

Parapsychology and Spirituality

Introduction

It is instructive and disturbing to compare the following two excerpts, one the results of a 1994 *Newsweek* survey of Americans' religious experience, the other a quote from an article by chemist Peter Atkins, published in the prestigious British scientific magazine *New Scientist* (1992). Atkins is commenting on an article by well-known author Mary Midgley (1992) in which she voiced concern about the way science appears to have undermined religion.

In a *Newsweek* Poll [of 3-4 Nov. 1994]] a majority of Americans (58 percent) say they felt the need to experience spiritual growth. And a third of all adults report having had a mystical or religious experience. . . . 20% of Americans have had a revelation from God in the last year, 13% have seen or sensed the presence of an angel. . . . Outside church, 45% sense the sacred during meditation, 68% at the birth of a child, 26% during sex. . . . 50% feel a deep sense of the sacred all or most of the time in church or at worship services. . . . (52-61)

Fear. Fear seems to me to be what motivates authors to write . . . about the encroachment of science on the tender patches of the soul. . . . There is indeed room for some people to fear, for those who seek to found their lives on the vaporous precepts so favoured by religion now find themselves teetering on the brink of an abyss wherein lies truth: the truth of our mortality, the truth of the absence of soul and the truth of the ultimate insignificance of all human activity. These truths are so consuming as to inspire subconscious fear and to generate the only resort of the vanquished and the disarmed: the stridency of protestation. (32)

If Atkins is right, our civilization is very sick indeed, with a majority of Americans not only *believing* in God,

but a fifth of them so deluded that they think they have actually had a personal revelation from God in the last year! We must be not only fearful, vanquished, and vaporous, many of us must be rather psychotic!

Questions about what, if anything, is valid about religion and, more importantly, spirituality (the more pure and powerful experiences underlying the social organizations we call religion) have been important to me (and many others) since I was a child. If all spirituality is nonsense, then where do we find a basis for a morality that goes beyond "looking out for number one"? Such questions came into sharp focus for me when I was invited to give an address on science and religion at the historic second Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993. The paper presented there begins this issue.

I am convinced, through both my professional work as a scientist and my personal attempts at personal and spiritual growth, that this wholesale undermining of spirituality by orthodox science is not only unhealthy but scientifically, *factually* wrong. The traditional conflict between science and religion is really one between *scientism*—a dogmatic hardening of belief systems, rather than basic science—and "religion" in the worst sense of the word, rigid and unhealthy belief systems that belie the spirituality they claim to be founded on. When relevant solid, scientific research is studied, rather than scientific dogma, we discover a solid, scientific base for seeing human beings as potentially far more than mere material animals and find that humans can occasionally exercise various psychic abilities that give

credence to a generally spiritual view of the world.

This issue of *ReVision* presents a detailed exploration of the spiritual implications that can be drawn from modern research in parapsychology. The scientists and scholars writing here are leading figures in scientific parapsychology. The discussion is unusual, for parapsychologists usually prefer to stick close to rigorous laboratory findings and say little about the implications. The reason is that there is so much emotionally intense opposition to parapsychological findings from the defenders of scientism against what they treat as heresy. Our contributors have decided that the importance of the findings for issues of spirituality is greater than that of the conservative, defensive strategies that it was hoped (in vain) might lead to wider acceptance of parapsychology in the mainstream scientific community. The result is exciting reading!

I am proud to call myself both a scientist and a spiritual seeker, and I am not being unscientific in doing so. I hope that you will share this feeling after reading these contributions and that unnecessary conflict will be eliminated in your personal and professional interest in the spiritual.

—Charles T. Tart

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