

Zygon and the Future of Religion-and-Science

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CONCERNING DIVERSITY AND PRACTICALITY

by Joan D. Koss-Chioino

Abstract. I raise issues about the scope and content of the religion-and-science field of study and suggest that cultural diversity has not been considered relevant or important. Adding it to the present foci of discussion yields different ideas and constructs about the nature and experience of religion than currently found in most of the religion-and-science literature. Consideration of cultural diversity not only broadens the ideas and constructs but also leads to practical (applied) considerations that have not been prominent in this field.

Keywords: applications of religion-and-science; communitarian religion; culture diversity; popular religion

It is both an honor and a great pleasure to pay homage to Philip Hefner, who has been a wonderful friend as well as a major inspiration for my involvement in the religion-and-science dialogue. At the beginning of this relatively recent interest, I reframed my long-term study of alternative religions (variously labeled as "folk," "popular," "tribal," or "small" as opposed to "great" religious traditions) and their healing systems. I had described them as examples of

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diverse and extraordinary expressions of religiosity and spirituality that focus on special experiences and processes, such as healing and spiritual transformation as originally described by William James in his classic work *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). I now readily think about studies of these relatively small, communitarian religious traditions as important to the religion-and-science dialogue. Two years ago I gladly responded to Phil's invitation to write a guest editorial for *Zygon* suggesting reasons for the inclusion of these popular religions and the cultural groups that practice them as part of a "wider audience" for the religion-and-science arena (Koss-Chioino 2007).

To briefly explore several arguments: First, the inclusion of popular communitarian religions implements a focus on the anthropological perspective, in this case not on the more usual foundational questions such as the nature of being human or the course and meaning of human evolution (which already are aspects of the religion-and-science field) but including the broader perspective of cultural diversity in defining and appreciating the nature of "religion." We need to consider who practices and lives what I am labeling *communitarian* or small religious traditions and why they are attracted to them. Small religious traditions often are highly localized (that is, tribal religions or those based in neighborhoods or towns). At present, several relatively newer religious movements are scattered across the world, albeit with greater concentrations in some countries: Spiritist centers can be found in at least thirty-seven developing and developed societies but are not numerous in most countries, except in Brazil and Argentina; Wicca is concentrated in the British Isles, and so on.

Second, what characteristics are shared by these popular religions? There is little or no institutionalization at higher levels of social organization, so they are able to individualize both practices and meanings for practitioners beyond what is offered by most of the great religious traditions such as Roman Catholicism or the Protestant churches, which are more structured and highly institutionalized. However, "folk Catholicism" in South American villages and towns is an example of a local and more individuated expression of a great tradition, as are various Hindu sects in village India. In the small traditions, especially those that focus on spirit rituals, ordinary persons can, if they wish, reach a transcendent state directly on their own volition, without having to go through or relate to a sanctified intermediary or a minister with church credentials. Moreover, some recently developed small religions, such as Spiritism and Scientology, view themselves as a special sort of science, juxtaposing this view with their spiritual disciplines (Chibeni 199; Koss-Chioino in press). Buddhism, as practiced in many Asian societies, although considered a great tradition, shares some of the same characteristics.

Third, numerous anthropological and sociological studies describe these communitarian religions, their spiritual practices and cosmologies, as integral to the fabric of daily life in numerous culturally diverse communities. In many cultures they are so interwoven with daily life that they cannot be labeled as a separate type of institution called religion in the sense used in

religious studies or theological writings. Study of these alternative religions raises the question of the viability of the Western cultural concept of religion, as defined by theologians and religious studies scholars, as a pan-human phenomenon. What basic components of the lived practices are shared by both small and great religious traditions? How do these ideas and behaviors affect their practitioners? Are there basic common denominators in the lived experience of all religions?

These social/behavioral-science questions in turn could be aligned with the opening statement in the *Zygon* editorial by Wesley Wildman: "The science-religion conversation needs to shift from grand synthetic dreaming to concrete problem solving" (2007, 277). In response to Wildman, many practical approaches could be taken. One specific example is the difficult and practical problem of mobilizing cross-cultural understanding between peoples and groups in societies who suffer from religiously motivated conflict or from conflict justified in religious terms. What in their worldview or in the deeper meanings of their religious practices explains their disaffection from other citizens and vice versa, and how can it be reversed?

Currently I am deeply interested in the relationship between medicine and spirituality as a practical religion-and-science issue and am carrying out an ethnographic-phenomenological study funded by the John F. Templeton Foundation. My study explores how medical doctors in Puerto Rico, who identify as Spiritists or have experiences with spirits, often in their families of origin, use their beliefs and experiences in clinical practice. The study seeks to describe how this affects physician-patient relationships, as compared to Puerto Rican doctors who do not use (or experience) spirituality in their clinical work or lives. The project extends the interest in the use of spirituality in the clinic as fostered for example by Christine Pulchalski (2005), but it focuses on a particular type of spirituality in a religion that involves spirits as extrahuman (disincarnate) partners in life and healing. Most of these doctors attend centers where Spiritists hold philosophical forums and healing sessions based on the writings of Allan Kardec (1804–1869), the pseudonym of a French scientist-philosopher who carried out studies of the spirit world and wrote six books, as well as a journal, that became very popular in southern Europe and Latin America in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

From a theoretical perspective my study aligns with the ideas of Hefner, that the field of religion-and-science is not a two-sided subject but rather an interconnected arena. He suggests that religion-and-science is both an "undertaking in its own right (that is, one *does* religion and science) as well as an object of study" (Hefner 2006, 562). This perspective leads to viewing religion-and-science as an object of social science study, as distinguished from *doing* religion and science. My study is of the genre of behavioral science in that it examines how medical doctors do religion-and-science within their special life arenas, both personal and clinical. The expected result is an understanding of the religious and spiritual realities of a group of Latin American doctors who are deeply

committed to living with and working with their ideas of the nature of human beings and the universe, as influenced by their religious philosophy, Spiritism, and its spirit-related practices. Spiritist doctors infuse their convictions, beliefs, and experiences into their clinical work, which fosters a type of altruism and compassion dictated by Spiritist tenets. This generates the presence of empathy and an empathic clinical relationship. Moreover, Spiritism's ethical codes direct the extension of other-caring and healing practices beyond the individual and family to persons in the community, and where institutionalized (as in Brazil and a century ago in Puerto Rico, Argentina, Venezuela, and Mexico), these healing practices are directed toward the community through the establishment of hospitals and clinics (Hess 1991).

The main research questions I pose in my study are "How do these doctors in Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries reconcile their scientific medical training with their special experiences and ideas about spirits?" And "How does this affect their patients?" This touches on a practical issue that focuses on the ever-worsening problem of patient dissatisfaction with medical caregivers in an increasingly technological medical world dominated by economic forces.

This is only one example of a practice approach to religion-and-science. There are many others. One could augment studies and applications of pastoral care, explore and seek to change unethical and uninformed meaning systems of individuals or communities, or illuminate approaches to treating and preventing illness and mental illness such as in current studies of meditation and prayer as well as traditional aspects of religious behavior. As suggested by Wildman (2007), a practice approach may develop educational strategies that focus on the acquisition of knowledge oriented around problem solving and the various disciplines relevant to a particular problem area. The importance of an applied perspective is undeniable.

NOTE

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