

The secularization of modern Western society has led to an overall decline in orthodox religiosity, especially over the last few decades. This has been largely interpreted as a decrease in reliance on spiritual explanations of the world due to the increasingly widespread understanding and acceptance of rational scientific answers to questions previously answered by religion. Globalization has also contributed to secularization by introducing alternative belief-systems into the popular culture, thereby allowing for relativism of worldviews and de-sacrilization of traditional values, particularly among young adults. Nonetheless, this increase in general awareness of scientific theories, accompanied by an increased exposure to Eastern and other mystical philosophies, has led to some interesting recent developments in spiritual beliefs and practices in North America.

Many of the 'New Religious Movements' manifest as completely unique 'bricolages' made up of elements from modern science and technology, the paranormal, and a wide variety of ancient, Native traditions. In the face of such developments one is led to conclude that religiosity is not in fact declining in today's Western society, but merely evolving into forms of spirituality which encompass and address the existential concerns of our current cultural reality, including the pervasive 'secular' emphasis on science and technology. It must be stated that the new quasi-scientific spirituality is a general trend which, while it is the focus of this essay, does not take into consideration the contemporaneous rise in both Christian Fundamentalism and Logical Positivism. This paper will discuss the impact of science on religion, and point to a synthesis of these two paradigms in the creation of a constructive new spirituality which will potentially integrate both of these 'languages', uniting them within a larger functional framework of ultimate concern.

For many contemporary North Americans, the traditional Judeo-Christian symbolism is seen as reified and limiting in its patriarchal, overly personified and literalized conception of God. Historically this manifestation of religion has clashed terribly with the increasingly pervasive and persuasive descriptions of reality offered us by science. It would seem that the Nietzschean assertion that "God is dead" still reverberates (if only unconsciously) in our cultural psyche and has gradually led, along with the scientific, technological, and 'feminist' revolutions, to widespread questioning and reformulation of traditional religious attitudes, even by the most orthodox theologians and clergymen attempting to retain

the faith of an increasingly skeptical populace. Sociologist Keith Roberts, in his text Religion in Sociological Perspective<sup>1</sup>, defines 'secularization' as "transformation of a society to a more rational, utilitarian, and empiricist outlook on life and a reduction in supernaturalistic explanations" (Ibid. 338).

Despite the apparent trend to secularization there remains a desire, and some would argue an innate need, for a metaphysical if not a specifically divine locus of meaning and ultimate concern. Sociologist of Religion, Milton Yinger, asserts that "...human nature abhors a vacuum in systems of faith. This is not, then, a period of religious decline but is one of religious change" (Roberts, Ibid. 7). Talcott Parsons and Robert Bellah "treat secularization as the process by which religion has become a private matter...However, if secularization is referred to as a process by which religion decreases in importance and by which it has less influence on one's world view and on social behavior, then [they] would deny that secularization is occurring" (Roberts, Ibid. 343). Whether one perceives secularization as a decline or an evolution in religion, or as occurring at all, obviously depends on one's definition of 'religion'.

This paper will assume the Functional definition offered by Milton Yinger who states that:

Wherever one sees a closing of the gap between fact and hope, wherever one sees a leap of faith that allows a person to assert that suffering and evil will somehow, someday be defeated, there one sees the manifestations of religion" (Roberts, Ibid.)

Yinger thus defines religion as follows:

Where one finds awareness of and interest in the continuing, recurrent, *permanent* problems of human existence - the human condition itself, as contrasted with specific problems; where one finds rites and shared beliefs relevant to that awareness, which define the strategy of an ultimate victory; and where one has groups organized to heighten that awareness and to teach and maintain those rites and beliefs - there one has religion (Roberts, Ibid. 9)

This definition is broad enough to encompass the new forms of spirituality, including the potential integration of religious and scientific worldviews which appears, as I will later show, to have been apprehended by scholars such as Ian Barbour, Ted Peters, Philip Hefner, Fritjof Capra, David Bohm, Paul Davies, and others from the fields of Liberal Theology, Physics, and Philosophy of Natural Science.

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<sup>1</sup>Roberts, Keith. 3rd Edition, Wadsworth Publishing Company: California, U.S.A., 1995.

In observing the impact of secularization on religion, one must look also at the societal and personal functions of religion in order to determine what role religiosity plays in a secularized society and whether or not there are new forms of 'spiritual' behavior emerging. According to Functional Analysis in the Sociology of Religion, the functions of religion are fourfold: two of these are 'individual functions' and the other two are 'societal functions'. The individual functions create a subjective sense of meaning and of identity. The societal functions reinforce cultural values and enhance social stability and cohesion (Ibid. 56-59). While this model may reflect the intended 'ideal' functions of religion, the suggested 'societal' functions do not apply in the multi-cultural context of modern North American society. Roberts notes:

The difficulty in a heterogeneous culture is that there is no agreement on which big theory really makes sense and explains the meaning of life. The overriding, integrating world view, which religion provides for many cultures, is not a uniting and integrating factor in a pluralistic one (Ibid. 104)

In such a complex society as ours there is virtually no way for a single religion to provide a dominant and cohesive worldview. The dissemination of a normative set of values is now a function of individual families and secular institutions such as Media, Education, and Politics; none of which are as strongly unifying an influence in society as religion once was. Perhaps though, it is within the microcosms of each of the many spiritual communities now coexisting in modern society that one finds the 'societal' functions to be operative.

Even within the various cultural and religious enclaves however, the influences of secularization affect the views of the young adult members whose acute needs for meaning and identity often lead them to reinterpret their own religious heritage or to abandon it altogether. Roberts points out that "Belief systems, if they are to survive, must be rooted in a social base and reinforced through a sense of sacredness or absoluteness about the beliefs" (Ibid. 188), because "If everyday events or if scientific explanations seem to disprove the religious world view, the survival of the group may be threatened" (Ibid. 187). It is the experience and opinion of some that the religious belief system is currently

threatened by the scientific worldview which offers a verification principle where religion offers only 'blind faith'. Roberts quotes Sociologist Peter Berger's observation that:

The critically thinking empiricist allows that nothing is sacred; that is, nothing is beyond study and question. The world construction of the scientist is based on causality and logic. Because individual thinking is valued, the scientifically oriented society allows and even encourages a plurality of world views (Ibid.)

Although this may be the dominant consciousness of our culture, as Berger has pointed out, it "was bought at the price of severe anomie and existential anxiety" (Roberts, Ibid. 339). Many are finding that the rational scientific paradigm alone, while essential to a certain facet of explanation and understanding, is not adequately comprehensive of the complexities of human experience and awareness. The more avid materialists claim that this is merely due to the fact that science has not yet progressed to its full potential for an empirical explanation of all aspects of reality. Such an ultimate faith in science could itself be considered a form of religiosity. As Yinger asserts, "a secular faith that science and technology will ultimately solve all our problems is...a religious or quasi-religious phenomenon" (Roberts, Ibid. 7). Others hold the 'two-language' view that science will never replace religion because the two discourses address entirely disparate issues and thus continue to serve completely separate, yet equally valid, functions within society. There is also another position, one that I myself strongly identify with, which posits that although each employs its own unique 'language' and methodology, both religion and science attempt to understand the world and to explain the mysteries of existence and therefore they share a common concern with ultimate Truth. This view, as I and others see it, may lead to an understanding that the scientific language is ultimately a 'religious' one.

Such issues have been of increasing concern to many philosophers and practitioners of religion and of science who have put forth various arguments for the compatibility or incompatibility, as well as for the complete incommensurability of these two fields. For instance, in his book Beyond Legitimation; Essays on the Problem of Religious Knowledge<sup>2</sup>, Donald Wiebe attempts a methodical summation and refutation of the major viewpoints on the relationship between religion and science. According to Wiebe there are two main types of compatibility systems, the "non-cognitivist" and the "cognitivist" (Ibid. 92).

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<sup>2</sup>Wiebe, Donald. St. Martin's Press: New York, N.Y., 1994.

Briefly, the non-cognitivist approach claims that, unlike science, religion does not attempt to offer empirical explanations of objective reality and that therefore there is no conflict between them. Whereas cognitivist approaches state either that religion is equally as rational and objective an endeavor as is science, or, that science is equally as irrational and subjective as religion. Wiebe does not accept any such attempts to interpret a complementarity, maintaining that:

...science and religion provide not just different sets of concepts for coming to terms with the world but rather mutually exclusive conceptual structures or frameworks for doing so (Ibid. 87)

Furthermore, Wiebe states (Ibid. 95) his agreement with the Levy-Bruhlian thesis of the hierarchical dichotomy between 'primitive' (mythopoeic) and 'modern' (logical) forms of thought which associates religion with the former and science with the latter. Wiebe argues that both of these are forms of cognition, but because mythopoeic explanations of the world are archaic and based in superstition they are of less truth-value than explanations arising from the modern logic of scientific thought and method. I submit, however, that the existence of theists who embrace scientific knowledge and scientists whose discoveries lead them to a deeper religious faith, demonstrates that both 'mythopoeic' and 'logical' thought are simultaneously operative in the modern mind. For Wiebe, this fact is apparently evidence that such individuals suffer from some form of schizophrenia rather than a new spiritual awareness since, he insists, "...one cannot with consistency espouse both [religion and science] at the same time" (Ibid. 98).

While I acknowledge that these two forms of thought offer differing conceptualizations of the world, I would argue that these are not mutually exclusive, nor is one a superior advancement over the other. In my own experience it is quite possible to cognize reality in such a way that, to a unified mind, it is of concurrently religious and scientific significance. I also believe that the objective reality of the world is of a singular nature, so that in my opinion all perception and cognition illuminates aspects of a single and unifying Truth, regardless of the theoretical or methodological paradigm within which one's interpretation is focused at any given moment. Ian Barbour, in his book Issues in Science and

Religion<sup>3</sup>, exhaustively compares the languages and methods of science and religion and, in contrast to Wiebe, observes that:

Despite the divergence of their interests, it is (according to critical realism) the same natural world to which they look, so their inquiries cannot be totally independent (Ibid. 269)

Additionally, Barbour asserts that:

...the possibilities for the evaluation of a religious world-view should be compared not with those for scientific theories, but with those for alternative world-views. No world-view, theistic or naturalistic, is capable of demonstrable proof (Ibid. 260)

And thus he concludes:

Disagreement between adherents of naturalism and theism is basically not an argument between science and religion, but between two ultimate commitments, two interpretations of the nature of the universe and the significance of human life (Ibid. 257)

Although Barbour's theories move us beyond the limiting dichotomization of religious and scientific forms of thought, both he and Wiebe maintain traditional views of religion and of science.

Currently there is a trend that sees individuals and groups within North American society once again seeking spiritual guidance, creating new forms of belief and worship where traditional religious frameworks are found to be inappropriate to modern reality. Keith Roberts summarizes the observations of Sociologist Robert Bellah:

The new form of religious expression is characterized by a breakdown in the dualistic view of the world...This is being replaced by a grounding of religion in ethical life in this world. The world view is less otherworldly but still involves a symbol system that "relates persons to the ultimate condition of their existence" (Ibid. 343)

With the relatively recent developments in the field of Physics, orthodox conceptions of science and religion and their relationship to one another are being revolutionized and a new vision of the metaphysical unity of naturalistic and theistic worldviews is being engendered. In the Preface of his book God and the New Physics<sup>4</sup>, Paul Davies proposes that 20th century Physics, which has evolved from the theory of relativity and quantum theory, has "revealed more than simply a better model of the

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<sup>3</sup>Barbour, Ian. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966.

<sup>4</sup>Davies, Paul. Penguin Group Publishers: U.S.A., England, Canada, 1990.

physical world" inasmuch as "Physicists began to realize that their discoveries seemed to turn common sense on its head and find closer accord with mysticism than materialism" (p.vii).

In an essay entitled Theology and Science: Where Are We?<sup>5</sup>, Ted Peters observes that physicists such as David Bohm and Fritjof Capra have been led to claim that "reality...is ultimately undivided wholeness in flowing movement" (Ibid. 330). Physicist Brian Swimme and Theologian Thomas Berry are quoted as having put it this way:

Our new sense of the universe is itself a type of revelatory experience. Presently we are moving beyond any religious expression so far known to the human into a meta-religious age, that seems to be a new comprehensive context for all religions...The natural world itself is...the primary presence of the sacred, the primary moral value (Peters, Ibid. 330)

This 'meta-religiosity' has impacted spiritual practice in various ways and taken a wide variety of forms from Environmental ethics, to Goddess worship, to Crystal and Aroma therapies, just to name a few. As Peters observes, "The key to their approach is holism...to overcome such modern dualisms as the splits between science and spirit, ideas and feelings, male and female, rich and poor, humanity and nature" (Ibid.). The postmodern deconstruction of these and other oppositional structures has itself taken on 'religious' significance, becoming of ultimate concern for those seeking to affirm the spiritual conception of the underlying unity of all things. Peters has pointed to a related approach to the religion/science duality, one which he labels "Hypothetical Consonance", claiming that:

The term *consonance*, coming from the work of Ernan McMullin, indicates that we are looking for those areas where there is a correspondence between what can be said scientifically about the natural world and what the theologian understands to be God's creation (Ibid. 328)

Similarly, Physicist Fritjof Capra's experience has led him to conclude that:

...the principal theories and models of modern physics lead to a view of the world which is internally consistent and in perfect harmony with the views of Eastern mysticism (p. 303)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Peters, Ted. In *Zygon Journal of Religion and Science*, Vol.31, No.2. Joint Publication Board of Zygon: Chicago, IL, 1996.

<sup>6</sup>Capra, Fritjof. The Tao of Physics, 3rd Edition. Shambhala Press: Boston, MA, 1991.

In an essay entitled Science-and-Religion and the Search for Meaning<sup>7</sup>, Philip Hefner describes the 'New Age' approach to the religion/science interface as a "postmodern perspective" which "...is committed to constructing new overarching frameworks that function very much like myths and metaphysics in former times. They are postmodern in the sense that old frameworks are awash and are oppressive to the extent that they are identified with particular groups, thus not available to everybody who is now a citizen of the global village (Ibid. 311-312). Hefner paraphrases Holmes Rolston's point that "causes (the domain of scientific explanation) and meanings (the domain of religious interpretation) are seldom separated in our experience (Ibid. 315), and further elaborates that:

...in their experience of the world and their attempts to understand that experience for their own lives, men and women often hold to a functional, if unsophisticated, union of science and theology that seems to be required in their search for understanding (Ibid.)

It is because of this experience of naturalism and theism as fulfilling "two basic human needs", which Hefner identifies as those "for credible understandings of the world and our lives in it...and for indicators of the ultimate meaning or significance of these credible understandings" (Ibid. 316), that this paper has focused primarily on the issue of the current relationship between religion and science as manifested in modern secularized society.

I have attempted to demonstrate that secularization does not necessarily imply the demise of spirituality but only the death of some traditional conceptions of religion. As Hefner asserts:

To a certain extent, the Enlightenment critique of Christianity has actually discredited all traditional Western religion in the public mind. We now find that there is a marketplace of resources that propose how ultimacy can interact with our credible understandings of the world (Ibid. 317-318)

Regardless of whether or not one views religion, science, or both, as human psychological projections onto reality, the fact is that these are useful and necessary tools for understanding the world and deriving existential meaning in our lives. In my opinion, this essay has supported the words of J.B.S. Haldane who said: "The wise man regulates his conduct by the theories both of religion and science".

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<sup>7</sup>Hefner, Philip. In *Zygon Journal of Religion and Science*, Vol.31, No.2. Joint Publication Board of Zygon: Chicago, IL, 1996.