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# Religion and Spiritual Experience: Revisiting Key Assumptions in Sociology

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In this paper, we examine the dominant materialist assumption that there is an inherent conflict between sociology, religion, and spirituality. We will suggest that such a conflict is not fundamental and that accepting the possibility that religious experiences might reflect contact with a transcendent reality can enrich the theoretical possibilities of sociology, supplementing rather than replacing existing insights.

*Keywords: paradigm, sociology, materialist, parapsychology, spiritual,*

Sociology, and all the social sciences, have their origin in philosophical traditions dating back to Socrates. These classical traditions considered the possibility that religious experiences may reflect contact with a transcendent reality. The social sciences, however, became differentiated from philosophy during and after the Enlightenment in an intellectual climate that viewed religion skeptically. The founders of sociology adopted this separatist position and argued that sociology would show that religious beliefs were epiphenomena of social structures. They claimed that, as a science, sociology would disprove the claims of religion and establish human knowledge upon purely material foundations.

## **The Possible Relevance Of Transcendent Experiences**

The dominant paradigm in sociology is based upon an assumption that reality is essentially materialistic, a stance that sociological theorist Randall Collins (1977) has termed reductionist materialism, “the doctrine that the world is purely material, and the mind is the product of it” (p. 49). Nature, or the physical and material universe, is assumed to be the fundamental reality, and there is nothing that transcends it.

These assumptions exclude consideration of the possibility of transempirical realities—realities that are not scientifically observable. As a result, it is possible within the current sociological paradigm to discuss such issues as whether religious experience might reflect contact with a transcendent reality or whether human ethical and cultural systems may be linked to a spiritual realm.

The purpose of this paper is to examine this underlying assumption in light of alternative notions about reality and human nature. We will then discuss the kind of theory that might emerge if the dominant paradigm in sociology were altered. We will attempt to show that altering the basic assumption about reality need not lead to rejection of any significant theoretical and empirical advances made by sociologists.

## **The Materialist Metaphysics Of Human Nature**

Sociology emerged within the context of the positivist metaphysics of the nineteenth century in which reality was defined in essentially materialistic terms. Auguste Comte, a leading nineteenth-century French philosopher and the founder of sociology, perceived this philosophical move as the final stage in the evolution of human consciousness (Coser, 1977; Turner, Beeghly, & Powers, 1995), and the new science of sociology accepted this view as the dominant paradigm, as in all the developing scientific disciplines (Burt, 1954). The cultural environment emerging out of the Enlightenment necessitated that sociology incorporate these materialist principles if it were to be accepted as a legitimate scientific discipline.

The adoption of this perspective, however, was prompted neither by scientific evidence nor conclusive refutation of earlier arguments about the existence of God. There is, of course, no conceivable empirical evidence that can show the existence or nonexistence of the “divine” or of transcendent realities. In addition, the arguments of Aristotle and Aquinas on the

necessary existence of God as a first cause, and more recent versions of these arguments, have never been conclusively refuted or established (Alder, 1980).

The materialist perspective gained strength within the eighteenth century, not out of philosophical necessity, but because of social contingencies and intellectual trends: the profound disenchantment with the Church and the society the Church supported; the secularizing intellectual efforts of rationalism studied by the sociologist Max Weber (1952); and the massive impact of scientific advances, particularly Newtonian theory. All known evidence indicates that early sociologists espoused that worldview and did not consider situating themselves outside of it. Whether the early founders of the discipline considered them or not, there were significant political advantages to their decision, such as gaining credibility for sociology as a legitimate scientific discipline. For the most part, questioning the materialist base of sociology has been absent from sociological thinking (Parsons, 1978; Sorokin, 1947). There are, however, good reasons for critically scrutinizing these assumptions.

Repeated experiments in parapsychology, *the controversial science*, during the last several decades suggest that the human mind is capable of feats that seem impossible from the vantage point of a materialist conception of reality (Broughton, 1991; Moody, 1988; Morse, 1990; Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, & Tyler, 1986; Murphy, 1992; Ring, 1984, 1992; Targ & Puthoff, 1977). To the best of our knowledge, the most comprehensive set of studies into parapsychological phenomena involves the use of the ganzfeld procedure. These studies are reviewed by Daryl J. Bem and Charles Honorton (1994) in "Does Psi Exist? Replicable Evidence for an Anomalous Process of Information Transfer." Psi (an abbreviation for psychic phenomena) is defined as "anomalous processes of information or energy transfer, processes such as telepathy or other forms of extrasensory perception that are currently unexplained in terms of known physical or biological mechanisms" (p. 4). Based upon studies of meditation and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, Honorton and his colleagues hypothesized that human beings have the capacity to detect information at a distance but are ordinarily unaware of this capacity because of their preoccupation with sensory input from ordinary daily living. The ganzfeld procedure is used to reduce ordinary sensory input by placing the receiver, the subject:

in a reclining chair in an acoustically isolated room. Translucent ping-pong ball halves are taped over the eyes and headphones are placed over the ears; a red floodlight directed toward the eyes produces an undifferentiated visual field, and white noise played to the headphones produces an analogous auditory field. . . . To reduce internal somatic "noise," the receiver typically undergoes a series of progressive relaxation exercises at the beginning. (p. 5)

In a separate room, a sender then looks at a randomly selected visual stimulus for a period of about thirty minutes. The receiver provides a continuous verbal report of his or her imagery. At the end of the experiment, the receiver is asked to select the correct stimulus from a set of, usually four, stimuli. The results are scored as a "success" if the receiver chooses the appropriate stimulus.

A number of studies were conducted using this procedure, and meta-analyses of their results showed a likelihood of success far exceeding what would have been expected on the basis of chance. The ganzfeld procedure was criticized extensively by research psychologist Ray Hyman (1985) and others. In response to these criticisms, a second series of experiments were conducted, and meta-analyses showed similar results (Bem & Honorton, 1994). Hyman (1994) praised the changes, stating that the new set of experiments met most of the earlier criticisms. He noted, however, that the high level of success might be accounted for by weaknesses in the randomization procedures whereby stimuli were selected, a criticism Bem (1994) rejected as unfounded.

The quality of earlier studies in parapsychology has been questioned extensively, and the ganzfeld studies may meet similar criticism. We also recognize that parapsychological findings, if valid, may be explained through expanded scientific models based on materialist assumptions. For example, sociologists James Spickard (1992; Neitz & Spickard, 1990), Mary Jo Neitz (Neitz & Spickard, 1990), and David Preston (1988) have all offered the interesting suggestion that mystical experiences may be accounted for through complex processes of social learning. Biologist and Nobel Laureate Francis Crick (1994) raises the possibility that consciousness may be totally explicable as the product of complex interactions between

neurons. Thus, we do not contend that these studies must be accepted as valid. We do, however, submit that there is enough evidence to merit consideration.

These data indicate that certain underlying presuppositions of sociology may need revision. We offer the following beliefs, drawn from major spiritual traditions (Markides, 1995; Smith, 1991), as alternatives to the prevalent paradigm:

1. There is a reality toward which religious point that is both nonphysical and nonsocial.
2. People have an inner spiritual component that enables them to reach toward this reality.
3. This spiritual component also has the possibility of influencing behavior; thus, human personalities may be influenced by more than heredity and environment.
4. As a result, there is an inherent indeterminacy to sociology; that is, there are both social and personal phenomena that the social, physical, and biological sciences cannot fully explain.
5. Human values may be influenced by this spiritual component, as well as social and biological conditions.

Our purpose here is simply to state that these implications are worthy of exploration and that such exploration would be at least heuristically useful to sociological theory. We do not wish to argue that these alternative assumptions, or hypotheses, are necessarily correct. Rather, we suggest that it would be interesting to ask what sociological theory would look like if we were to bracket our current assumptions and explore this theory in light of the alternative hypotheses.

These proposed hypotheses contradict the materialist assumptions that sociologists often employ, assumptions which imply that human beings are fully formed by their environment and heredity and that spiritual experiences refer to no independent reality and are therefore to be viewed as the consequence of social structure and/or emotional disability. Within the symbolic interactionist view of the self, it is assumed that the self emerges out of daily communication with others. In contrast, our hypothesis posits that the self is strongly *influenced* by these interactions but is not *determined* by them (Mead, 1934/1962). The implications of this distinction will be explored later. The materialist assumptions also eliminate any discussion of the possibility that religious experience

may have a referent that is both real and nonmaterial. As a result, they lead us to explain religious experience in a reductionistic fashion.

### **Bringing Spirit In**

In the remainder of this paper, we would like to discuss the potential advantages for the discipline of sociology if it were to embrace the proposed new paradigm. In particular, we wish to underline that the incorporation of spiritual assumptions will not require that our discipline forsake any of its current practices; indeed, a proper view of the spiritual component in human affairs incorporates all the customary sociological insights.

A spiritual perspective would not lead us to discard any current theoretical frameworks because spiritual elements are seen as exerting only a minor influence on most human personalities except during experiences of transcendence, which are rarely encountered save by those who engage in rigorous spiritual practices. For most people, personalities are largely formed by the types of variables presently discussed by sociologists. Furthermore, because many people are largely unaware of the spirit within, their spiritual perspectives are influenced, for the most part, by their social and cultural milieus. Thus, the social and cultural variables familiar to sociologists are expected, within these spiritual perspectives, to explain many of the characteristics of societies and individuals. In *The Bhagavad Gita* (Chapple, 1984), Kirshna tells Arjuna that Arjuna can only connect with his own spirit by overcoming the strongly persuasive influence of society, a premise echoed by Socrates in the *Republic* (Plato, 1968). Alan Watts (1975), a celebrated specialist in Oriental religions, makes this same argument in *Psychotherapy East and West*. The Eastern concept of liberation necessitates liberation from cultural conditioning. To the best of our knowledge, the same argument is made within every major spiritual tradition.

Thus, the variables and theoretical perspectives used by sociologists would be incorporated within the modified sociology that we are proposing. These variables and theories would also be used to explain much of individual behavior and social dynamics. In contrast to contemporary sociology, however, they would not be expected to give a *complete* explanation either by themselves or in conjunction with the elements of biological and psychological theories now

being introduced into sociology. Rather, a complete discussion would also require reference to the possibility of a spiritual component and this component's relationship to a transcendent realm, influences that cannot be reduced to either biological or sociocultural determinants. We believe that such a perspective would enrich sociology while still allowing the discipline to continue its current work. We would like to illustrate this contention by discussing the sociology of religion and the sociology of the self.

In our view, the sociology of religion lacks any means of distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic religious beliefs and experiences. Rather than considering the possibility that some religious beliefs and practices may be authentic, the mainstream sociological view assumes that they may not be objectively explored. Consequently, the sociological perspective provides no way of differentiating the relative authenticity or inauthenticity of a religion that, for example, encourages human sacrifice from one that teaches universal compassion.

The adherents of any discipline that grounds itself solely within a materialist perspective cannot make such a distinction. If our discipline is extended to incorporate spiritual assumptions, however, such distinctions become possible. For example, a number of transpersonal psychologists suggest that human consciousness is on an evolutionary path toward higher stages (Assagioli, 1965; Greenwood, 1995; Grof, 1975, 1985; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980; Washburn, 1988; Wilber, 1982, 1983b, 1995). Their classifications of different levels of consciousness may be used to distinguish authentic from inauthentic beliefs and practices.

How would a sociology of religion appear if it accommodated a transpersonal view of human nature? On the one hand, it would accept the possibility that some people may have authentic religious experiences. By this we mean that people may voluntarily or involuntarily enter alternate states of consciousness during which contact with the divine is possible (Wilber, 1984). On the other hand, such a perspective would also recognize that when people emerge from such experiences back into their ordinary states of consciousness they face the problem of interpreting these experiences for themselves and others in their social milieu. In making these interpretations, they will be influenced by their cultures and all the presumptions

that prejudices contained therein (Katz, 1978), by the material and ideal interests of their social groups (Collins, 1977), and by the psychological dispositions that they have developed as a result of their personal experiences. Thus, no matter how authentic their experiences, their understanding of these experiences will be influenced, often very deeply, by the social and cultural variables with which sociologists are familiar. We would thus be able to ask all the questions we now ask in the sociology of religion, but our study would be deepened in several ways.

First, we would not assume that religious experiences are ipso facto inauthentic. Second, we would draw upon the vast amount of material within mystical traditions in order to avoid what Ken Wilber (1983a) has termed the "Pre-Trans Fallacy," namely, the mistake of confusing truly trans-egoic experiences with psychopathology. This fallacy can occur in two ways. It can be assumed that all forms of transpersonal experience fundamentally represent pre-egoic states of development – forms of psychological regression in which the individual ego is reduced to an infantile state of oneness (Jung, 1965). The fallacy can also take the form of viewing some mental illnesses as breakthroughs into higher levels of transpersonal awareness (Laing, 1967). In both cases, there is an inability to consider that people who report having extraordinary experiences may or may not be suffering from mental disorders. Further, there is no possibility of considering whether transcendent experiences are of a "higher" or "lower" order. Transpersonal theorists like Ken Wilber (1982) and Michael Washburn (1988) have identified several stages of transpersonal development that one can enter into experientially, a phenomenon known to mystics throughout history (Stace, 1987). For example, psychic experiences of clairvoyance are considered to be potentially authentic but at a lower level of truth than the experience of enlightenment reporting by "spiritual adepts" in all ages. Surprisingly, there seems to be considerable consensus among different religious and spiritual traditions on the stages on spiritual development. Based upon phenomenological descriptions of these experiences and the ways they are reported to have changed and developed over time, different traditions have arrived at similar conclusions about the nature and stages of mystical experience (Cheney, 1945; Smith, 1991, 1992).



Using these observations to create models of authenticity, sociologists would then be able to ask questions that are currently overlooked within the sociology of religion. Most importantly, they could ask which social and cultural structures foster authentic religious experiences and which do not (Marks, 1979). Further, when reports of religious experience that appear to be authentic are located, sociologists could then examine how they fare within the social structure: how social factors affect the extent to which these reports are distorted and their original meanings lost. They could then investigate the effects of these distortions upon the later life of the society. Similar questions can be asked about religious movements. Finally, Collins (1977) has suggested the interesting possibility that sociology may be used in conjunction with personal experiences derived from spiritual practices to disentangle the socially constructed and ideological aspects of mystical experiences from aspects that may be more intrinsic to the experiences themselves.

The orientation we propose also seems to hold promise for an understanding of the self currently absent from mainstream sociological discourse. This paradigm would allow sociologists to consider in a more open-minded manner the spiritual and ethical yearnings of many people and their belief that they have authentic religious experiences (Cox, 1984). Further, it would allow sociologists to investigate people's ability to resist cultural conditioning and advance to *higher psychological levels* (Maslow, 1968, 1977).

Current sociological theories offer an excellent understanding of the "Me," the part of the self that reflects socially assigned roles, but give us little ability to talk about the "I," the creative, spontaneous, nonsocialized part (for further discussion, see Mead, 1934/1962). Sociologists theorize about the "I" insofar as they discuss social mechanisms that lead people to become self-aware and enable them to acquire language and the ability to think. They are not able to account, however, for the fact that when people do focus on their internal processes they find something within themselves that, as George Herbert Mead said, stands against the "Me" and indicates a desire to be otherwise. Such theories provide insight into why people attend to internal processes but do not account for why they observe what they do.

How are we to understand these internal characteristics? Within psychological theories of

personality, they are explained by heredity and prior experiences. These theories rest upon the assumption that human beings do not have a spiritual component. If the contrary is assumed, there are possibilities for additional explanations that may be more akin to the full range of human experience.

The sociology of the self is largely a sociology of the "Me." All known spiritual traditions agree that socialization and culture have a significant impact upon who we are as human beings. In this respect, these traditions differ from mainstream sociological theory only in claiming that people have the spiritual possibility of transcending their cultural conditioning. The major spiritual traditions recognize the existence of unconscious thoughts, emotions, and drives, and they also recognize that part of any authentic spiritual path is the uncovering of this material. The perspective we advocate would also accept the relevance of the unconscious.

Within the paradigm we suggest, existing sociological questions about the self would be recognized as valid, but, in contrast to mainstream sociological theory, they would be seen as having the potential of explaining only a part, though a significant part, of human nature. Our proposed perspective would allow us to ask additional questions, such as what social conditions enable people to contact their inner self, thereby enhancing the development of the "I" and gaining further independence from the "Me." We may also ask what social conditions favor people's progression on their spiritual paths (Marks, 1979). In addition, we may study the consequences of mystical experiences and the social and cultural conditions that enable individuals to incorporate these experiences into either a more authentic or distorted understanding of the inner self. We can then study the effects of these different understandings upon social behaviors and the way these behaviors affect various aspects of life.

Finally, this perspective would allow sociologists to introduce further discussions of values and human worth. From its inception, sociology has explored the different social conditions that give rise to various sets of values. While most sociologists have believed that value systems are completely the result of social forces (Hall & Neitz, 1993), others have taken the position that particular values are innate to human beings, thus suggesting that social factors are not the only determinants of values (Bauman, 1994; Bellah,

Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, 1992; Etzioni, 1993; Fromm, 1973; Geras, 1983; Selznick, 1992). These sociologists have postulated certain values as desirable and have studied the social conditions that promote or impede their adoption and realization. Sociologists who employ the hypothesis we propose would also see certain values as innate but would differ from other sociologists in grounding these values within a spiritual context.

### Conclusion

If the discipline of sociology adopts such a hypothesis, it will continue to investigate all the processes that are currently studied but be more modest in its claims. In addition, sociologists will have available an exciting new range of analytical possibilities which seem to us more in accord with the full range of human experience. This new dimension will add to the contributions our discipline can make, highlighting problems and issues of the possible impact if extraordinary experiences upon historical processes and individual lives.

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