Introduction to “Do Spirits Exist? Ways to Know”

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SUMMARY  Given various studies both within and without anthropology that treat spirits and extraordinary beings as products of mind, culture, and physiology, the goal of this special issue is to entertain a different stance and to examine how we might know that spirits exist. This introduction to the special issue focuses on the meaning of encounters with spirits, other extraordinary beings, and hidden views of the world, including the dilemmas these experiences may raise and the kinds of inquiries that can assist our understanding of how we know that spirits or other worlds exist. The issue includes five articles by three anthropologists, a folklorist and scholar of religion, and a psychiatrist. A final discussion about “ways of knowing” and means of inquiry, as well as a critique of the articles, is presented by Edith Turner. [Keywords: spirits, inquiry and epistemology, experiential validation, science as method, anthropological perspectives]

many people hold an assumption that the (modern) scientific view of the world should be the basis for all knowledge and all that is knowable... the problem is not with the empirical data of science but with the contention that these data alone constitute a legitimate ground for developing a comprehensive worldview.

—His Holiness the Dalai Lama, The Universe in a Single Atom

My Experience

For over three decades I have studied Spiritism and Spiritists in Puerto Rico and the United States. I estimate that I have spent more than six full years in this field, mostly participating part time while teaching at the University of Puerto Rico from 1967–79. In the past years (2008, 2009) and currently, I have been engaged in yet another project: an exploration of the life and clinical work of Spiritists who are also medical doctors, as compared to non-Spiritist doctors. During my first study of Spiritism, I questioned my own beliefs as to whether spirits were “real,” and not just metaphors or expressions of intra-subjective elements of mind, influenced by inter-subjective experiences, such as the expectations of others who believe in spirits. I realize now that I had carefully tried to avoid focusing on extraordinary experiences by exploring Spiritism from a mental health–medical anthropology perspective. This was a popular and successful approach at the time because it provided access to grant funds.

However, at the same time, my unvoiced convictions about whether spirits existed veered widely from relativistic notions (i.e., “in the Spiritists’ view of...
the idea that spirits (of many types) were as much inhabitants of the universe as were incarnate beings. The mental health professionals (psychologists, counselors, and social workers) who worked with me suffered a similar dilemma, or discrepancy between academic stance and true belief, and several of them did become (or were) “believers” (creyentes); they reported that they had experienced spirits in various ways during the research activities. One day, a Spiritist medium (and, later, many others) told me: “I don’t believe (in spirits), but what exists, exists.” This sentiment comforted me somewhat, as it stripped the question of the existence of spirits of its ambiguity. I could repeat this statement when questioned by others, and, at that point, the questions usually ceased.

This solution to a difficult query sufficed for a number of years until I had accumulated so many experiences with spirits that I could no longer play the game of hiding behind someone else’s belief. I began to appreciate spirits as part of my world, although I remained very cautious regarding those with whom I shared this idea (however, see preface to Koss-Chioino, 1992). My spirit beliefs resonated with recent statements by learned Spiritists in Puerto Rico, who told me, “No son creencias, son experiencias” (they [the spirits] are not beliefs, but experiences). Guided as I had always been by Western scientific canons, I decided that I needed to test my belief system. So I questioned myself further, “How do I know that spirits exist?”

It must be noted here that a small group of anthropologists have very recently completely redefined what is considered valid ethnographic experience and research by advancing the notion of “Extraordinary Anthropology” (Goulet and Miller 2007). They advocate what should have always been obvious: that the way to relate to and understand one’s hosts in the field is to fully enter into their experiences to the greatest extent possible, even if that requires feeling literally “out of one’s mind” (unstable or confused) within a different reality. Students of shamanism and other esoteric disciplines have long sought to experience what their participants were experiencing (see Harner 1980; Stoller 1989; Turner 2005, to cite only a few). Indeed, several anthropologists, including myself, advocated practicing “experiential anthropology” in the early 1980s, which was a rather limited approach compared to the well-reasoned and exciting strategy outlined by Fabian, in his preface to the Goulet and Miller collection (Fabian 2007). Those interested in this perspective should read the preface and the cogent introductory chapter to this book. Several comments from this work are worth noting, in terms of the question of how we might know that spirits exist. The editors propose “ecstasis,” defined as “a quality of human action and interaction-one that creates a common ground for the Other in his homeland,” a mechanism and attitude from which to “experience the real” (Goulet and Miller 2007:5; Fabian 2000:8). Importantly, the editors are referring to what is real for others, as well as to what becomes real for oneself. Thus, they maintain that “this knowledge is also about Ourselves interacting with other subjects in their world” (Fabian 2000:279, as quoted in Goulet and Miller 2007:6). Ethnography is (or could be) a transformative experience according to their perspective; this is vividly illustrated in most of the 16 chapters of their book.
Regarding This Special Issue

I posed the question of how we know that spirits exist to a number of scholars whom I knew had both questioned and experienced the existence of spirits. Their very different answers appear in the articles in this special issue. Following my own brief discussion in this introduction, which provides one kind of answer to the question of how we might know that spirits exist, I will briefly introduce their articles. These articles are revised and expanded versions of papers presented at two symposia for which Edith Turner was the discussant. One presentation took place at the national meetings of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco, California in 2008, and the second occurred at the Mid-Year Meeting of Division 36 of the American Psychological Association at Loyola University in Columbia, Maryland, in 2009. Dr. Turner contributes an original discussion and critique as the final article in this issue.

Ways to Know

There are various ways in which the question of spirit existence might be answered. I could describe some of my experiences with spirits and try to account for my gut-level feelings when they occurred. I might argue that these experiences were so extraordinary that some special agency had to be involved. Many researchers would choose, and have chosen in the past, a reductive explanation. Examples of this type of explanation include: (1) my first “altered” state of consciousness that was felt as the presence of a spirit (which I had dropped into all of a sudden) was because of hypoglycemia because of food deprivation while attending a four-hour Spiritist session; (2) the uncanny knowledge of a physician’s (a Californian consultant to the research project I was working on at the time) past medical history was a clever guess; (3) the prediction (later proven correct) that a stranger from Washington (an NIMH site visitor) would suffer serious illness because of cancer within two years was based on the application of general premises (i.e., he had a stressful job and his anxiety as he tried to understand the ritual session was visible).

The testimonies of ethnographers in the field are potent agents of influence who influence our beliefs. For instance, consider one of numerous situations provided by Paul Stoller, who asked Jenitongo, his Songhay medicine man mentor, “She has spirits?” Jenitongo replied: “Yes, the spirits are in front of us. They are behind us. They are above and below us” (Stoller 1989:215). This interaction comprises vivid evidence, found throughout the anthropological literature, that our perception, and sometimes our discomfort, is based on our understanding of the testimony of an exotic “other” whom we appreciate as a wise stranger.

However, a problem most often arises when the ethnographer tries to account for his own experience. Anthropologists have traditionally utilized the hermeneutic perspective and the notion of cultural relativism to explain the anomalous experiences of others. Stoller (1998; D. Hufford, personal communication, May 12, 2010) criticizes conventional ideas of rationality and suggests a new approach of “embodied rationality,” partly to account for his own extraordinary experiences. He says: “An embodied rationality can be a flexible one in
which the sensible and the intelligible, denotative and evocative are linked. ... It is an agency imbued with ... ‘lightness,’ the ability to make intellectual leaps to bridge gaps forged by illusions of disparateness” (Stoller 1998:252).

This approach seems to obviate the notion of a universal standard of rationality, defined as “having or exercising the ability to reason” (American Heritage Dictionary 1976), or in the New Oxford American Dictionary (2005) as the “capacity to reason.” However, the descriptions Stoller provides of his extraordinary experiences, such as the successful use of a prayer given to him by his teacher to ward off attacking evil forces, appear rational in the usual way, without the need to redefine the concept of rationality. This depends, however, on one’s acceptance of experience that goes beyond the five senses, termed by many as “extraordinary” or “anomalous” experience (Hufford, personal communication, May 12, 2010).

Knowledge through Science

Modern science has occupied the central and most acclaimed position of inquiry into the nature of the world for three centuries, and it has thus served as the accepted method to achieve proof of existence of the main components of our universe. Strict adherence to its methods, however, can result in reductive explanations when questions raised in one natural system are answered by appeal to another system, or when opposing perspectives (e.g., Newtonian vs. relativity–quantum mechanics–string theory) demand ongoing readjustments in our scientifically derived worldview.

John Mikes, in “Dialogues” (an internet discussion group) asks, “Which science?” (personal communication, louiselu@frontiernet.net, March 8, 2009). He inquires, “What is THE science of the 3rd millennium?” and asks which basic approach should define it: fundamental mathematical thinking, conventional physics-based quantum science, or probing the unrestricted worlds of multiple universes. Should we use logic and experimental proofs, or any other particular method? It seems reasonable to suggest that all of these are valid ways to know about and understand the world; we should not select any one or two nor limit them.

David Young and Jean-Guy Goulet, in the final chapter of their groundbreaking book, Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters (1994), take up the issue of verification. They conclude that the scientific method is inadequate to establish the truth value of extraordinary experiences. They advocate that the scientific method should be used for verification—if possible, but they appear to dismiss the issue of truth (reality) as a worthwhile enterprise. I insist, however, along with David Hufford (in this issue) that the discussion of spirit reality cannot be dismissed when reports of experiences of spirits are ubiquitous in the world, in all cultures.

In this “spirit” one might also ask, “Whose science?” There are numerous definitions and concepts regarding the nature of science and scientific method (see Houshmand et al. 1999). Current theoretical physics, which deals with string theory, for example, does not work with lab-based experiments and generally sets aside what is considered “material.” One might wonder if the
nonmaterialism of much of current physics sets a stage for the acceptance of spirit beings as entities that we can apprehend only sometimes through our usual or special senses.

Science and Buddhism

In the last several decades there has been a series of articles and many books on the rapprochement between religion/spirituality and science, and faith versus empirical inquiry (see the journal *Zygon* for a representative sample of these writings). The work of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and his special scientific advisors over the last three decades represents one component of this complex debate. Since 1987, there have been biannual meetings organized by friends of the Dalai Lama (esp. Dr. Francisco Varela, a neuroscientist, and Adam Engle, a businessman), to which well-known scientists of various disciplines have presented. These meetings explored contemporary scientific and related philosophical issues weighing and comparing them to Buddhist philosophy in the ancient scriptures. The aim of these public and some private meetings including that described in the book quoted above, is to develop “a more holistic and integrated way of understanding the world around us, one that explores deeply the seen and the unseen, through the discovery of evidence bolstered by reason” (Dalai Lama 2005:4). The result has been a number of observations and books documenting discussions on how foundational tenets in Buddhism presage discoveries of current day physics, as well as those of other sciences and often reconciling differences.

In the report of one conference on *Consciousness at the Crossroads* (Houshmand et al. 1999), the editors comment:

How can the scientific method, which relies entirely on “objective” observation begin to account for the subjective experience of consciousness? Both science and Buddhism rely on methods that constantly test belief against empirical evidence, but Buddhism allows subjective experience as valuable evidence in the study of consciousness. [Houshmand et al. 1999:109]

I offer two examples that suggest the possibility of reconciliation of Buddhist principles with contemporary physicists’ description of the “real.” Thus, the Dalai Lama (2005:51) discusses the basic Buddhist theory of emptiness, that is, that “there is a fundamental disparity between the way we perceive the world, including our own existence in it, and the ways things actually are.” In our daily lives we tend to conceive of these entities (including our selves) as having “self-enclosed, definable, discrete and enduring reality” (2005:51). The Dalai Lama argues that this conception undermines the notion of causality, which “implies contingency and dependence,” not immutability and self-enclosure (2005:52). (In fact, the newest ideas about the nature of the universe and its components focus on networks and interconnectedness.) He notes that our lives depend on this paradoxical view of the world, which is framed by language. Buddhists escape the negative consequences of this view; for them, the condition of emptiness comprises reality. Closing the gap between Buddhist and scientific positions, quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity have begun to deliver
us from the mechanistic worldview propagated by Newtonian physics. They have revealed that matter is both less definable and not separable into object and subject.

As a second example, consider a concept from one school of Buddhist philosophy, which maintains that there is “no degree of objective reality in the external world” (Dalai Lama 2005:63). Still another school holds that the external world is relative—a kind of extension of the observing mind. A third school sees the external world as only relative—without enduring qualities; the world is based on language and shared ideas. These perspectives parallel the newest advances in physics, which show, for example, that the positions of positrons and other subatomic particle depend on the observer. It may be that everything in our universe is contingent.

These few examples are cited to suggest that science as accepted in the academies is only one part of a comprehensive system of establishing “truth,” and could be complemented by other methods. The Dalai Lama states clearly that from “the perspective of human well-being, science and spirituality are not unrelated” (2005:4). Furthermore, according to the perspective of another tradition, Spiritism, one can establish the truth about spirits and the spirit world through what Kardec (the French codifier of this tradition) identified as science and scientific method.

Spiritism and Science

In the words of a Brazilian psychiatrist, Alexander Moreira Almeida: “Spiritism . . . developed an . . . inclusive philosophical system based on a research program of spiritual experiences. Stressing rational and empirical investigation, Spiritism developed a theory of the self, including its survival after death, including the concepts of reincarnation and unlimited spiritual evolution . . . (which) formed the basis for a new empirical foundation of ethics” (2008:2). Kardec (1804–69) himself asserted: “Spiritism has not discovered nor invented the spirit, but was the first to demonstrate its existence by undeniable proofs. It has studied it, analyzed it, and made evident its action” (1987:12). Kardec thus emphasized the relevance to such proofs of well-attested reports of spontaneous cases of spirit encounters, in contrast to misplaced attempts to mimic physics, which, in many cases, appealed to quantitative measurements and laboratory experiments. Kardec also stressed that just “collecting experimental data is not enough to make a science, for which it is essential to develop a comprehensive, logically consistent theory” (Almeida Moreira 2008:3–5).

According to Kardec in Chapter 1 of Genesis:

Spiritism proceeds in the same way as the positive sciences, by using the experimental method. When facts of a new kind are observed, facts that cannot be explained by known laws, it observe, compares and analyzes them. Reasoning then from the effects to the causes, it discovers the laws which govern them. Then it deduces their consequences and seeks useful applications. Spiritism proposes no preconceived theory. . . . Thus, it is rigorously correct to say that Spiritism is an experimental science, not the product of imagination. [1868:5]
One aspect in particular of the foundation of these Spiritist ideas is comparable to that of the Dalai Lama; that is, that there should be a tightly bound, complementary relationship between the subject of science and the nonmaterial (i.e., spiritual–spirit) phenomena that are the subjects of faith. For Spiritists, the method used to establish the facts of the existence and nature of spirits is scientific (not philosophical—except in relation to science). In my view, it is based on phenomenology and explored through ethnography; it consists of exploration and documentation of an unknown world. (Note that Kardec would probably reject the recently advanced notion of “extraordinary” anthropology because Spiritists view spirits as part of ordinary experience, and facts about the spirit world are revealed through a scientific method.)

Silvio Chibeni (1990) compares the scientific approach advocated by Kardec to the paradigm described by Thomas Kuhn (1970). Kuhn’s paradigm consists of: (1) an ontology, which indicates what constitutes reality; (2) foundational theoretical principles, which specify laws that regulate the behavior of things; (3) auxiliary theories, which connect the basic principles to the phenomena and point to auxiliary domains; (4) rules, standards, and values to further specify the paradigm; and (5) examples of applications of the theories to the facts.


The Spiritist practitioner who is not well versed in the writings of Kardec generally rests her or his faith in the spirit world and its interactions with incarnate beings on empirical sources, including both personal experience and the communications of mediums. However, those Spiritists who view Spiritism as a science, as well as a philosophy and an ethical system, know, subscribe to, and work with the scientific paradigm advanced by Kardec. For them, faith and belief are not at issue.

**Many Ways of Knowing**

Having briefly explored two different kinds of scientific approaches to inquiring into the nature of a world that includes spirit beings, I turn next to the contributions of this special issue. Each of the authors in this issue explores the question of “Do spirits exist?” from a different perspective, but all use experiential data to explain or substantiate their convictions. Thus, Hufford and Greyson utilize well-documented experiences of other persons. In addition to providing examples of the frequent spirit experiences among ordinary, “modern” men and women, Hufford describes how the “disenchanted” modern world attaches mostly negative explanations to spirit encounters. He cogently
argues the case for the rationality of spirit beliefs with sophisticated acumen, noting how views about the world are labeled as “modern” or “nonmodern,” and how such labels affect whether spirits are acknowledged as a reality. He, as well as Greyson, emphasize that experiences of spirits (or other extraordinary beings) are reported in every society and culture, regardless of sociodevelopmental status, religious preferences, or the educational and class background of individuals. Greyson’s careful marshalling of facts on a number of cases of dying persons, both in recent times and in past centuries, who identify meeting persons from the afterworld whom they did not know had died, provides a convincing argument for an afterlife and the existence of spirits of those persons who have passed over. In another publication (Greyson 2010) Greyson illustrates his convictions about near-death experiences (NDEs) as possible evidence of an afterlife by detailing the facts that suggest that mind and brain are not identical; therefore, a more comprehensive explanation is required.

In this issue, Mills explores cases of reincarnation among the Northwest tribal peoples she has studied for many years, assembling intriguing evidence of past lives of persons she knows in families she has studied. She tells us how the missionaries, the Canadian officialdom, and society have always rejected tribal beliefs, a situation Hufford describes as the heritage of the “disenchanted” modern world. Mills’s fine-tuned description of her observations allows readers to appreciate the dilemma of the anthropologist who declares herself to be as
one with the people she studies; such an avowal often amounts almost to leaving one’s birth culture and integrating into another, very different and socially undervalued culture. This dilemma is also illuminated by Hufford in his analysis of how and why spirit beliefs and visionary experiences are rejected in the “modern” disenchanted world. Yet Mills conveys a convincing sense of organic unity within the world in which her participants live, a world that includes acceptance of spirits of persons who have passed and who sometimes return to reincarnate and verify their previous identities.

Fotiou tells the story of her first fieldwork experience, exploring how Westerners respond to the experience of *ayahuasca* ceremonies in Peruvian shamanism aimed at foreigners. Her initial interpretations of participant responses to these ceremonies fit the current anthropological paradigm that culture determines how persons interpret the meaning of their ritual experiences: thus, Westerners attributed their experiences to psychic events while Peruvians reported the occurrence of sorcery by their enemies. With further exploration and personal experience of the rituals, however, her ideas began to shift radically as she saw that foreigners began to make the same interpretations as Peruvians, and as she herself began to feel effects of the sorcery! This seems to be a case where intense involvement in the field produced deep doubts about the received wisdom of anthropological perspectives (see Goulet and Miller 2007). It illustrates the difficulty of preparing those new to ethnographic fieldwork for encounters with spirits and unseen worlds. Perhaps there is no preparation possible—only the experience itself instructs, and the lesson may always be soul-shaking.

The final article in the issue, by Glass-Coffin, takes us on a deeply felt personal journey of spiritual searching within a rich mother lode of two decades of ethnographic fieldwork among Peruvian *curanderas*. Glass-Coffin narrates her own story, a saga whose beginnings have been reported in past writings, but she goes far beyond her previous descriptions to portray soul-rendering personal experiences with the interconnected natural world order, as fostered by her current shaman-participant. She describes her journey as a transformation “from scientist and skeptic to humanist and adept.” It seems that her extraordinary experiences have increased her doubts about the truth and relevance of the anthropological enterprise itself, including ethnographic fieldwork and the current paradigms that guide explanations of extraordinary experiences. Glass-Coffin’s account is a kind of coming out of the closet, a narrative about a personal transformation that comes very close to negating the meaning of the anthropological enterprise. She questions the very basis of fieldwork and the validity of collecting data on spirituality and special experiences when the separation of self and other is so endemic in anthropology.

**Conclusion**

All of the participants in the 2008 and 2009 symposia fully accepted the quest to answer the question, “Do Spirits Exist?” not as an epistemological exercise but, rather, as a personal and interpersonal search. All of the contributors, including myself, report doubts that energized rather than discouraged the pursuit for an understanding of spirits and other extraordinary experiences in
relation to worlds that very often are unacknowledged or reduced to symbols, even in many sectors of the anthropology arena. The same observation might apply to psychiatrists, such as Greyson (among others), who do not readily accept the established doctrine that labels most “anomalous” experiences as pathological.

What does this mean for the inquirers? Except for one, all of the contributors to this issue have been working at their professions for decades, yet they willingly disenfranchise themselves (after a fashion) by allowing their experiences (in the first person) to determine what is true and rational for them without recourse to a third person Other. For all of the authors, the Others who were participants in their research were not relegated to inhabiting their own special (anomalous or distinct) reality, but instead evidenced a universal reality. Glass-Coffin maintains, in very strong words, that her experience of this fact was transformative for her. A new question arises: has it transformed the other contributors or other persons with similar experiences?

Notes

1. “Positive science” means, in the philosophical parlance of that time, inquiry thoroughly based on facts (Kardec 1864).
2. “Experimental method” should not be taken as simply laboratory method but, instead, a research method based on empirical observations, that is, on every kind of fact attestable by careful observation.

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