized religious and spiritual movements (including two indigenous healing systems in Latin America) produce empathic expressions and altruistic ways of dealing with sufferers; they also connect both healers and patients to the surrounding community and to the universe (including the world of spirit beings). These are only a few examples of popular religions that have ritual healing with spirits, a practice ubiquitous throughout the world, not only in small communities (rural villages, urban slums, barrios) of lower-class, non-formally educated persons but also in urban neighborhoods and among upper, professional classes. The anthropological literature describes hundreds of examples of popular religious movements where belief in spirits (distinct from Fundamentalist churches that worship the Holy Spirit) results in rituals other than healing, related to nature, horticulture, developmental transitions, birth, and death.

These small and often marginalized religions usually are woven into the daily life of their followers, who, in complex societies, also may attend the church of a major religion for the benefit of sanctified life transitions. Each cultural population, although a complex mosaic, maintains a broad worldview that acts as a template for the cultural construction of its behavioral environment, as described long ago by A. I. Hallowell in his *Culture and Experience* (1955). (The concept of culturally constructed behavioral environment is an early forerunner of the notion of constructivism in psychology in its many forms [Lyddon 1995]). Such environments, patterned by cultural traditions and beliefs, almost always include spirits of deceased group members, famous persons, or gods who interact in various ways with incarnated beings. What is clear in the hundreds of ethnographies that describe these beliefs and practices across the world is that such prac-

tices may be minimally institutionalized (family- or community-oriented), as in some surviving tribal communities, or practiced by larger organized groups or movements. For example, Spiritism, a religion codified during the last half of the nineteenth century in France, which spread rapidly to Latin America and then to other parts of the world colonized by Spain and France, has become an international movement, even though the number of members is small in countries such as Japan and much larger in others, such as Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina.

This brings us to an inevitable query: What then is *religion*? There are numerous definitions. A very early and simple one in anthropology was that of founding father E. B. Tylor: “belief in spirit beings.” Current definitions recognize a difference between *religion* as a communal institution and *spirituality* as a personal set of beliefs and practices, within or without a religious context. I find the broad definitions by Harold Koenig and his collaborators to be useful (from a book in 2001 that reviews studies of religion and health): Religion is an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent; spirituality is the personal quest for understanding ultimate questions about life and meaning. This would then include community-based, “small” religions and their spiritual practices, which could provide an expanded base for the study of religion and science.

Where does science enter into this picture? During the decade of the 1960s, anthropologists became interested in ethnoscience, cognitively focused ethnography, very often with a biological theme, which described folk systems of classification of natural objects as they were developed and used by Western and non-Western peoples. These systems of classification and nomenclature differ from what is accepted as modern “science” (which is largely a Western European cultural product), but some studies demonstrate how some domains of knowledge are based on an inherent natural order. Systematic studies of plant remedies in other cultures are part of these efforts; they are early forerunners of medical science and currently are contributing plant medicines to the modern biomedical pharmacopeia.

My thoughts about “other sciences” have been influenced by my studies of Spiritism in Latin America. In the writings of its codifier, Allan Kardec, Spiritism is considered to be not a religion but a type of science or field of study. The central theme is of the existence and survival of the spirit, free will, and the law of cause and effect. Demonstration of that existence is phenomenological, based on many types of observed and reported experiences. These range from spirit communications through mediums to psychography (automatic writing), xenography (speaking in a foreign language), materialization of spirits, visions, and auditory experiences of spirits (Chibeni 1991). Kardec describes how he discovered and explored the spirit world by systematic questioning of two young mediums who easily fell into (what we call today) altered states of consciousness (trance states) and revealed their experiences of that world.

Phenomenology refers to a philosophy and a research approach with a focus on the study of experience. Philosophically it searches for the direct apprehension of reality not only through understanding but also through suspending assumptions and notions that distort the things (the content of reality) themselves. There are at least two methodological approaches. A first-person experience studies the structure of experience itself. This approach requires deep reflection on one's assumptions, systematic review of alternative notions about the experience, description of the content of consciousness, and sustained training in these skills. Most studies rely on second- and third-person approaches, in which a very detailed description of the phenomenon is acquired through interviews of another person and sometimes checked with a third person. Complementary techniques such as reviewing life histories and case studies are often used. Interviews across multiple subjects permit some generalizations about the phenomenon.

Kardec and his followers, employing phenomenological methods, have amassed hundreds of reports about the spirit world across cultures. (William James used a similar approach to arrive at many of his ideas.) Many educated Spiritists in Brazil and other countries are devoted to theories emerging out of psychical research in the United States and England because they are based on experimental methods that explain spirit interactions and support their belief in reincarnation.

The scientist might object, "This is not science!" Yet these approaches to understanding and classifying the world are empirical, systematic studies of phenomena perceived as "natural." The book *Naked Science* (Nader 1996) takes a culturally relativistic view of science that compares ethnoscience, local science, and popular forms of systematic analysis to modern science. Modern science is infused with cultural elements (values, politics); when expert systems intersect with local systems of knowledge, social change becomes difficult and often problematic because the competing systems of knowledge focus on different issues, values, and perceptions.

All of these comments are set forth as queries about the content of the religion-and-science field. In sum I ask, Whose religion (or science), and who is in the audience?

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