World Parliament of Superstition?
Scientific Evidence for a Basic Reality to the Spiritual

CHARLES T. TART

Editor's note: This paper was presented at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Chicago, 28 August to 4 September.

Are all of us here today, you, and especially me, a bunch of fools? Are we wasting our time attending a meeting on religion, when everybody "knows" that science long ago showed religion was all nonsense, the refuge of the superstitious and weak-minded who can't face harsh reality? The opiate of the masses?

We usually prefer to ignore that question, but we can't do it very well in today's world, so I'm going to make it the central issue in this talk. Not simply because it's impolitic to ignore such a politically powerful area like science, but for a basically spiritual reason. That reason is well expressed in a saying, attributed to a mystical group, that I take as a personal credo:

There is no God but Reality.
To seek Him elsewhere
Is the action of the Fall.

The relevant interpretation of this here is that even if you have high spiritual goals, if you ignore any aspects of what reality is in your search, it is bound to become distorted and fail.

To address the question, then, of whether religion is all nonsense, I'm not going to give you a typical scholarly presentation on relationships between science and religion with lots of detailed data and references as to who said what about what. I've written about many aspects of that in a formal way in other places (Tart 1972; 1975; 1979; 1981; 1986; 1988). Rather I'm going to tell you a story as the central framework of the facts and ideas I want to present. It is a personal story, my story in some ways, but it's also the story of Western man and woman in our times. I am not uncomfortable adding this personal element, as most scientists have been conditioned to be (if I speak and write in an impersonal style I must be really objective, yes?), for some of my own psychological research has been on the ways our personal biases play important roles in distorting the scientific process, as well as the process of living in general. I aspire to objectivity as any scholar or scientist does, but I've found that the best way to deal with biases is to face them, not pretend that they aren't there.

Preview

At this historic Parliament, many participants are wearing dress—turbans, robes, etc.—appropriate to their faith. So I stand before you wearing, as it were, one of my robes of office, a symbol of purity, my "religious" vestments—a white lab coat. With these vestments I invoke the authority of one of the most powerful "religions" of our times: scientism, a powerful and dogmatic religion, that always pretends it is real science.

I could also describe my wearing of this lab coat as a cheap trick to get your attention, or, more accurately, I could say I am using the cultural conditioning we moderns have all had in order to draw your attention and so more effectively emphasize some central points of my message today, such as (a) the fact that science, in the form of scientism, has degenerated into a rather deadly but powerful religion in many ways, and (b) that it is a religion that too frequently captures our attention and feelings in a mindless way, just as this lab coat affects your perception of me in ways that are largely automatic and conditioned. I shall go on to show, as a scientist, how genuine science, as opposed to scientism, can both help and be inspired by genuine spirituality.

Personally, I wear this lab coat, my identity as a scientist, proudly. I love doing science and I'm good at it. I also spend a lot of my time doing spiritual practices—I have just returned from a month long meditation retreat, for example—which, I hope, will make me a wiser and more loving person, and I
have little conflict between my spiritual aspirations and my role as a scientist rigorously pursuing knowledge. Indeed, I believe genuine science and genuine spirituality need each other desperately if our planet is to survive!

Now for the first thread of our story.

The First Thread: Childhood Religion

The religious part of my story began around 1940, when I was three, and so old enough to begin absorbing the deep truths of my grandmother, a Lutheran. She eventually took me to Sunday school and church, and I was a devout Lutheran until my midteens.

As an orthodox psychologist, I know of many studies that show what deep and usually permanent impressions our early childhood experiences have on us. To illustrate, when my grandmother suddenly died of a heart attack, when I was seven years old, I was heartbroken. Although my parents did what they could, I developed rheumatic fever about a year later. My adult psychological understanding tells me that I wanted to die and go to heaven to be with my loved ones. They are important, but faith of my grandmother, a Lutheran. She eventually took me to Sunday school and church, and I was a devout Lutheran until my midteens.

This beginning religious story, with many twists, is what many of us have lived. Our parents' or other relatives' religion is given to us wholesale when we were open, impressionable, naive children. The "twists," of course, are enormous. At its worst, the early religious story is one of fear-based indoctrination into a pathological, dysfunctional belief system, incorporating the shortcomings and neuroses of the parents, the community, and the religion, and producing a lifetime of stupid and useless suffering for ourselves and others. At its best, you at least stay somewhat in touch with your spiritual core and, hopefully, develop a mature, loving spirituality that brings happiness and meaning into your own and others' lives.

The Second Thread: Developing Intelligence, Developing Conflict

The second thread of the story is about the development of intelligence and knowledge. As young children, our relationship to our parents, other adults and society is rather like the way the ancient Greeks pictured the relations of humans and gods. We are weak to the point of total dependence for our very lives on our parents, we know little of the world around us, and our thinking is simplistic and frequently erroneous. Our parents, by contrast, seem and are godlike, knowing so much and being so powerful!

But we grow. Our knowledge of the world and people, our ability to think and reason, our ability to see below the surface of things, develops enormously. We develop skill in using our bodies and, hopefully, skill and intelligence in using and understanding our emotions. Orthodox psychology has studied and understood this process in great detail. Few people reach their full potentials in these areas, unfortunately, but most adults have grown enormously compared to when they were children.

As my mind, body, and feelings grew, I became more devout in some ways but also began to question what I had been taught about religion in other ways. I vividly remember my confirmation class when I was about twelve, for example. We had been memorizing and studying the Ten Commandments. I took them very seriously and did not want to do anything wrong, but I didn't understand the one about adultery. How could I avoid committing this sin if I didn't know what it was? I asked my pastor during a class. To my puzzlement and embarrassment, he blushed and looked uncomfortable and then told me not to think or worry about it, that commandment was only of concern to adults! Young as I was, I had grown enough to know I was not being given an honest answer and I had done something wrong to even ask. This kind of evasion and use of authority to inhibit inquiry sowed doubts about the religion I had been taught. I was also puzzled and angered by the amount of hypocrisy I began to recognize in church members and by knowing more adults who were nonreligious or antireligious.

Conflicts with religion as it was taught to us are a part of the story of practically every person who has had a formal religious upbringing. How they are handled and the resulting outcomes, relatively healthy or pathological, show great variation. Many people give in to authority in order to fit in and receive approval, crippling a part of their natural intelligence, for example. I will come back to this issue after introducing the theme of science.

The Third Thread: Science "Disproves" Religion

The third thread of the story is relatively unique to recent human history; it
is the wide-ranging conflict between science and religion.

I loved science even as a young child. I was naturally curious as to how things worked, as well as being attracted to the glamour and power of science. Getting a chemistry set for Christmas, for example, was one of the highlights of my life! We had not become sophisticated enough to begin to think about the ecological and psychological costs of technological progress yet, and science was our glowing hope for continually improving the lot of the human race. I wanted to be a scientist when I grew up!

With my teen-age years I became an avid reader of books on various areas of science, spending an amount of time in the library that would probably be considered unhealthy. But I was doing just as much reading in religious, occult, and metaphysical books, as I wanted to know how to make religion actually work, not just be some ideals I and others couldn't seem to live up to very well.

For a long time I felt little conflict between my growing knowledge of religion and science. I, as I learned many early scientists had done, accepted God as Creator and saw science as an exciting opportunity to reveal the wonders of creation. Indeed, science was (and still is to me) a noble quest, based on a dedicated, disciplined, and basically spiritual commitment to discover and serve Truth at all costs and on a humility where you admit to and refine your wrong opinions and failed experiments.

As I became older and more knowledgeable and could think more clearly, the conflict became clear. Science, especially the material sciences like physics and chemistry, had no need of God or anything supernatural. Indeed, the scientific community seemed to regard religion as not only useless but pathological, and my later studies of clinical psychology, as well as my increasing understanding of my own neurotic shortcomings, showed innumerable examples of Western religious beliefs cutting people off from reality and acting as the seeds and causes of all kinds of psychopathology.

The second and third threads of our story converge here: how do people deal with the conflict between traditional religious upbringings and modern secular society as they begin to think for themselves? Especially, as they become scientifically knowledgeable?

As with all human stories, there are many variations on the way the story continues. Here I will focus on two common paths and a third, less common path, that is my own and is a path for reconciliation and mutual benefit between genuine science and genuine spirituality in our times.

Trying to Resolve Conflict: Compartmentalization

The first common path of conflict resolution is what I have called the "way of compartmentalization": the conflict between science and religion is not really faced or resolved, but is covered over by the common human ability to dissociate, to hold conflicting beliefs in, as it were, different compartments in their minds and to try to never open both compartments at once. So you have one compartment which opens for an hour or so on the holy day of your religion and then closes, then the main compartment, which holds the beliefs for dealing with the "real world" for the rest of the week, reopens. Many people are thus conventionally religious, going to church on Sunday, but living pretty secular lives the rest of the time.

Psychologically speaking, compartmentalization often seems to work. It usually avoids overt psychological conflict as long as there are no crises in life that call for a deeper response than a secular one. On the other hand, compartmentalization in one area can easily lead to more widespread use of this defense, and there is always a price to be paid; a loss of wholeness, a loss of depth and authenticity.

Trying to Resolve Conflict: Extreme Belief or Disbelief

The second common path of conflict resolution is one of psychological extremism. For many people this means an active rejection of their childhood religion and an active embrace of a secular, ostensibly scientific approach to life. If their religion was associated with denials of self-worth and massive guilt (far too common a story, unfortunately), this may involve the psychological defense of reaction formation, so their childhood religion, often all religion, is violently attacked. On the other hand, some people go to the extreme of a forced, brittle faith in their religion and see science and the secular world as irrelevant or evil. As with compartmentalization, both these extremes are psychologically unhealthy, involving a loss of wholeness and more specific psychological defenses that distort perception and behavior.

As a psychologist interested in personal growth, I have always been fascinated (and discouraged) by the ways in which we restrict ourselves, in which we lose our vital energy and higher possibilities to automatized psychological strictures and defenses. The sad thing is that we usually don't consciously know we're doing this, it just becomes an automatic, habitual way to live.

I sometimes give workshops to help people become more mindful of who they really are and what their psychological and spiritual possibilities might be. But you must personally discover what holds you back. If you know you believe something, for example, you can observe the consequences of your beliefs and try to alter or refine them and so keep in better touch with reality. When your beliefs become automatic habits of perception, thinking, feeling, and action, though, they are a set of shackles chaining your mind. In a while I will describe an experiential exercise I devised some years ago to help people become more conscious about some of the beliefs and restrictions that had become so automatized among us Westerners, specifically the beliefs that constitute the "religion" that sociologists call scientism.

Genuine science was (and still is) a quite noble and spiritual process, having arisen from beliefs that a search for better knowledge about the world, for Truth, could reduce the suffering and increase the happiness of humanity. Absolute honesty and dedication were necessary qualities to be a scientist, and you accepted what the universe, Reality, taught you through the factual results of your experiments, even if they weren't what you had hoped to find. You tried to be always open to new information, new data, new ways of making sense of data, so you needed to be rather humble about
your own ideas. They were always subject to empirical test.

This noble quest, vastly successful in so many areas, especially the physical sciences, is practiced by real human beings, though, and we don't always measure up to the requirements of absolute honesty, humility, and open-mindedness. We get attached to our theories and explanations, we don't like to or refuse to look at data that looks like it would contradict our beloved theories and "laws." We forget to be open-minded about everything, we accept the general beliefs of our culture outside our special area of research, possibly even within it. The need for social approval, or to keep a job or get a promotion, can make many sloppy about looking at contradictory information, or even overly dishonest.

We all know what happened historically. The physical sciences became more and more successful. Since everyone wants to be successful, even the social and psychological sciences started to emulate the physical sciences. I have no real need to wear a white lab coat, for example: there are no chemicals in my lab that I have to keep from spilling on my clothing. But doesn't it make me look like a real scientist?

So all the sciences copied the physical sciences to various degrees, and that meant a working philosophy of materialism. If something can't be sensed by our bodily senses or measured by a physical instrument, it isn't real! Coupled with some of the obvious excesses and pathologies of religion as grounds to reject it, materialism became a dominant force in Western culture.

Scientism

If someone wants to consciously adopt a materialistic philosophy of life, or any particular set of religious beliefs, that's all right with me. I firmly believe that people should be able to choose their beliefs, as long as they are willing to be responsible for the consequences and treat everyone else decently. Unfortunately my psychological studies have shown me that most of us were pressured and conditioned, seduced and brainwashed, into particular belief systems when we were children, with little knowledge, consciousness, and choice involved. This brings us back to the experiential exercise I mentioned earlier, which I call the Western Creed exercise.

To make people more aware of the scientistic, materialistic beliefs that are largely implicit in them, even if they think they are deeply spiritual people, I ask them to participate in a "belief experiment." They are asked to deliberately give as much energy and belief as possible, "play the game," to entertaining a particular set of beliefs for about fifteen minutes. While doing this, they are to observe the emotional feelings generated. They are asked to wait on intellectually analyzing the exercise until it's over. Afterwards they can go back to their usual beliefs and evaluate what they've learned from the experiment.

To increase the emotional impact of the experiment, I make use of our common American cultural conditioning and our natural instinct to be social creatures, just as I am deliberately making use of this white lab coat. I have my students stand at attention in neat, orderly rows, with their right hands over their hearts, the way we learned to pledge allegiance to the American flag in school. In unison we then recite aloud the Western Creed.

I'm going to read the Creed to you but not ask you to recite it with me, as the full-scale exercise usually generates strong emotions that I have people work out afterwards. We don't have time for that, but just listening will give you some emotional feeling for the effects of the Creed.

Note that the formal structure of the Western Creed is a deliberate parallel to the Apostles Creed of Christianity. This is not an attack on Christian beliefs—I deeply admire anyone who uses their Christian faith to behave as Jesus asked us to and so become a more loving human being—but a way of making the consequences of our automatized scientistic beliefs clearer by contrasting it to a well-known set of religious beliefs. Here is the Western Creed:

I BELIEVE - that all ideas about God or gods - enlightened beings - prophets and saviors - or other nonphysical beings or forces - are superstitions and delusions. - Life and consciousness are totally identical to physical processes and are arose from chance interactions of blind physical forces. - Like the rest of life - my life - and my consciousness - have no objective purpose - meaning - or destiny.

I AFFIRM - that all judgments, values, and moralities - whether my own or others - are subjective - arising solely from biological determinants - personal history - and chance. - Free will is an illusion. - Therefore the most rational values I can personally live by must be based on the knowledge that for me - what pleases me is Good - what pains me is Bad. - Those who please me or help me avoid pain are my friends - those who pain me or keep me from my pleasure are my enemies. - Rationality requires that friends and enemies be used in ways that maximize my pleasure - and minimize my pain.

I AFFIRM - that churches have no real use other than social support - that there are no objective sins to commit or be forgiven for - that there is no divine or supernatural retribution for sin or reward for virtue - although there may be social consequences of actions. - Virtue for me is getting what I want - without being caught and punished by others.

I AFFIRM - that the death of the body - is the death of the mind. - There is no afterlife - and all hope of such is nonsense.

You will seldom find the beliefs of scientism expressed this blatantly. But you will find them expressed more indirectly, as if they were scientific "facts," in millions of places, such as college textbooks in the various sciences. They are not simple facts, of course, they are theories, interpretations. The automatic, mindless acceptance of them is not good science: yet they are very widespread in our culture.

You can probably see why I tend to call this a "sadder but wiser" exercise. Scientism provides a pretty dismal and depressing view of life for most people. But what makes it really sad is that the large majority of people who participate in this Western Creed exercise discover that parts of them believe much of this depressing philosophy and it adversely affects their lives, even though these same people have consciously thought of themselves as "spiritual seekers," as being far more spiritual than most peo-
ple in our culture. They realize how deeply these kinds of beliefs have been conditioned in them just by being alive in these times, and how these beliefs are constantly being reiterated, reinforced, and rewarded, directly and indirectly, in contemporary culture.

We could discuss the psychological and spiritual ramifications of this exercise at length, but time restrictions do not allow it. But there is one vitally important point to make: Just because we don’t feel good about this scientific belief system is not a sufficient reason to reject it!

Recall the spiritual maxim I quoted at the beginning of this talk:

There is no God but Reality.
To seek Him elsewhere
Is the action of the Fall.

Now let’s come back to considering the ways people have of dealing with conflicts between science and religion. We looked at compartmentalization, and we looked at extreme reaction formations, such as scientism. Let’s look at a third way.

**Trying to Resolve Conflict: Psychical Research and Parapsychology**

I, and a very few others, were lucky in finding a third path. As part of my voracious reading as a teen-ager, I discovered the early scientific literature on psychical research and its modern descendant, parapsychology.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century the conflict between science and religion was, if anything, more intense and overt than it is now. Scientific progress had indeed shown that many religious ideas, especially ones pertaining to the nature of the physical world, were just plain wrong. Further, understanding of abnormal extremes of psychological functioning had shown how even apparently normal people could have trancelike states in which unusual hallucinations occurred, often of a religious flavor. Thus it became increasingly easy—and fashionable—for intellectuals to dismiss religion totally, seeing it as a product of primitive superstition, prescientific, and outmoded attempts to understand the world, and as psychological aberrations and delusions.

A number of brilliant intellectuals and scholars, though, realized that the fashionable dismissal of all religion in the name of science, materialism and modernity was too extreme. There seemed to be some human experiences that, on the face of it, would not yield to physical explanation and suggested that there was more to humans than, as it used to be phrased, ninety-eight cents’ worth of chemicals.

A reliable, educated gentlemen, for example, might suddenly have a dream that his son, currently stationed in India, had tragically been killed by an elephant. The gentlemen would not be the type to worry excessively and might normally never recall any dreams. Yet when a sailing ship arrived from India a few months later, the sad letter would confirm that the son had indeed been killed at that time by a runaway elephant. This was hardly proof of a really major idea like the existence of God, but it was (and still is) totally unexplainable in terms of physics or any reasonable extensions of physics, and suggested that the human mind—or soul, whatever you want to call it—was something importantly more than ninety-eight cents’ worth of chemicals, was perhaps something “spiritual.”

Thus in 1882 the Society for Psychical Research was formed in London. Its purpose was to use the methods of science and scholarship that were working so well in so many areas of life and apply them specifically to studying the kinds of unusual human experiences that seemed to imply a spiritual dimension to humans. The Society’s founders knew that much that went under the name of religion was superstition or error, but was there a core of truth? Were we throwing out the baby with the bath water? They conducted detailed surveys of such experiences, for instance, filtering out rumors and third-hand stories and collecting testimony only from reliable witnesses, preferably those who had independent corroboration of their stories.

There is a fascinating history of psychical research that I could talk about, as well as the evolution of laboratory-based parapsychology, leading to well over a thousand published, high-quality, scientific experiments that show the existence of several psychic abilities and tell us a little about their nature, but there is no time for that here. Instead I will outline the main point, namely the existence beyond any reasonable scientific doubt of four psychic abilities, abilities of mind that provide a solid, scientific basis for seeing humans as far more than the old ninety-eight cents’ worth of chemicals. I need hardly point out that this change in perspective has important moral implications in the long run, for the ninety-eight cents’ worth of chemicals has become $50,000 for a transplantable eye, $10,000 to $40,000 for a single, transplantable kidney, $2,000 for an ovum, plus other increasingly marketable body parts (Kimbrell 1993). When humans are seen as nothing but biological preparations, the have-nots and the powerless become more and more desirable commodities for the haves and powerful.

The four major kinds of psychic functioning, psi abilities as they are generally called now, are three kinds of extrasensory perception (ESP)—telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition—and a kind of direct motor effect on the world, psychokinesis (PK). They are probably other kinds of psi effects also, but I focus on these four as there are dozens to
hundreds of experiments establishing each one, whereas the others haven’t been investigated so thoroughly.

The controlled laboratory procedures that have demonstrated these psi abilities involved setting up a situation in which, given our scientific knowledge of the physical world and reasonable extensions of it, nothing could happen. You then have people try to mentally gather information that is at a distance or shielded from them or materially affect some target that is similarly distant or shielded from them. According to the materialistic approach, you are wasting your time.

I won’t go into details for lack of time, but describe just one of the more interesting methods to give you a flavor of parapsychological experimentation. This is the ganzfeld method. Ganzfeld is German for a uniform, featureless visual field. You tape halved Ping-Pong balls (acetate hemispheres, if you want to talk fancy!) over a receiver’s eyes and shine a light on them. The receiver sees a featureless field, but soon begins to project his or her own visual imagery on this field and describes it aloud. Meanwhile a “sender” in a distant room looks at a randomly selected picture and tries to telepathically send it to the receiver. An outside judge is given the pictures and transcripts of a series of such sessions, without being told which target picture was intended to go with which ganzfeld imagery session.

If telepathy were something which worked reliably all the time, we wouldn’t need formal experiments, of course. If there were no such thing as telepathy, on the other hand, all we would see in a ganzfeld experiment would be occasional, random correspondences between a receiver’s imagery and the correct target picture. But if telepathy occasionally manifests, even with just partial flashes of information transfer, the outside judge should find consistently higher correspondences between the transcripts of imagery intended for a particular target than between that target and imagery from other sessions. And that is exactly what has been found. Thorough analyses and meta-analyses (see Bem and Honorton [1994] for a review) have shown that some form of psi occurs with fair regularity in ganzfeld studies.

Occasionally the “hits” are spectacular, as when the target series was a set of Viewmaster clips on Las Vegas and the receiver described her imagery as looking like a scene from Las Vegas. Most of the time psi effects are small, and sometimes they don’t show up at all in particular laboratory studies. Psi would not form a very reliable communications system at this time, but its implications are more important than its applications.

The primary implication is that, using the best kind of scientific methodology, the human mind has occasional abilities to transcend space and time that are totally inexplicable in terms of the material world. That is, materialism, while it may be a useful working hypothesis in many areas, especially the physical sciences, is totally unable to explain important aspects of human nature. Thus science is a factually mistaken “religion” insofar as it purports to be based on scientific fact and a total view of reality.

Let’s look at some aspects of this a little more specifically. Consider telepathy. The human mind can occasionally have some sort of direct information transfer—factual information or emotional tone—“contact” if you prefer, with other human minds. Nothing about brains or bodies can explain this. The electrical radiation from our brains is enormously weak and could not carry information over any useful distance.

Consider clairvoyance. Occasionally a mind can directly know the state of affairs of the distant physical world, without using the senses of the body. This can be gross characteristics of the physical world, such as the ink marking on a concealed card, or more subtle characteristics, such as the internal electrical state of a computer-like device.

Consider precognition. Occasionally a person can correctly predict a future event which is, in terms of widely accepted physical principles, inherently unpredictable, such as the order of a deck of cards that will be thoroughly shuffled at some future time and repeatedly cut according to future conditions such as the temperature in a distant city and the barometric pressure in another city. Precognitively and clairvoyantly detected events have also included the outcomes of events based on quantum mechanical random-event generators.

Consider psychokinesis. Occasionally just wishing for a certain physical outcome has some detectable influence on that outcome. A striking example is biasing the outcome of an electronic, computer-like device that randomly produces a binary outcome. The person causing the biasing, the agent, usually has no idea how the device works, and usually doesn’t have sufficient technical education to understand an explanation even if he or she were given one.

These sound like the characteristics of minds, or perhaps souls, that may be quite enmeshed in the characteristics of matter most of the time but can somehow operate and (at least partially) exist independently of matter, minds that occasionally have access to nonphysical sources of information we cannot begin to adequately conceptualize, that perhaps may be capable of surviving physical death. And if these are characteristics of people, may there not be minds or a Mind much greater than our own? God?

These are big jumps, of course, and eventually involve some leap of faith as to what one ultimately concludes. But it will be a faith based on high-quality, scientific evidence of what is possible in reality.

Resistance to the Findings of Parapsychology

As you know, the scientific establishment in general pays no attention to the findings of parapsychology. They are almost never taught as part of a scientific or even a general education. Most scientists (and laymen and religious professionals) can honestly say they have seen no evidence to make them take the field seriously, which illustrates the degree to which science has permeated the scientific enterprise. Since scientific functions as a dogmatic, closed religion, part of the implicit education of scientists is the occasional disparaging remark about what nonsense parapsychology is. We want social acceptance, to belong, so we don’t look at the evidence and then can indeed honestly say that we have never seen anything to convince us! Many of the most outspoken pseudocritics of parapsychology are insulted if you ask them to read the lit-
erature; why should they waste their time on what they know is nonsense?

This kind of obstinate closed-mindedness is often found in religion, although formal religion has no monopoly on it, and the rest of us look down on it. It is too bad this kind of scientism is so common in science. What is needed is not mindless resistance and orthodoxy in any area of knowledge, but open-minded investigation.

Transpersonal Psychology

Parapsychology is still a very small field, even though its roots go back more than a century. A much larger and faster growing field of investigation, though, is transpersonal psychology, a twenty-five-year-old branch of psychology that actively investigates mystical experiences and the like, experiences that are trans, beyond our ordinary personal and biological self. It is primarily interested in understanding and helping to facilitate such experiences. We moderns are desperate for genuine spirituality based on deep experience, not simply ideas, and there is great hope that transpersonal psychology can bring a nonsectarian spiritual vitality into our culture that can help us.

Transpersonal psychology rests on an understanding that a “successful” spiritual life needs a solid basis in deep "trans" experience. Words and doctrines, emotions and orthodoxy, are desperate for genuine spirituality based on deep experience, not simply ideas, and there is great hope that transpersonal psychology can bring a nonsectarian spiritual vitality into our culture that can help us.

Transpersonal psychology research review: Psychospiritual dimensions of healing. (Lukoff, Turner, and Lu 1993)

Separating from a spiritual teacher. (Bogart 1992)

A preliminary study of long-term meditators: Goals, effects, religious orientation, cognitions. (Shapiro 1992)

Spiritual issues in psychotherapy. (Vaughan 1991)

Guru and psychotherapist: Comparisons from the Hindu tradition. (Vigne 1991)

Looking into mind: An undergraduate course. (Mansfield 1991)

Mindfulness, spiritual seeking and psychotherapy. (Tart and Deikman 1991)

Adapting Eastern spiritual teachings to Western culture. (Tart 1990)

Psychodynamics of meditation: Pitfalls on the spiritual path. (Epstein 1990)

Intimate relationship as path. (Welwood 1990)

The technology of the praeternatural: An empirically based model of transpersonal experiences. (Nelson 1990)

This third way of trying to resolve the conflict between science and religion, using the best of science to try to separate the wheat from the chaff in religion, has been my path, and I hope that my sharing of it has shown its usefulness.

Conclusion

I started my talk by asking,

Are all of us here today, you, and especially me, a bunch of fools? Are we wasting our time attending a meeting on religion, when everybody “knows” that science long ago showed religion was all nonsense, the refuge of the superstitious and weak-minded who can’t face harsh reality? The opiate of the masses?

My answer, as a scientist and as a psychologist, is that yes, we are all certainly foolish at times, but that is a general human characteristic in all areas of life; we are not fools simply because we believe that there is something more to religion. The data of first-class scientific research shows that there is something very important going on under the classification of “religion,” and we would be fools not to use the resources of science to clarify what that is. And we would also be fools not to let the potential and power of genuine spirituality inspire our scientific efforts, lest the world expire in that slough of despondence know as scientism.

NOTE

1. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth; And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary; Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into Hell; The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From there he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Catholic Church; the Communion of Saints; the forgiveness of sins; the Resurrection of the body; and the Life Everlasting. Amen.

REFERENCES


Tart, C. 1972. States of consciousness and orthodoxy in any area of knowledge, but open-minded investigation.

Transpersonal Psychology

Parapsychology is still a very small field, even though its roots go back more than a century. A much larger and faster growing field of investigation, though, is transpersonal psychology, a twenty-five-year-old branch of psychology that actively investigates mystical experiences and the like, experiences that are trans, beyond our ordinary personal and biological self. It is primarily interested in understanding and helping to facilitate such experiences. We moderns are desperate for genuine spirituality based on deep experience, not simply ideas, and there is great hope that transpersonal psychology can bring a nonsectarian spiritual vitality into our culture that can help us.

Transpersonal psychology rests on an understanding that a “successful” spiritual life needs a solid basis in deep experience. Words and doctrines, emotions based simply on hope and fear, produce a shallow and frequently neurotic religion that does not stand up well to the stresses and strains of contemporary secular life. To exaggerate somewhat in order to underscore the point, it is not enough to hear about what God said to someone long since dead and be told what to do by someone who heard it from someone who heard it from someone, etc.: you need to directly hear from God yourself in an experience that transcends your ordinary self, that shakes you to your foundations.

There is little time for me to really go into what this developing field of transpersonal psychology is all about, but let me just give you the titles of a few recent articles from the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology to give you the flavor:

Death and near-death: a comparison of Tibetan and Euro-American Experiences. (Carr 1993)
Charles T. Tart, professor emeritus of psychology at University of California-Davis and currently visiting professor in East-West psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, core faculty member at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, is internationally known for research with altered states, in transpersonal psychology, and in parapsychology. His books include Altered States of Consciousness and Transpersonal Psychologies. His primary goals are to build bridges between the scientific and spiritual communities and to help bring about a refinement and integration of Western and Eastern approaches to personal and social growth.