Ontology of Consciousness
Percipient Action

"These essays are like detonating explosives, profoundly disturbing to various intellectual universes."
—Wilton S. Dillon, Senior Scholar Emeritus, Smithsonian Institution

"A rich tableau of research on the nature of consciousness... from archaic traditions in religion and culture to contemporary neuroscience to the testimony of personal experience."
—Alan M. Olson, Professor, Philosophy of Religion, Boston University

Edited by Helmut Wautischer
10 The Priority of Local Observation and Local Interpretation in Evaluating the "Spirit Hypothesis"

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Abstract

The belief that spirits exist and that these disembodied intelligences interact with humankind perseveres through all cultures and through history to the present. Details of the nature of spirits and the occasions for their interaction vary from culture to culture, although there are recognizable patterns of belief that are practically universal. Spirit belief encompasses a broad range from theological ideas about God and the fate of human souls, to beliefs concerning angels, jinn, and demons. Even in the Buddhist traditions that are frequently said to be atheistic, the concepts of karma and reincarnation imply something analogous to "soul" or "spirit." These beliefs are present not only within religious institutions but also in folk traditions, which are often in tension with religious teachings. These beliefs are supported by a variety of human experiences, ranging from mystical visions to the visits from deceased loved ones often reported by the bereaved. The combined influences of the Reformation and the Enlightenment have characterized spirit beliefs as archaic, not rationally supportable, and spiritually immature. This classification has been powerfully reinforced by the stigmatization of compelling spiritual experiences as psychopathological in origin. As a result the open discussion of spirit experiences is suppressed, creating the false impression that healthy and sophisticated modern persons do not have such experiences. Only the most ambiguous kinds of spiritual experiences, the religious interpretation of ordinary experience, escape this stigmatization. The result is a cultural construction, a worldview, in which some of the most powerful and common experiential reasons for spiritual belief are assumed to be absent in the modern, "disenchanted" world (Weber 1963, originally 1922). This assumption is shared by the religious as well as the nonreligious and even by those who have had such experiences but imagine that theirs are peculiar and not to be discussed openly. Consequently, there is a tacit acceptance that although such spirit experiences do occur, they have no weight as evidence, and that spirit beliefs, therefore, are not rational.

Rigorous research about spirit beliefs requires an approach that challenges this bias. Physicalist beliefs need to be regarded with the same skepticism as spirit beliefs; neither should be accepted or rejected without good reasons. The prevalence and incidence of spirit experiences must be documented and they must be phenomenologically described in great detail. This investigation must take the "spirit hypothesis" very seriously. This gradual management of intellectual bias
will eventually support research that opens new vistas for our understanding of consciousness. The proper reconsideration of spirit experience and belief has the potential for bringing popular interest and systematic research into useful dialogue on what humans are and what the universe is ultimately like.

Prologue

The belief that spirits exist (i.e., are ontologically real) is ubiquitous, common even in contemporary Western societies among well-educated persons, and it is of interest to scholars in many fields. But almost all academic fields adopt an “official” view that this belief cannot possibly be true—or that at the very least it cannot be rationally founded—although many scholars in those fields personally hold such a belief. This rejection is treated as obvious rather than being argued, so it has become an unexamined assumption. Local observations and explanations—often inappropriately called “non-Western”—are discredited, as much by those who argue that they should be respected as by those who consider them foolish. This fundamental tension between modern intellectual views and one of the most pervasive and ancient ideas about the world is interesting in itself and gives rise to important theoretical, methodological, and ethical problems. This chapter sketches several of those issues and offers some elements of a remedy. The remedy requires taking seriously the possibility that spirits are ontologically real. We must ask whether those who believe that spirits exist ever have good reasons and whether those reasons can be expressed in a way that has force in argument. It is obvious that people often have weak or invalid reasons for holding common beliefs, even beliefs generally accepted as true. An evaluation of the best available reasons is necessary for assessing how well founded a belief may be. Unfortunately, scholars of spirit belief have generally concerned themselves only with weak reasons, even when they have had to hypothesize those reasons.

Introductory Examples

Investigating what is believed and by whom can be done in large part by quantitative methods. Well-designed surveys, some of which are cited below, can tell us much. However, quantitative methods have their limits. Knowing what respondents understand a particular survey question to mean is best done through open-ended interviews with a subset of respondents. And understanding why a particular belief is held requires ethnographic methods. The quantitative and qualitative methods are complementary, although those who employ one or the other often fail to recognize that. The examples given below are data just as surely as the numbers in a survey are data. They are drawn from a substantial collection of interviews and literature review that I have carried out over the past thirty years. Each one by itself has little weight. But when compared with
other instances and put in the context of quantitative data on the same topic, such instances become essential to our understanding.

**A Bereaved Husband** One morning in 1995 one of our hospital chaplains called my office at Penn State's medical center, asking me to speak with a man who had just been visited by his deceased wife who had recently died in our hospital. In a few minutes the three of us sat in my department's conference room, and the man, in his seventies, told us the following story.

One afternoon shortly after the funeral he was in his living room when his wife walked in. He was stunned. She told him that she was all right and that he should not be so upset. They chatted briefly, then she said good-by, telling him that she had to go. He was distressed. He recalled asking, “Who says you have to go?” and “Where will you spend the night tonight?” But she was gone. He said he was shocked, though he was glad to see her. He had never imagined such a thing possible, noting that he had never heard anything about it in church. He had questions. Why couldn’t she stay? Who makes these rules? Why hadn’t it occurred to him to reach out and touch her? Where would she spend the night? He had tried to speak about the experience with his daughter, a very religious woman, but it upset her. She said it was bad, to forget it. But he couldn’t. On the day we spoke with him he had been grocery shopping when he decided he had to find someone who could talk to him about this experience. He had left the groceries, gotten in his car, and driven an hour and a half to the medical center, where he asked for a chaplain.

I told him that I have spoken with many others who have had such experiences, that these experiences are well known in the grief literature, and that they are normal. I said that those who have told me about their visits have considered them a beautiful and consoling gift, a sign of love. He was pleased and relieved, comforted by this common human experience, his anxiety dissipated by the discovery that his experience was not unique.

**A Palliative Care Unit** In the summer 1999 issue of the *Journal of Palliative Care* (Barbato et al. 1999), a team of Australian palliative-care specialists reported their findings concerning the visits that next of kin received from loved ones who had died at their hospital. They undertook the study because of the growing literature documenting these experiences as healthy responses to loss. The first such solid empirical study was published by a British physician in 1971 (Rees), and by the mid-1970s these experiences had been normalized in the psychiatric literature. They are often called the “normal hallucinations of bereavement,” a term that paradoxically accepts and rejects at the same time. The Australian team found that almost a quarter of their sample admitted to such visits. Their article recommends that those close to palliative-care
patients be counseled and reassured about such experiences because, occurring as they do in a cultural setting that has long pathologized visionary events, they create anxiety even as they offer consolation. These authors chose to call the visits "parapsychological phenomena near the time of death," noting that "the term hallucination still carries with it the stigma of mental disease" (Barbato et al. 1999, 31). We might add that hallucination also carries the explicit meaning of a false perception.

A Physician In May 1999 Jane, a former medical student of mine, now a practicing physician, spoke with me about a serious health problem she faced. As we talked I asked her what personal resources she had found helpful. She mentioned several things, including family, and then said, "My faith." I asked what she meant, and she replied, "I don't go to church a lot, but I know that there is more to life than what we see." I asked "How do you know that?" She paused and said, "A patient I had taken care of came to me as a spirit, after he died, and told me so." That visit had occurred several years earlier, well before her current illness—not during a time of particular stress. In subsequent discussion I learned that when Jane told her husband about her visit from the deceased patient, he told her of his mother's communication with him immediately following her death. He also told his father and his minister, and received two different reactions. His father said that he, too, had spoken with her after her death. The minister made no response at the time or subsequently.

The American Public Empirical data have consistently shown that belief in the existence of spirits is common in the United States, and the patterns of its distribution and prevalence contradict the common assumption that spirit belief is incompatible with life and knowledge in modern society. The Gallup Poll and the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), two highly respected survey organizations, have been providing data on the topic from scientifically designed national samples, for decades. For example, George Gallup Jr. published data in 1982 showing that belief in life after death, a basic element of spirit belief, is not only common nationally, but is more common among respondents with more education: 69 percent of those with college education, 67 percent with only high school education, and 62 percent of those with only grade school education. Many respondents also said that they believed that spirits can visit the living. Gallup reported belief in the possibility of communication with the dead as 28 percent of the college educated, 25 percent of high school graduates, and 9 percent of those with only a grade school education (Gallup and Proctor 1982, 195). That such spirit belief is not purely theoretical is shown by NORC data. In 1987 sociologist Andrew Greeley reported that when asked "[have you ever] felt as though you were really in touch with someone who had died," 42 percent of a national sample said yes \(N = 1,445\) (Greeley 1987). Although substantial, this number is not surprising given the incidence of such experiences among widows and widowers. The first
medical study of the topic surveyed all the competent widows and widowers in a county in Wales, and found a rate of 46.7 percent (Rees 1971, 38; 2001). A more recent survey of widows in Arizona found a rate of 53 percent (Greeley 1987, 258). Such survey questions are very sensitive to variations in wording, and this may account for the odd disparity between those who say they believe this is possible and those who say it has happened to them. Of course spirits of deceased humans are not the only spirits widely believed to exist. National surveys have repeatedly shown very large majorities of Americans believing in the existence of angels. Checking the Polling the Nations database recently, I found that since 1995 six surveys reported that they had asked respondents whether they believed in the existence of angels (with a combined sample size of 11,498). The average positive response in these surveys was 72 percent “yes” with a low of 57 percent and a high of 85 percent. Even larger majorities believe in the existence of God, around 94 percent in most surveys, and God is, in most belief systems, a spirit. There are many issues of interpretation raised by these studies. But it is nonetheless abundantly clear that belief in the existence of spirits, the ability of spirits—including the dead—to contact living humans, and the experience of seeming to have such contact with spirits are all very common in American society. Furthermore, such beliefs and experiences are distributed in a manner that contradicts most academic theories of the effect of modern knowledge on belief in spirits—contemporary, educated people in the mainstream of modern culture in the United States believe in spirits and many of them say they have encountered them! Finding that belief in the existence of nonmaterial spirits is common among modern, well-educated people does not prove such beliefs to be true. However, it clearly does counter the claim that such beliefs are obviously false for those with modern education. One cannot simply assume a belief held in this way to be false but must rather offer arguments and evidence.

In the examples given above it is not difficult to grasp what is believed or what is said to have been perceived. Granted the ambiguity of language and the ultimate inaccessibility of the experiences of others, we can see that the bereaved husband, the palliative-care-unit next of kin, the physician, and the positive respondents to the surveys cited, each believed that spirits exist as real, nonimaginary ontological agents, and that those spirits can sometimes interact with living humans. This understanding of the referents of the statements made by these people says little about their meaning and even less about the validity of the beliefs involved. But as far as the statements go, they are clear. The statements of modern academics have generally also been clear: spirits do not exist, and if they did exist they could not interact with humans, so ideas about their existence would be irremediably metaphysical. But in the late twentieth century social scientists became more sensitive to charges of ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism, and more influenced by postmodern doubts concerning any claims about a reality independent of a given observer. As a result, the language of
sophisticated discussion about spirits, especially among anthropologists whose fieldwork constantly faces them with spirit beliefs and accounts of spirit experiences, has become much more difficult to decode. The discussion of beliefs not shared by the scholar have become more filled with expressions of respect and devoid of clear negations. For many the idea of directly negating any belief has become as impossible as embracing one. The result is implicit negation and an even stronger insistence that the validity of spirit belief is not accessible to rational investigation.

An Anthropologist One explicit example of the problems that arise when scholars attempt to simultaneously embrace and reject spirit beliefs is the work of Young and Goulet (1994). Although that was already mentioned in chapter 2, I find it helpful to add some details. Goulet and Young propose an experiential approach, and I endorse the idea of approaching spirit beliefs through experience. In fact, I have been arguing for an “experience-centered approach” for more than twenty years (see Hufford 1976, 1982a, 2005). However, I have serious objections to the way that Young and Goulet embrace “extraordinary experiences” while at the same time dismissing the local meanings of those experiences largely on the basis, apparently, that those meanings seem “non-Western.” A truly experience-centered approach offers the possibility of transcending such cultural boundaries, but only if one is prepared to treat “Western” assumptions with as much skepticism as is usually reserved for those beliefs that seem in conflict with those assumptions. This example is worth pursuing, because it represents a much more explicit and detailed effort to open-mindedly come to terms with spirit belief than has generally been found in anthropology or the other social science disciplines.

Young and Goulet’s “experiential approach” involves the investigator immersing herself in the “lifeworld” of another culture with the result that she begins to have the kinds of experiences that locals have. Consequently, their book presents many striking examples in which anthropologists have what are locally believed to be spirit encounters, as has been well described by Edith Turner in chapter 2.

And yet Young and Goulet (1994, 322) assert that anthropologists who have visionary experiences of spirits “similar” to those of their “native informants” must interpret these in ways that eliminate spirits, that this is required “because the anthropological journey leads back home where they must communicate anew with friends and colleagues in a shared language of understanding.” Even most sympathetic anthropologists such as Young and Goulet consider spirit experiences alien to modern, Western culture, asserting that the experiences are produced by immersion in cultures that believe and teach the reality of spirits. This follows from the dominant anthropological view that such experiences are caused by culture, what I have called the cultural source hypothesis (Hufford 1982a), an explanation that debunks perceptual claims by ignoring the independent observations that occur cross-culturally. And yet it is clear that many
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of the same experiences and the same interpretations are “native” to the anthropologists’ own societies. Not only do spirit experiences not require immersion in an accepting culture, they occur unbidded in cultures where they are unwelcome and where discussion of them is punished! This is the case in anthropology’s home culture, where for generations stigmatization as psychotic symptoms (a process in which the social sciences have readily participated) has stripped society of informed expectations or any sense of legitimacy about spirit encounters. Paradoxically, the reality of spirits is even “taken seriously” by several of the contributors to Young and Goulet’s own book, further undermining the claim that the reality of spirits cannot be accepted by rational modern thinkers. Methods and explanations that hinge on strong cultural endorsement of spirit belief (including immersion of the subject in a lifeworld where such beliefs are prevalent and related experiences often recounted) as the cause of spirit experiences and beliefs are contradicted by the ubiquitous distribution of those experiences and beliefs. Local production requiring strong cultural endorsement would suggest that spirit experiences are internally generated. Universal distribution of such experiences regardless of cultural acceptance, in contrast, is what one would expect of objective observation.

In his ethnography of Dene Tha spirit belief Goulet (1998, 190) says that “the work of inferring the reality of spirits from experience is immense.” But given the ubiquity of spirit encounters and their acceptance as ontologically real by the majority of perceiving in all cultures, what requires steady cultural reinforcement is the academic work of making this mass of observations in different cultures evidence of the same process by which societies construct fictive kinship ties or local gender configurations. Considering the common categories of spirit experience, the construction of a materialist reality in which reported perceptions of spirits are viewed as hallucinations is a much more complex and arduous task than constructing a reality that accepts spirits on the basis of experience. The process that Max Weber (1963, originally 1922) called die Entzauberung der Welt—the disenchantment of the world—was accomplished only through immense effort advanced by complex economic and political forces, and was not accomplished at all in the personal experience of most of humanity. A world inclusive of spirits is closer to human experience and a more intuitive response to common human perceptions. Such a world is empirically robust, not merely emotionally pleasing.

The Rationality Issue

All over the world and throughout history many people have had direct experiences with spirits. These experiences range from the unique to obviously related sets, such as bereavement apparitions and near-death experiences, spontaneous experiences as well as those occurring in ritual contexts. This continues today in all societies.
Although cultural setting influences description, these experiences show consistent perceptual patterns independent of the subject's prior belief or expectation. The effect of most secular scholarship and most Western religious teaching on the topic for the past several centuries has been to obscure this fact. The experiences have been stigmatized as heretical, psychopathological, or a characteristic of "primitive mentality." More recently, responding to concerns about ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism, scholars in the cultural relativist tradition have created approaches that reject cross-cultural comparisons as necessarily reductive. In the field of comparative religion the drive to avoid superficial cross-cultural generalizations led to a view of spiritual traditions as unique, limiting comparisons to the elements within particular traditions. This approach rejects the idea that such beliefs are "irrational," treating rationality as a local, Western issue, and spiritual beliefs as non-rational, not accessible to the kind of systematic rational inquiry to which hypotheses are subjected. The resulting view protects traditional spirit (and other) beliefs from reductive translation into the concepts of modern, Western society. But even when done to "protect" traditional views, this hermeneutic defense inevitably leaves most ordinary believers unprotected. People do not hold merely that they have a right to believe that they have souls or that God answers prayers or that the dead live on, but also that they have reasons that justify those beliefs. They hold that such propositions have a reality that transcends their immediate tradition. They may understand that they are "living a story," but they do not accept that the story is merely fictional.

Because the history of Western scholarship concerning religious and spiritual beliefs is so complex, both in its dismissive and its protective forms, the investigation of the "spirit hypothesis" is at least as much a matter of untangling the cultural products of scholarship as inquiring into the spirit beliefs and experiences of ordinary people. That process leads to a recognition of common features of spirit experiences that are relevant to understanding the spirit hypothesis.

Asserting such common features is not an essentializing argument for the "psychic unity" of humankind. Rather, it is a call for consideration of comparable observational reports in the same way that comparisons of similar medicinal uses for similar plants in different cultures has suggested pharmacological efficacy. Similar observations from independent witnesses should always raise the possibility that the observations accurately reflect the real world, rather than being wholly products of psychosocial and/or neurophysiological context—that is, the possibility that such beliefs are, in some substantial portion, both empirical and rational. Most who have treated spirit beliefs as rational and empirical have done so in the process of rejecting them as mistaken. Edward B. Tylor (1871), sometimes described as the founder of social anthropology, considered "primitive man" to be rational and engaged in attempting to understand the world, but doing so based on inadequate knowledge. He located the origins of religion in animism—the "belief in spiritual beings"—and interpreted this belief as reasoned
efforts to explain “two groups of biological problems”: (1) What is the difference between conscious and nonconscious bodies (sleeping, in trance, or dead), and what animates the conscious body? (2) What are the entities that appear in dreams and visions, and where do they come from?

The ancient savage philosophers probably made their first step by the obvious inference that every man has two things belonging to him, namely a life and a phantom.... [These] are doctrines answering in the most forcible way to the plain evidence of men’s senses, as interpreted by a fairly consistent and rational primitive philosophy. (Tylor, quoted in Lessa and Vogt 1972, 12-13)

Rational and empirical, but understandably—and to the nineteenth-century anthropologist’s mind, obviously—mistaken, according to Tylor, because of the primitive philosopher’s inadequate knowledge base.

Through much of the twentieth century anthropologists sought to find more respectful ways of dealing with spirit belief, something beyond Tylor’s “best-effort” analysis. A very influential example of such effort is found in the work of Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, especially in his Nuer Religion (1956), where he sought to refute the idea of a prelogical primitive mentality, as advanced by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, by showing that what appear to be inconsistencies from outside Nuer religion are actually consistent viewed from within. Yet even Evans-Pritchard clearly assumed that the spirit beliefs of those he studied were false and that their falsity was obvious to the modern mind. In his 1937 Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande, a classic still featured in debates about rationality, Evans-Pritchard described his observation of a mysterious light one night, an experience he calls having “seen witchcraft on its path.” He goes into considerable detail to show that the light was apparently impossible—no lamp was available to cast such a bright light and it traveled and disappeared in a puzzling way. The next day villagers told him what he had seen must have been witchcraft, and soon after a messenger arrived telling of the death of a man judged to have been the target of the witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard (1976, 11) reckons that “this... fully explained the light I had seen. [But] I never discovered its real origin.” Yet Evans-Pritchard never explains how he knows that the villagers’ beliefs are false. At another point he says that “it is an inevitable conclusion from Zande descriptions of witchcraft that it is not an objective reality.... Witches, as Azande conceive them cannot exist” (1976, 63). In this juxtaposition of the hermeneutic, internal-consistency interpretation with the outright assertion that these beliefs are objectively false, there is something of the psychiatrist’s willing suspension of disbelief when speaking with a psychotic patient. Of course I know this is real to you. Ideas similar to those of Tylor, although in much more sophisticated form, are also found among some modern anthropologists. For example, Robin Horton (1982) postulates a “strong core of human cognitive rationality common to the cultures of all places on earth and all times since the dawn of properly human social life,” and uses this to explain a wide variety of
religious and spiritual beliefs as understandable, consistent, highly functional, and mistaken (Horton 1970, 1982).

**The Belief That Spirits Exist Is Ubiquitous**
The belief that spirits exist is found in all human societies of which we know—not all members of any society, but many members of all societies. By spirits I mean (1) conscious beings—not necessarily humans—who do not require physical bodies, (2) ontologically real entities that exist independently of perceiving minds, and (3) conscious agents that are capable of interacting with the ordinary world in some ways. Exactly which spirits exist (God or gods, angels, jinn, souls, ghosts, etc.), and the nature and occasions of their interaction with the ordinary world (e.g., during rituals, creating the universe, reincarnating in human bodies, and so on), are left entirely open in this definition. This is an inductively derived definition intended to capture the commonalities in traditions all over the world that refer to what is most often translated as *spirits* in English. I grant that these traditions are very diverse—ranging, for example, from beliefs about spirits found in nontheistic Buddhism to the very different spirit beliefs of Presbyterians. Some belief traditions accept only one spirit, God, as real, while others include many different kinds of spirits including spirits in plants and rocks, while still others may exclude God. Of course, that such beliefs are ubiquitous says nothing about whether they are true.

**The Belief That Spirits Exist Is Contested**
The particularities of spirit beliefs are contested among believers. Wars have been fought and heretics put to death over these differences. But these differences pale in comparison to those that exist between all believers in spirits on the one hand and conventional modern academic theories about the belief that spirits exist (hereafter called “spirit belief”) on the other. Traditional spirit beliefs, as defined above, are basically never accepted on their own terms in the theories of most scholars, and the possible validity of those beliefs in their own terms is almost never seriously considered. The crucial question is whether the idea of spirits makes any sense, whether any spirit could exist, and if so whether anyone could have rational grounds for saying so. And the academic answer up to the present is a clear resounding no.

The Western academic tradition has a long history of alternately denying and ignoring the actual prevalence of the belief in spirits; of dismissing the belief as obviously false or, alternately, as qualitatively different from and incommensurable with modern knowledge; and of refusing to consider the claims inherent in such beliefs. This has been true of many who in some sense defend traditions of spiritual belief as well as those who consider such traditions to be hopelessly archaic and nonrational. Reductionists insist that these beliefs are obviously false or meaningless. Scholars sympathetic to spirit belief traditions, such as Goulet and Young, assert that truth issues are...
The Alliance of Skeptical Materialism and Western Religion against Traditional Spirit Belief

The reasons that both Enlightenment skeptics and Western theologians happened to make common cause against traditional spirit beliefs are numerous and complex, and I will not attempt to delineate them all here. But one is especially relevant: it is the association of spirit belief with religion and magic in Western thought during the past three centuries. Following the Reformation the understanding of authentic religion became increasingly "noncognitive" (and, by implication, "nonrational"). That is, it moved away from a view of religion that includes particular beliefs as accurate depictions of "spiritual facts," especially when such cognitive beliefs claim an experiential foundation, as in healings believed to be miraculous or encounters with spirits believed to be authentic.6 Theologians, notably Calvin, acknowledged cognitive belief, as in the belief that God exists, but considered it unimportant, something even the devils believe. For Calvin, proper faith was emotional, trust—belief in God.7 As to other "factual" beliefs, Protestant reformers identified belief in ghosts as Catholic superstition to be condemned as impossible along with the Catholic idea of supernatural sacraments. The Protestant repudiation of Catholic ritual as mere magic was a part of this change. Stanley Tambiah (1994, 31) points out that "seventeenth century Protestant thought contributed to the demarcation of 'magic' from 'religion,' magic being...false manipulations of the supernatural and occult powers." Keith Thomas (1971, ix), in his landmark Religion and the Decline of Magic, says that the belief in ghosts is today "rightly disdained by intelligent persons" but was "taken seriously by equally intelligent persons in the past." He places the change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, saying that in the sixteenth century the belief in ghosts "distinguished Protestant from Catholic almost as effectively as belief in the Mass or the Papal Supremacy" (p. 589). As Richard Bowyer (1981, 190–191) put it, in describing the post-Reformation period in West Country England, "The church also had ceased officially to believe in ghosts, and ascribed all such apparitions to the malevolent wiles of the Devil. This did not mean that ghosts ceased to appear, but merely that the church abdicated its authority over them." Subsequent theologians took many different paths in this move away from the idea of observable natural-supernatural interaction, which turns out to be simultaneously a move away from the spiritual experiences and beliefs of ordinary people.
In 1799 Friedrich Schleiermacher defended religion against reduction by “its cultured despisers,” the intellectuals of early German Romanticism, many of whom were his friends. His first book, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, was a direct result of the insistence of several of these friends on the occasion of his twenty-ninth birthday. This book marks the beginnings of liberal Protestant theology and has influenced many theologians up to the present day. In this book Schleiermacher (1958, 88) rejected religious ideas that were taken to conflict with “the universal validity of scientific and physical conclusions.... Religion...leaves your physics untouched, and please God, your psychology.” He went on to reject the idea of miracles as marvelous, physically impossible occurrences, saying instead that “miracle is simply the religious name for event” (p. 88). Schleiermacher then proceeded through revelation, inspiration, prophecy, and grace, defining each in a way that excluded the supernatural except for the meaning of each term to the religious observer. In Schleiermacher’s view the source of such an observer’s religiousness is religious feeling—not observable evidence of the supernatural occurring in the world. In his most important theological work, *The Christian Faith* (1821), Schleiermacher developed his idea of this source further, as a feeling of complete dependence and a self-conscious awareness of one’s finitude. Schleiermacher, in part influenced by Giambattista Vico’s insights into the historically situated nature of human knowledge, developed a hermeneutic theology in which authentic religion can only be understood by those who experience it, and whose claims are entirely separate from scientific claims about the observable world.

This idea of the radical subjectivity of religion was expanded by many later scholars, yielding a variety of approaches to the understanding of the lifeworlds of others. Theological existentialism further developed the subjectivity of religion and led to additional rejections of specific, cognitive beliefs as fundamental to religion. Søren Kierkegaard, one of the founders of religious existentialism, held that rationality in religion undermines true faith by attempting to make “safe” that which should be accepted “by virtue of the absurd” (1941b, 47, 51), and in the *Postscript* (1941a) he goes even further, saying that the absurd is not the basis of belief but rather that which must be believed, because, as Kellenberger (1985, 8) sums it up, “Faith for Kierkegaard in the *Postscript is against* reason, it is not above reason.”

From the latter nineteenth century forward, both the hermeneutic approach and existentialism, operating in a variety of fields, can be seen continuing to advance the splitting off of authentic spiritual belief from cognitive and observational claims and rational inference. In history the hermeneutic view can be seen in the ideas of Wilhelm Dilthey (1988, originally 1883) and Max Weber (1963, originally 1922) and more recently Hans-Georg Gadamer (1972), in arguments that understanding requires us to allow our own perspective to merge with the perspective we wish to understand. This is the kind of actively empathetic understanding that Dilthey called *Verstehen*. In anthropology cultural relativism, generally attributed to Franz Boas, sought to protect cultures...
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from ethnocentric interpretation. As his student Melville Herskovits (1947, 76) put it, proper cultural anthropology should make it possible to see "the validity of every set of norms for the peoples whose lives are guided by them." Cultural relativism has been extended to cover a variety of domains including perception (as for example with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) and even truth, so it regularly entails efforts to understand belief. Turning back to theology, Rudolf Otto (1953), seeking to broaden theology to include non-Christian tradition, located the source of religiosity in the unique religious feeling of what he called the numinous. Although Otto provides extensive phenomenological description of this feeling, he describes it as objective but nonrational and asserts that those who have not felt it cannot understand what religious people are speaking of. Rudolf Bultmann, an existentialist Protestant theologian, also endorsed the idea that authentic religion is to be found in feeling rather than knowing, belief in rather than belief that. Like Calvin, Schleiermacher, and Kierkegaard, Bultmann found religious beliefs based on observations of alleged divine action (or any supernatural cause) in the world to be primitive and an offense to the modern mind. Following the view of human knowledge as historically situated, Bultmann found ideas such as miracle to be understandable in the culture of the Apostolic era but foolish in the modern context, leading him to embark on the project of "demythologizing" Christian scripture. Bultmann (1953, 3–5) claimed that "the mythical view of the world is obsolete.... Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in spirits, whether good or evil." This process of "demythologizing" continues, often under other names, as modern theologians struggle to maintain authentic religion without making any claims that might be either tested or subject to alternative explanation by skeptics. As Wayne Proudfoot (1985, 235–236) sums up the effort in his book aimed at demolishing the hermeneutic defense, all these approaches "describe religious experience in such a way as to preclude any natural explanation of that experience...[by limiting] all inquiry and reflection on...religious experience and belief, to internal elucidation and analysis."

In the contemporary theological discourse concerning the relationship of science and religion this view, now sometimes called physicalist, is very influential. Ian G. Barbour, winner of the 1999 Templeton Prize, advocates an integration of religion with science in which religion learns from current science what is possible and arranges its ideas accordingly. For example, in When Science Meets Religion, Barbour (2000, 137) rejects the idea of an immaterial soul because "evidence from neuroscience does not support a body/soul dualism." Similarly Nancy Murphy, professor of Christian philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary, says "I am a physicalist. I don't believe there is a soul. The soul is a hypothetical concept that seemed necessary way back when. We don't need it now for scientific purposes" (Giberson and Yerxa 2001, 33). This understanding is exactly that of such well-known scientific skeptics as Francis Crick (1994, 4), who has said that "the idea of a soul, distinct from the body...is a myth," or E. O.
Wilson, the founder of sociobiology. In *Consilience*, his bestselling tour de force of reductive scientific materialism, Wilson (1998, 289) asserts that neuroscience makes belief in the soul untenable, and goes on to the natural conclusion that the same move eliminates any grounds for belief in spirits: “The spirits our ancestors knew intimately fled the rocks and the trees, then the distant mountains. Now they are in the stars where their final extinction is possible.” Centuries after Calvin and Hume, we find skeptical materialists and a certain kind of Western theologian moving in lockstep on the issue of spirit belief.

In this process of theological change, which Peter Berger (1990, 1–30) calls the “de-mise of the supernatural,” cognitive religious ideas have come to be seen as naïve (Zalesky 1987, 184–205), “literalist” (Comfort 1979; Maslow 1976, 21), and “crude” (Davis 1989, 226–227). Historians of religion, along with a good many theologians, have constructed this change as one that makes empirical spirit belief seem as unmodern as anthropological writing makes it un-Western. It is inevitable, then, that the intellectual view of spirit beliefs is that they are “primitive” or childish, even when they are not assumed to be symptoms of psychopathology. As John J. Cerullo (1982, 3) puts it, in contrast to the medieval view of frequent supernatural-natural interactions, the God of Protestantism “would not grant such ‘popish’ boons to a mankind as utterly, frightfully fallen as Luther and Calvin believed. In the final analysis, only one undeniably supernatural event was allotted Protestant man: the devolution of God’s sovereign grace.” The reasoning changed considerably over time, but this characterization of early Protestant thought rings true through the middle of the twentieth century and persists among physicalist theologians today. In fact, some of the latter would no longer allow grace either. Although Calvin would not have accepted Bultmann’s demythologizing of miracles in the Apostolic era, he and Bultmann share the view that contemporary humanity has only one true source of spiritual knowledge: God speaking through Jesus, a view that excludes most human-spirit interaction. Ironically, this view matches that of Enlightenment skeptic David Hume, one of those against whom the German Romantics such as Schleiermacher were reacting. In his essay “Can We Ever Have Rational Grounds for Belief in Miracles?”, Hume presents a series of arguments against a reasoned belief in miracles—by which he specifically means any supernatural-natural interaction. Many of these arguments are still in use today, ranging from peoples’ desire to believe “wondrous things” and the assertion that allegedly supernatural events are “observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations” (Hume 1963, 413), to the observation that humans are known to lie but natural law has never been known to be broken—therefore, defining miracles as the breaking of natural laws, alleged miracles are always more likely to be lies than truth. But Hume does not say that the religious cannot believe in miracles, only that they should not claim to do so on rational grounds. The religious, he says, have something better than reason, they have truth “brought home to everyone’s breast, by the immediate opera-
tion of the Holy Spirit” (p. 408). Theological hermeneuticism and existentialism join skeptical materialism and now physicalist theology in making authentic spiritual belief radically nonrational.

Compounding the noncognitive bias against attention to specifiable supernatural beliefs, inquiries into modern religious thought tend to follow modern theology in another way, by taking theism—ideas about God—as the beginning and end of spiritual religious experience and belief. It is probably no coincidence that this tendency follows Reformation theology, which sharply narrowed the acceptable forms of supernatural-natural interaction. This has put the majority of spirit beliefs out of bounds in both skeptical and religious circles in Western thought, subjecting them to both materialistic and religious criticism and rejection. This greatly complicates efforts to understand and evaluate the spirit hypothesis within the context of Western intellectual traditions: many of the discussions, arguments, and methods of modern thought are applicable to the spirit-hypothesis topic, but that topic has rarely been explicitly raised within serious scholarship during the past two centuries. The exceptions are notable, including William James (1902), University of Virginia psychiatry professor Ian Stevenson (2001), sociologist Andrew Greeley (1975), and anthropologists Edith Turner (1994) and Antonia Mills (1994). And, of course, outside the academic world oral tradition and popular culture have always carried ideas and accounts regarding spirits.

The continued presence of these discussions suggests that Berger’s “demise of the supernatural” has taken place only in conservative academic thought. The persistence of belief in spirits is evident in historical sources from the very beginning of the theological and philosophical moves away from them. Thomas (1971, 588) notes that although the Protestant teaching against belief in ghosts was “remarkably firm,” by the eighteenth century such notable intellectuals as Samuel Johnson were again speaking seriously of the possibility of ghosts. Institutional Protestantism and modern theology have struggled to disenchant the world. But constant revivals, from the Great Awakening to the Charismatic Movement in Christianity, from Hasidism to Jewish Renewal and the resurgence of Kabala in Judaism, the rise of so-called fundamentalisms around the world, and the pervasive influence of “New Age” thinking from Emerson to the Theosophists to Shirley MacLaine, insistently return the idea of a world imbued with an objectively real supernatural. Even as the word supernatural seems to have been so stigmatized by horror fiction and localized by anthropology (see Hallowell 1960; Saler 1977) that it can no longer be used intelligibly, the concept to which it referred remains vibrantly alive. When scholars imagine spirit belief to be passé they endow a narrow spectrum of academic ideas with the power to define “modern thought.” As Andrew Greeley (1972, 8) has pointed out, “It is not good social analysis to define as modern man the academic and his colleague in the media and to write off the rest of the population as irrelevant residues of the tribal past”; to do so is “the sheerest kind of snobbery.” Greeley made that comment more than thirty years ago, arguing that
spiritual belief was neither dead nor in real decline in the modern world. The current evidence from the "postmodern world" makes Greeley look downright prescient. And yet anthropologists and other social scientists continue to put forth great effort to commit the same mistake in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence.

Coming to Terms with the Ontology of Events

Despite the mounting evidence that the basic belief in spirits is empirically grounded and rationally derived, for years I accepted the common assertion that issues of truth in such belief cannot and should not be addressed. I began to change my mind about that as a result of conversations that I had in 1985 when I was invited to a conference on comparative methods. What happened, I am sure, is typical of the experience of scholars and scientists who take the spirit hypothesis seriously in an academic arena. I was invited to the conference because my research on traditions of supernatural assault (e.g., sorcery, demons, and vampire), reported in The Terror That Comes in the Night (Hufford 1982a), involved both cross-cultural and historical comparisons as a fundamental method for studying spiritual beliefs. That research centered on the medical category of sleep paralysis, beginning with its cultural expression in Newfoundland, Canada. I showed for the first time that this event includes a complex subjective pattern involving the perception of an "evil presence" and numerous other negative "spirit attributes," and that this pattern is consistently reported all over the world. That is, what sleep researchers call sleep paralysis comprises an understandable and challenging warrant for certain widespread spiritual beliefs. This does not prove the beliefs true, and in some cases conflicting widespread beliefs are supported by the same kinds of experience, as when sleep paralysis is interpreted as "alien abduction" (Hufford 1995a, 2005) by some and demonic attack by others. But the robust experiential basis does render such beliefs understandable as reasoned. In my presentation I extended the findings reported in the book, showing that this widely found pattern contradicts conventional explanations of alleged supernatural experience that depend on the cultural loading of experience—what I call the cultural source hypothesis.

The cultural source hypothesis assumes that first-person claims of spirit experience are produced by prior belief and cultural values. The experiences are errors of interpretation, illusions, hallucinations, or simply the false appearance of experience produced by narrative processes. If this were true, then counting such claims as evidence for traditional beliefs would be viciously circular, since the beliefs are understood to cause the experiences. I insisted that it is bad scholarship simply to assume such explanations rather than documenting them systematically. By demonstrating that experiences with the same complex features as the Newfoundlanders' "Old Hag"—such as shuffling footsteps and a frightening presence—occur in different cultural settings all over the world, including among my medical students who have never heard of them and
who did not believe in such things before having the experience, I was able to demon-
strate that explanations requiring prior cultural knowledge cannot account for the
experiential reports of traditions about such events found all over the world. I went
on to suggest that the same is likely to be true of a variety of other traditional
beliefs—for example, afterlife beliefs. I called for a new approach to the interpretation
of spiritual folk belief.

At that point a colleague asked me how I did explain these beliefs and accounts of
experience if they do not depend on cultural sources. I replied that I did not know
of any explanations that accommodate the data except, of course, for the explanations
found in folk tradition—explanations involving real spirits. Although I did not go on
to argue that those explanations are correct, the ensuing discussion—and later the
unexplained absence of my paper from the published conference proceedings—made
it clear that I had already upset some colleagues rather badly. This confirmed my
understanding of the social processes that protect the archaic interpretations of spiri-
tual belief shared by many scholars. Thomas Kuhn's (1962) explanations of academic
resistance to politically unacceptable observations and interpretations, from adverse
reviews to attacks on the methods and competence of dissident scholars, are the mod-
ern norm where spiritual beliefs are involved.

Since that time I have gradually moved toward plain speaking on this issue, ques-
tioning the common argument that we cannot be concerned with whether a belief be-
ing studied is true or well-founded. Some colleagues have argued that addressing issues
of truth in belief studies is theology, not ethnology. Jacqueline Simpson (1988, 16),
taking issue with my critique of poorly 'founded academic "traditions of disbelief" in
the British journal Talking Folklore (Hufford 1987), said that when a folklorist "begins
to wonder whether the phenomena under investigation could be based on fact," one
ceases to be a folklorist—an old assertion that always makes me wonder whether those
who eat food are to be automatically excluded from studying it! Simpson said, for ex-
ample, that the nineteenth-century scholar Andrew Lang ceased to be a folklorist and
became, instead, a psychic researcher when he entertained the possibility that ghosts
exist. And yet the same scholars who argue against directly addressing truth issues use
and develop theories that implicitly debunk those beliefs (e.g., Berger, Goulet, Zalesky).
Debunking, or dismissing as irremediably metaphysical and not subject to confirma-
tion, does in fact directly address the truth issue. Even sympathetic scholars such as
Young and Goulet (1994, 317) refer to spirit experiences as "dreams and visions,"
making no effort to distinguish the two, contrasting these experiences with those that
occur "while wide awake" (p. 317). They refuse explicitly to reject or accept the truth
of spirit belief, saying that either alternative requires "an act of faith" (p. 325). Then,
emphasizing the role of interpretation, they assert that accepting the native view of
spirits as real is "tantamount to going native," preferring the "hermeneutic challenge"
(p. 325). This exploitation of an ambiguity partially produced by steadfast refusal to
make a detailed and accurate account of the observational basis of many spirit beliefs debunks the basic claims of believers as much as do those of the reductionists whom these authors deplore.

This kind of theorizing, the norm in folklore and anthropology since their beginnings, does address truth issues, but does so with a devastating, though unspoken, pre-emptive bias. What they call for is avoiding comments on truth issues that support belief rather than undermining it. My response used to be that a true bracketing of truth claims was what I sought. But my colleague’s question at the comparative-method conference has returned to haunt me again and again. If we have several coherent explanations for spiritual beliefs based on experience, and the evidence leads us to exclude all but one—and that one hinges on the traditional belief that spirits exist and are occasionally perceived—then on what grounds do we insist that the events are “inexplicable”? If we compare two explanations for belief in spirits—experiential claims versus cultural loading, for example—and we have shown that the spirit explanation is simpler and fits the data far more closely than the cultural-loading explanation, then haven’t we done all that we ever do when we say that we have shown that one explanation is more likely to be true? The only clear way to subvert that conclusion would be to show that the spirit explanation is somehow contradicted by other well-established knowledge—something that I have shown is often assumed but almost never demonstrated. I do not believe we should ever, as scholars, claim an irrevocable certainty about anything—although such disposition is certainly quite different from what is reasonable in our personal lives. But neither do we refuse to connect our interpretations with the world outside our imaginations. So, if we can systematically compare explanations in terms of their adequacy (empirical fit and consistency, that is, their epistemological warrants), then in doing so we are inquiring into their “truth.” This we certainly can do regarding experience-based claims about spirits.

An Experiential Theory of Spirit Beliefs

Belief in spirits is considered by many scholars to be a defining element of religion, but it does not by itself constitute religion. The conflation of religion and spirit belief in modern scholarship has caused the difficulties of rationally adjudicating conflicting theological claims to be projected onto the study of spirit beliefs. This is a serious conceptual error. Religion refers to social institutions, while spirituality refers to personal belief and practice. In some individuals these may be very similar, but the difference between them is important, since many hold spiritual beliefs and follow spiritual practices without affiliating with any religious institution (Roof 1993; Fuller 2001). The distinction has become a commonplace in modern American life. Certainly there are spirit beliefs in the highly ramified theological doctrines of diverse religious institutions, and these religious doctrines are notoriously metaphysical, lacking a stable em-
Local Observation and Interpretation in Evaluating the “Spirit Hypothesis”

Empirical foundation. Although religious beliefs often include some empirical elements (such as personal experiences of answers to prayer and mystical experiences), they are heavily dependent on faith. While it is often granted that religious systems have an internally consistent logic, their lack of a robust and stable empirical base makes it impossible to relate that logic systematically to other belief systems in a direct manner. Most religious understandings of faith remove any need for observational evidence. The resulting incommensurability creates the special investigative problems of hermeneutics. But spirit beliefs are also found in all societies in much less abstract form as folk beliefs (Yoder 1974), which tend to be closely associated with experience and minimally theorized (Hufford 1995b, 2005).

Because of unfamiliarity with events such as the bereavement experiences noted at the beginning of this chapter, near-death experiences, and the terrifying spiritual pattern of sleep paralysis noted above, and because of the cultural influences already discussed, some readers may immediately wonder whether such reports cannot simply be attributed to mental illness. As I have noted several times above, explanations that dismiss spiritual experience as valid evidence for belief frequently do attribute these experiences to psychopathology. The term hallucination refers to a false perception, an apparent perception for which there is no corresponding external object. It is natural, then, that in rejecting a perceptual claim as impossible the idea of hallucination arises, and hallucinations are associated with mental illness. This is problematic because of the central involvement of Western psychology in the post-Enlightenment project of removing spiritual ideas from the realm of rational discussion. Psychological theories have been used by anthropologists and anthropological ideas by psychologists in reaching a consensus on the nonrationality of spiritual belief and experience. For example, several studies (Larson et al. 1993; Post 1992; Lukoff, Lu, and Turner 1992) have shown a considerable negative bias toward religious belief and experience in the mental illness classifications and descriptions in DSM-III-R (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, superseded in 1994 by DSM-IV) through unfair stereotyping of religious persons, inclusion of mystical and near-death experiences as psychoreligious problems, disproportionate use of examples of psychopathology that involve religion, and a general insensitivity toward patients’ religious views (Bucklin 1999, 8).

DSM-IV (1994) has made attempts to correct this bias. In the introduction it states:

A clinician who is unfamiliar with the nuances of an individual’s cultural frame of reference may incorrectly judge as psychopathology those normal variations in behavior, belief, or experience that are particular to the individual’s culture. For example, certain religious practices or beliefs (e.g., hearing or seeing a deceased relative during bereavement) may be misdiagnosed as manifestations of a Psychotic Disorder. (p. xxxiv)

The result is an exception from psychiatric labeling, but only for those whose culture endorses such experiences. This perpetuates the anthropological notion, illustrated by
Goulet’s (1994) approach, that immersion in a visionary cultural setting produces visions in psychologically normal individuals, while those who report such experiences where visions are stigmatized, as in modern, Western society, are labeled with psychiatric diagnoses. This persists to the present despite abundant documentation in the literature of the widespread occurrence of visionary spirit experiences in the general population of the United States. That labeling simultaneously serves to suppress the discussion of such experiences among the psychically normal, to delegitimate the claims of those who refuse to follow the rules, and to obscure crucial empirical evidence regarding spirit belief. I have discussed and documented this issue at length elsewhere (Hufford 1985). Suffice it to say here that the prevalence and distribution of these experiences, as documented in Western society during the past three decades, makes the psychopathological explanation as untenable as the cultural explanations. The fundamental question is not so much whether normal people hallucinate as it is on what grounds it has been decided that the most common of these experiences are hallucinations in the first place.

None of this “proves” experience-based beliefs to be true, but direct perceptual experiences do provide a meaningful place to begin an inquiry into the empirical claims. Believers also support such claims indirectly, as when good or bad events, thoughts, or feelings are attributed to the hidden influence of spirits, but all such support is inherently ambiguous. Scholars have long focused on such ambiguous experiences interpreted as spiritual by believers and otherwise interpreted by those who do not believe. Theories based on such ambiguity have in turn described believer experiences in ways that maximize the opportunity and need for interpretation. Detailed phenomenological descriptions of “spirit experiences” derived from thorough interviews, the kind of account needed to recognize direct experiential support for spirit belief, have been extremely rare in the literature.

I have proposed elsewhere (Hufford 1995b, 27–34) an experiential theory of spirit beliefs focused on direct empirical claims. It may be simply stated as follows:

1. Many widespread spirit beliefs are supported by experiences that refer intuitively to spirits (conscious agents who do not require physical bodies for their existence) without inference or retrospective interpretation, and occur independently of a subject’s prior beliefs, knowledge, or intention (psychological set).
2. These core spiritual experiences form distinct classes with stable perceptual patterns.
3. Such experiences provide a central empirical (that is, observational in the ordinary sense) foundation from which some spirit beliefs develop rationally (that is, utilizing ordinary rules of inference).

Stating that these experiences refer “intuitively” is not a naive claim that they are unmediated, but rather that, like many ordinary perceptual experiences, they are not mediated by the concepts to which they give rise. An experience refers intuitively to
spirits if it involves a perception that seems to force a choice between “I must be hallucinating” and “I am perceiving a ‘spirit.’” In this case there is no issue of subjectivity versus objectivity, or lay versus expert opinion. Neither are the determination of intuitive reference and the forced choice controversial. The experience of seeming to clearly perceive an object always presents a forced choice between a valid perception and a hallucination, although this choice is automatic except when the perception seems very unlikely. We do not even need to rule out illusion (that is, misperception as opposed to false perception) and show that valid perception and hallucination really comprise the only possibilities. All that is needed is that the experience seems to be a clear perception. Although we can never directly assess the clarity of an alleged perception, when many subjects independently claim a particular kind of clear perception we have strong evidence that the perception does indeed seem clear.

Seeing and being spoken to by one known to be dead, while awake and lucid, presents this choice between perceiving a spirit and hallucinating. So do the frightening presences of sleep paralysis. Direct spirit experiences are unambiguous regarding this basic point. Unlike less direct “interpretive experiences,” the conclusion that direct experiences involve spirits does not require prior belief—rather it changes prior disbelief. The stable patterns of these classes of spirit experience account, at least in part, for similarities among such beliefs in different cultures and for their persistence in the modern world. These culturally independent patterns also constitute a class of evidence supporting spirit belief.

“Subjective” Evidence
The empirical basis and rational articulation of spirit beliefs, as well as their cross-cultural prevalence, make them available for discussion in terms of their truth claims. Granted, this evidence is “subjective,” and that may make “scientific investigation” or “proof” impossible. This was the basis of Goulet’s assertion that such beliefs are “scientifically unverifiable.” But that does not prevent a rational and systematic assessment of truth claims.

Anthropologist Paul Stoller (1998, 252), in an effort to reconcile spirit belief with rationality, criticizes conventional Western rationalities—a use of the plural that suggests a rejection of a single rational standard—and endorses what he calls an “embodied rationality” that “demands a fuller sensual awareness of the smells, tastes, sounds, and textures of the lifeworld.” He continues by stating that “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” (p. 252). The rationality that Stoller most strongly rejects, what he calls “Universalist Rationality,” calls for logical consistency as a core concept. Stanley Tambiah (1994, 117), quoted by Stoller (1998, 244), criticizes this consistency demand by questioning its assumption.
that "the person who acts irrationally [has] the wherewithal to formulate maxims of his action and objectives which are in contradiction with each other." Stoller then asserts: "Viewed in this manner, it is clear that a universalist rationality is an extension of the intellectual hegemony of the Enlightenment project in which universally applied Reason is used to constitute authoritative knowledge" (p. 244). It is this concern for the colonial aspects of rationality rooted in Western science that led Feyerabend (1988, 4) to make the following strong statement:

"Progress of knowledge" in many places [has] meant the killing of minds. Today old traditions are being revived and people try again to adapt their lives to the ideas of their ancestors.... Science, properly understood, has no argument against such a procedure.... Such a science is one of the most wonderful inventions of the human mind. But I am against ideologies that use the name of science for cultural murder.

I agree wholeheartedly with the imperialist risk as stated by Feyerabend, but I disagree with both the current analysis and the solutions recommended by anthropologists to the extent that they reject a solid basis of rational procedures that is universally applicable. Being more open to our sensuous experience as Stoller advises seems wise counsel, and this has the advantage of an openness to subjective report. But that does not require the abandonment of conventional reason. The problem is not an "excess of rationality." The problem is an excessive and inconsistently applied demand for 'objective evidence': the insistence that observations that register on mechanical devices—as opposed to those that are sensed by the human observer—are the only useful objective and public observations. But that mechanical criterion of validity, powerful and problematic as it has been, does not lie at the heart of rational process. Reliance on objective evidence in this sense does lie at the heart of contemporary scientific process. But that does not require such evidence for all rational process, unless science is what rationality is. This view is sometimes expressed today by philosophers, for example Daniel Dennett (Dennett and Rorty 2000), and it is somewhat similar to the pragmatic view, found for example in John Dewey's work (1938). These ideas constitute a very broad claim for science. In fact, this view has actually penetrated everyday discourse and is common even among many who dispute the validity of science but assume that this requires them to dispute the validity of rational argument also.9

If it is true not only that science is rational, but that rationality is what science is, then all ideas—alleged facts, methods, interpretations—that are not scientific are not rational. It would also follow that scientists would be the only appropriately trained judges of rationality and valid statements about the world. It might, then, further follow that only objective evidence in the mechanical sense would have weight in rational (that is, scientific) discourse. That methodological criterion has had many positive effects in science, but in medicine it has resulted in such serious problems as failure to deal adequately with pain, an undeniably real but irretrievably subjective "observa-
The use of subjective evidence is not assumed to be irrational in medicine. And also in law, despite such genuine scientific advances as DNA tests, independent eyewitness testimony is considered a rational basis for reaching conclusions. In most fields subjective evidence has weight, and it is not assumed that inferences made in the absence of strong mechanically derived data are irrational or all equal. I do not suggest that subjective accounts individually should have the evidential force that a photographic or seismic record has. But when independent subjective accounts confirm one another they do have evidential weight and are conventionally accepted—except when they conflict with privileged prior conclusions. And when that happens, when powerful paradigms are threatened, even replicable machine-registered data are generally ignored and those who report it stigmatized.

This is the heart of the problem: the confusion of the "'bridgehead' of true and rational beliefs" (Hollis 1982, 73) or "irreversible knowledge" (Lamer 1984, 153–165) that rationalists say is required for rational discourse, with the rational processes that have contributed to the construction of such knowledge. This is the aspect of the rhetoric of objectivity that Feyerabend called the effort to separate facts from the path that leads to them, giving them independent existence "out there" instead within an epistemological framework. Yet even if subjective report is not useful in science proper, it certainly must be within rational discourse generally. And when inferences based on experience unaided by machines conflict with privileged prior conclusions, that conflict alone cannot be taken to show that the inferences are irrational! Only in the strongest old-fashioned positivist view could it be assumed that if two statements disagree one must be irrational. If they are contradictory, then one must be wrong. It does not follow that one must be irrational. But when conventional science meets unconventional claims, especially decidedly unmodern claims about spirits, then even open-minded and theoretically flexible scientists tend to become logical positivists.

"Subjective evidence" is widely credited despite recognition of its shortcomings. (Objective evidence has its shortcomings also, with regard to human concerns.) Although epistemologists sometimes define knowledge as "true, justified belief" (see Audi 1988), most scholars today recognize that knowledge is often contested and in need of revision. Certainty is hard to come by, but that does not make all of us nihilists. Even when objective, quantitative data are present our reasoning involves odds ratios and confidence intervals. We do not speak or act as though we have no belief in anything that has not been scientifically verified, and if we did we would find life very difficult.

Subjective evidence always provides room for argument, and contested propositions will be met with a great deal of such debate. But that does not mean that subjective evidence is without weight, despite the constant assertions to the end when spiritual belief is at issue. Some of the philosophical matters involved have been discussed at
length by Carolyn Franks Davis (1989), and I do not intend to recapitulate them here. I will simply make a number of summary observations:

1. Given what believers in fact believe about spirits—that they are not material—one would not expect much in the way of physical evidence.

2. Our approach to evaluating the spirit hypothesis should not stand or fall on “scientific verification” but rather on a rational assessment of evidence—although scientific evidence is a kind of rational assessment it is not the only kind, as the medical and legal examples above suggest.

3. Instead we should be concerned with the methods available to us, and generally well known, for assessing allegedly independent subjective reports.

4. The ultimate agreement of all intelligent parties as a criterion for having made a strong case is a preposterous standard. This criterion has not yet been achieved for most interesting theories and observations in modern knowledge, but that does not mean that without unanimous agreement consensus is meaningless.

5. Direct spirit experiences are common and occur cross-culturally, and there are consistencies among many such experiences. This makes them a robust form of empirical support for spirit belief, and opens them to the evaluation of their truth claims.

6. Evaluation of spirit experiences is required on both epistemological and ethical grounds.

7. The cultural biases of the modern academic world concerning spirit beliefs have resulted in methods of study that have obscured the patterns and evidential force of direct spirit experience.

8. The intransigent refusal of scholars to address seriously the most direct experiential grounds of spirit belief has resulted in interpretations of such belief that are at best incomplete and at worst are contrary to all good quantitative data on the prevalence and distribution of spiritual belief, that are descriptively impoverished, that are theoretically incoherent, and that are inherently unjust as discussed above.

Fair and Effective Study of Spiritual Belief

Any fair and rational approach to the investigation of spirit beliefs will benefit by including the following three principles: methodological symmetry, local acceptance, and local priority.

The Principle of Methodological Symmetry

Most investigations of spirit belief (or of any set of beliefs that the investigator does not share) give a privileged status to some of the investigator's opposing beliefs. These are permitted to stand as assumptions—that is, they are taken for granted and neither explained nor questioned. Axiomatic grounding is a necessary and reasonable require-
ment for any investigation, but for the investigation of contested beliefs, especially unofficial and socially stigmatized beliefs, such grounding creates an insuperable obstacle when the assumptions implicitly conflict with the belief being examined. Such an investigation commits the fallacy of begging the question by reaching conclusions based on statements that are themselves at issue. To avoid the overwhelming bias resulting from the use of such assumptions I utilize the principle of methodological symmetry. Its central feature is an insistence on parity among beliefs and possible explanations for them. Support for the principle comes from the sociology of knowledge assertion that all beliefs are “problematic”—that is, that all beliefs require explanation and raise the question of why they are held at all. This is as true for well-established beliefs (such as scientific knowledge) as for the flimsiest rumor, if we want to understand how knowledge is constructed. In such an inquiry unshared explanations cannot be privileged or discounted without reasons, and similar reasons are required for all kinds of explanations. For example, if I frame my discussion of an allegedly haunted house with the assumption that ghosts do not exist, methodological symmetry requires me to explain how I know that. If I omit this step I am not doing systematic analysis, instead I am merely giving unsupported personal opinions—or reciting the beliefs of my tribe, and under symmetry the beliefs of one’s tribe do not trump the beliefs of others without argument, whether my tribe is philosophers or physicists or spiritists. A statement such as “Anthropologists generally agree...” does not count as an argument. By itself it is an appeal to authority. By the same token one cannot assume that ghosts do exist when attempting to evaluate spirit belief. I do not insist that spirit beliefs must be found true or even rational or that competing disbeliefs must always prove flawed. I consider any assumptions about the basic issues under investigation to be fatal for systematic inquiry. This is symmetry. The symmetry I seek lies in the process of the investigation, not in its results.

The Principle of Local Acceptance

Knowledge and belief are usually distinguished, with knowledge being more certain than belief. In epistemology knowledge has often been attributed on the basis of very stringent criteria—for example, knowledge as “justified true belief” (see Audi 1988, 102–118). Even such stringent usages treat knowledge as a kind of belief. Because what counts as justification and grounds for being certain of the truth vary enormously from one subject to another and from one cultural frame to another, the knowledge-belief distinction is not useful for a culturally situated inquiry. In a cultural view, knowledge refers to locally certain belief, without regard to whether the inquirer shares the local certainty. This contextualizes knowledge claims, but it does not relativize them.

Rational inquiry is, broadly speaking, the study of belief in the cognitive sense—that is, ideas held to be true. That is the case in science, where beliefs comprise hypotheses,
the soundest of which are organized into formal theories. It is also the case when we inquire into traditional ideas ranging from use of a particular plant in folk medicine to beliefs about spirits. Apart from the formally stated hypotheses of scientists and the creeds of religions, most “beliefs” are not held in a highly articulated form, certainly not as a list of propositions. Even if one knows, accepts, and has reflected on an official religious creed, as may (or may not) be the case for a Christian who recites the Apostles’ Creed in church, that creed is unlikely to contain all of one’s spiritual beliefs. This is not, however, to say that most people do not know what they believe. Rather, peoples’ beliefs are embodied in their “stories” from which the beliefs may be inferred by the interested observer. Stories and their discussion, then, are the natural currency of belief traditions. And these stories that center on the description of events also embody the arguments and counterarguments by which people support their beliefs. Many questions can be asked about beliefs and the ways that they are expressed and organized. But if we are to take believing seriously we must include questions about the validity of the grounds on which these ideas are held to be true—that is, how accurately a belief reflects that particular aspect of the world to which it refers. The claim of such accuracy is, after all, the very heart of belief. To ask questions about the accuracy of scientific ideas or folk beliefs we must encounter them as propositions. Because such propositional descriptions of belief are inferred from believer utterances and refer to aspects of the cognitive worlds of believers, the validity of those descriptions requires an empirical check based in those worlds. I call this criterion the principle of local acceptance: a valid belief description must be acceptable to the one to whom it is attributed.

Using the cognitive meaning of belief, it makes no sense to speak of “unconscious beliefs,” and the like. Therefore, the simplest check on the validity of a belief description is to offer it to the one thought to hold it, and ask if it is acceptable. The fact that a believer may lie about a belief poses an important problem in belief study (as in law, sociology, and so on), but it does not override this principle. Neither does this view exclude “covert beliefs.”

Working with both the ethnographic and the historical record requires one’s understanding of a belief without the benefit of contemporaneous interview. Although nothing can replace directly checking a belief statement with the putative believer, there are a variety ways to reduce the likelihood that a belief description would be rejected by a believer. Such methods are not well developed, because the local-acceptance requirement has not yet received much attention. It is paramount that any utterance of a propositional belief statement attributed to a person or group should be accompanied by evidence and an argument specific to whether the utterance would be acceptable to the one(s) to whom it is attributed.

Belief descriptions need to be carefully scrutinized for ambiguous terms. Until all terms have been properly defined, in ways acceptable to the believer, a valid description
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has not been established. For example, even if an interviewee accepts as an accurate statement of her belief the proposition that "this house is haunted," a common belief related to the belief that spirits exist, the possibility of serious error still exists until the meaning of "haunt," to the believer, has been properly stated.

The construction of belief statements inferred from accounts, conversations, and interviews is a central methodological issue in the study of belief, although rarely discussed in explicit terms. Failure to use statements that would be accepted by the believer, at this stage of analysis, is a methodological error that will invalidate any subsequent effort to understand why this person holds these beliefs. Martin Hollis (1982, 72) has correctly recognized the importance of what I call "local acceptance" when stating his criteria for understanding a belief system: "I take there to be understanding, when he [an inquirer] knows what his subjects believe (identification) and why they believe it (explanation). But let no one forget that the two go together, lest we propose a canon for explaining beliefs, which would make it impossible to identify them." I suggest that we take Hollis's claim even further. If a belief is misidentified in such a way that its original holder would either not recognize or not agree with it, then all subsequent explanations will be about a false belief that the interpreter holds about the believer.

Beliefs in propositional form are to be understood as constructions of an investigator who attempts to refer to the allegedly truthful ideas of the believer in question. They have the same status as the values, symbols, and other abstract entities that scholars generally infer from the behavior and statements of people. Deriving valid belief descriptions concerning beliefs that claim some sort of experiential foundation—that is, beliefs that are not entirely metaphysical—requires both phenomenological description and careful redescription, the former to approximate the nature of the experiential basis and the latter to clarify and simplify colloquial descriptions that tend to be both ambiguous and highly ramified.

Phenomenological Description and Ramification

Spirit-belief evaluation relates to an assessment of observations by independent witnesses, and this requires close attention to the ways observations are collected, stated, and then aggregated. The issues are essentially the same as those involved in taking testimony in a legal case. What is required is interviewing, translation, and description that are as straightforwardly phenomenological as possible, in order to separate interpretation from "the data." I grant that there is no such thing as atheoretical language—no pure "observation language"—but I do insist that some language is more theory-laden than some other language.

Any claim to base a conclusion on experience must actually deal with accounts of experience. We can never inspect "the experience itself" or anyone's perception of the experience. Our inferences cannot be based on observations themselves, but they are based on statements made about the experience of making observations—that is,
observation statements. My own observation immediately changes to a memory of my observation. There is no need to pursue this backward through an indefinite epistemic regression to appreciate its importance. Descriptive utterances are essential for inferential reasoning. And while "meanings" (under the various sophisticated academic interpretations of "meaning") may be incommensurable, perceptual references are not. It is one thing to know that an utterance refers to "a spirit," and quite another to know the "meaning of spirits" to the subject and the subject's culture. It is reference that is needed in evaluating the evidential force of experiential claims. Phenomenological description, properly derived, provides an exceptionally strong source for distinguishing the two.

Carolyn Franks Davis (1989, 24) adapts from Ninian Smart a term that is enormously useful in characterizing descriptions, especially those relating to belief: ramification, the extent to which an account entails more than was actually observed. Davis gives the following sources and examples of ramification in description: "Highly ramified descriptions may involve highly theory-laden terms (e.g., 'a glaciated landscape') or very specific terms (e.g., beagle as opposed to 'dog' or 'animal'), or employ specialized knowledge (e.g., 'This is the pen which the prime minister used to sign the treaty')" (p. 24). Highly ramified descriptions move from observation statements toward statements of interpretation. Bearing in mind that observation and interpretation cannot be rendered dichotomous, interpretations also vary in their degree of ramification, making it a central feature in the process by which language enculturates experience.

Because argument and the citing of evidence are much less explicit in ordinary speech than in academic talk, ramification is a primary mechanism by which observation, theory, and argument are "bundled" within traditional discourse.

More highly ramified descriptions are not necessarily less accurate, although they do contain more opportunities for error than less ramified descriptions. By definition, ramification moves descriptions away from the observations to which they refer. Phenomenological descriptions are minimally ramified descriptions. When we are seeking to know the specifics of a perception, we must reduce ramification as much as possible.

Redescription of Spirit-Belief Experiences A highly ramified description can usually be redescribed in a less ramified manner, in order to get a more direct observation statement (see Davis 1989, 25). This is precisely the methodological requirement for phenomenological interviewing. However, no one other than the actual subject of an experience can make such a restatement in anything other than a hypothetical form. The principle of local acceptance applies to descriptions of experience that are themselves belief statements about perception. The use of repeated redescription to achieve a minimally ramified, phenomenological description, with the constant confirmation of the field consultant, is illustrated by the following exchange (Hufford 1982a, 195–
in which two people were describing what they took to have been their own versions of the “same experience” of paralysis and a spirit presence, at first pleasurable, but subsequently terrifying:

Example # 5.
Hufford: You felt it coming over you, you said. Describe the sensation as exactly as you can.
Joan: Well, at first I just kind of sensed something there. I don’t know how to explain that.
Hufford: In the room?
Joan: Right. Just a presence, or just a...
Carol: You could feel it.
Joan: And then physically it’s like a tingling through your shoulders. And then a heaviness, maybe. Or a pressure.... It’s not like you’re really concentrating on, “Well, I’ve gotta get out of this thing,” you know... right away. Because it feels good. It’s not a bad feeling.
Carol: It’s a real pleasant sensation.
Joan: It’s not a bad feeling at all. Until you start thinking... well...
Hufford: Here I’m stuck.
Joan: A tingling. Well, I don’t know how to say... How do you describe “tingle”?
Hufford: Is there any sensation you’ve ever had that’s similar to this?
(someone else in the room): Like when your leg’s waking up from being asleep?
Carol: No. It’s not like that at all. That’s more of an irritation type.
Joan: Yeah. This is very pleasant like, rippling...
Carol: Very sensual... (Laughs.)
Hufford: Rippling?
Joan: Yeah.
Hufford: Through the surface of your body?
Joan: No, more inwardly.
Carol: Inward.
Joan: It’s like... in your body.
Carol: It’s like your nerve ends are just all being stimulated by some real pleasant... vibration or something. And it’s a real sensation.

Such joint redescriptions clearly are about both perception and language. All descriptions of unshared experience involve analogy to link the reported perceptions to perceptions that are assumed to be shared. Because analogies are imperfect correspondences, redescription is always necessary to distinguish the applicable and the inapplicable elements, and this can only be done confidently by the subject.
In the analysis of a particular case, when confirmation by the field consultant is not available (as for many classic mystical accounts and accounts in the ethnographic literature), redescriptions must seek the lowest common denominators of ramification without introducing theory-laden terms. Obviously interpretation and even disputes about the accuracy of the original description may be called for. But when they are simply offered as differently ramified redescription they smuggle interpretations into the discussion while avoiding questions about their justification. For the analyst interested in the experiential and perceptual levels, much of the ethnographic record, despite the “thickness” of the description there, appears so highly ramified by the describer that a great deal of basic information, especially perceptual information, is no longer present.

The development of phenomenological interview techniques and the use of verbatim accounts are essential to investigation of the perceptual basis of spirit belief. When the original account is in another language there is no doubt that translation introduces new ambiguities and opportunities for error. But if it is understood that at this point we are seeking straightforward descriptions of perception—not seeking a fulsome understanding of meaning—there is no need to be pessimistic about the possibility of useful translation. I may never fully appreciate an Inuit person’s description of snow, but that does not mean that they cannot convey to me, through a translator, such basics as “It is snowing now.” I can know what my informant is referring to, even if I cannot claim to grasp the local “meaning” of snow.

The Principle of Local Priority
Academic explanations of spirit beliefs are almost always, to use the words of Young and Goulet (1994, 322), given “in terms that are foreign to the culture in which they lived these experiences.” They use “in terms” to mean both the selection of language (after all, unless the original experiences and beliefs are given in English, the English speaker will want some kind of translation into English terms), and the kinds of interpretation given. The former often, but not always, leads to the latter. When the interpretation is foreign to the believer it is what Keith Dixon (1980, 127-128) calls “external-to-discourse,” an idea similar to “etic.” Regarding spirit beliefs all explanations that exclude the nonimaginary reality of spirits are clearly external-to-discourse. The principle of methodological symmetry does not forbid the use of such conflicting interpretations, but it does require that they be shown superior to local interpretations in some way other than being offered by people with advanced degrees. This is specifically with regard to those external explanations that conflict with internal or local interpretations, as by dismissing the belief in spirits. External interpretations and commentaries do not necessarily conflict in this way, and if they do not conflict—that is, if they can simply be added to local understandings in a consistent way—superiority is not an issue. This does not privilege local understandings, but it refuses to subordinate
them without good reason. One needs to begin with local interpretations and explanations, and then move beyond them only as necessary. Such a procedure is basic parsimony in action. I call this criterion the principle of local priority: (1) the search for explanations of a belief should properly start with those given by insiders; (2) any outsider interpretations that conflict with those of insiders must show (give evidence and arguments for) their superiority.

Dixon (1980, 123) points out that the "theorist ought to exercise extreme caution in turning to reductive or external-to-discourse explanations for beliefs," because "in explaining or understanding beliefs, judgments upon their epistemological basis cannot be evaded." He goes on to note that "serious attention must be paid to participant accounts of the meaning of the beliefs and activities which define or are elements of a particular discourse" (p. 123). Consequently, serious belief scholarship requires one to explore meanings from an internal perspective, and to take seriously their truth claims. Taking spirit beliefs seriously and considering their plausibility from an internal perspective does not rule out the possibility that eventually an external, reductive explanation—such as a pure social-construction interpretation—will supersede local understandings and eventually be accepted for a particular belief and related meanings. However, prior to asserting external explanations that contradict local beliefs, the truth claims of those who originally hold them need to be considered. As Bucklin (1999, 11) puts it, Dixon (1980, 127–128) "notes that there are a number of possible outcomes for such a consideration. The claims may be (1) rationally based and not obviously held for 'extra-cognitive' reasons, in which case 'this is a sufficient account for them being held'; (2) not rationally derived, in which case external, reductive sociological explanations may be called for; or (3) sociological explanations may be appropriate that do not claim to explain exhaustively why the beliefs are held, that is, external explanations that are not reductive." Dixon maintains that, if a claim is intelligible, coherent, and supported by empirical evidence, this should be a sufficient explanation for belief. We might add that this is true whether or not the explanation fits with the scholar's personal beliefs.

The principle of local priority is necessary because in academic analysis, especially of spiritual beliefs, the explanations advanced by outsiders very often serve to debunk the believer's truth claims by attributing to believers reasons for belief that are not rationally sound. For a classic example, the psychoanalytic concept of wish fulfillment as the reason for belief in spirits advances a bad reason for believing ("Because I want it to be true" is not a sound reason for holding a belief) and suggests that this unconscious motivation produces illusory experiences that appear to support the desirable belief but that in fact should be given no evidential weight. Most latent functional explanations are of this type. But it is not assumed that all desirable beliefs are unfounded. For example, that smallpox vaccination would reduce the prevalence of the disease was very desirable to believe—it was also well founded and is now widely
accepted as true. Wish fulfillment only satisfies the principle of local priority if the analyst can show why the believer’s own reasons are weak and that there are good reasons to disregard the believer’s claim. This is similar to Richard Swinburne’s (1979, 254) “principle of credulity”: “that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present, then probably x is present; what one perceives is probably so.” Davis (1989, 77) also points out that this principle is needed for the veridicality of experience generally; she suggests that for avoiding the “skeptical bog” it is necessary to accept “all perceptual experiences as prima facie evidence for experiential claims,” that perceptual experiences are “innocent until proven guilty.” Yet in academic discourse, spirit experiences continue to be assumed guilty.

The principle of local priority states that if the scholar’s interpretation is not superior to the believer’s interpretation in some way other than being more congenial to the scholar’s own beliefs and disbelief, then it has no serious claim to make. Above all we must seek to rise above the tacit claim that the opinions of scholars carry weight simply because they are the opinions of scholars.

Conclusion

Beliefs concerning the existence, nature, and behavior of spirits are among the most widespread and influential of human beliefs. They are basic to religion. These beliefs are truth claims about the world that involve empirical elements. Spirit beliefs in general are not merely metaphysical propositions, and their empirical claims can and should be systematically addressed.

The fair and intellectually sound study of these beliefs must redress the overwhelming bias against spirit belief characteristic of modern Western society’s intellectual institutions. For this it is necessary to disentangle contemporary concepts about rationality from the ideological commitments of those who have controlled the application of the term. Because the social processes protecting academic orthodoxy are powerful, any research into the stigmatized topics of spirituality is a risky enterprise. This has been called “the anti-tenure factor” (Sherrill 1994), and it is one reason that rigorous and balanced research on this topic is so rare in the academic world. But in my experience, these risks can be reduced by systematic and solid methodological design of inquiry. And today there are reasons to think that the topic is becoming “safer,” more central to intellectual discussion. The publication of this book and a few others, such as Wiebe’s God and Other Spirits (2004), by highly regarded academic publishing houses is one indication of this change, and there are many others. At the same time the persistence and resurgence of spirituality in modern society is fraught with old problems disguised in new clothing.

During recent years religion and spirituality have emerged as among the most important topics in American society. Politicians, educators, and researchers are rushing to
take advantage of the growing interest. There is no doubt that this is a remarkable de-
velopment, totally unforeseen just a few decades ago. But the political and economic
forces, and the accompanying cultural dispositions, that marginalized spiritual belief
as nonrational have not disappeared. In the new setting they function to limit and
reshape traditional spiritual discourse into forms that continue to serve powerful inter-
ests that have neither respect for nor knowledge of spirit. When suppression has failed,
co-option is the next strategy. In December 2000 Robert Russell, Professor of Theology
and Science at the Graduate Theological Union, published “Why Science and Religion
Must Be Bridged.” Eloquently describing the historical chasm between science and reli-
gion in the modern world, Russell states that “religion once again needs the rigors of
science to rid it of superstition, for religion inevitably makes truth claims about this
world that ‘God so loves.’ These claims must be weighed against the grueling tribunal
of evidence” (p. 21). Russell concludes by calling for a “new and creative interaction”
between “the most rigorous theories of mainstream natural science and the most cen-
tral points of mainline theology” (p. 21). In principle there is nothing here to disagree
with, and Russell has been a leader in the growing science-religion rapprochement. Yet
it has been specifically these dominant scientific and theological positions that for 250
years marginalized traditional religious and spiritual ideas. And today, as I have noted
in this chapter, those same positions are creating a theological discourse in which spi-
rits, an ancient and ubiquitous foundational concept of religion, are never discussed
except to dismiss the human soul as an outmoded notion no longer scientifically
needed or supportable. Near-death experiences, visits from deceased loved ones, mysti-
cal visions, spiritual healing, and spirit encounters of all kinds have become common
subjects of conversation, but they remain restricted to marginal and stigmatizing
venues from tabloid papers to daytime TV shows. They are most definitely not a part
of “mainline theology.”

In commenting on the obsolescence of the idea of the soul in “mainline Christian
thought” over the past century, Nancey Murphy noted that this disappearance of the
soul “has not been widely shared with the folks in the pew” (Giberson and Yerxa 2001,
33). Mainline religious thinking is the territory of academic experts, not the “folks in
the pew.” The great current salience of spirituality in American society means one
thing to most theologians and philosophers and another to ordinary citizens. In the
academic world, theory continues to trump experience, showing “common sense” to
be uncommonly wrongheaded and the observations of the untrained to be worthless
when they conflict with accepted theory. But it was at the insistence of ordinary people
that spirituality has surged back to center stage. The decedents’ insistence on occa-
sional visits to their loved ones and the otherworld glimpses of those near death have
prevented modern academic theories from eradicating spiritual belief. It has not been
discoveries in seminars or breakthroughs in social science or the neurophysiological
investigation of meditative states that created the current attention to spirituality. The
National Institutes of Health did not begin to turn their attention to spirituality and health because of discoveries in medical research. Quite the reverse, since the “folks in the pew” have refused to relinquish spirit from their lives or their religion. Through political, economic, and cultural channels the “folks in the pew” have brought about another spiritual awakening. Scientists, theologians, philosophers, physicians, anthropologists, and others must begin to take seriously not only the money and votes of ordinary people, but also their experiences and their ideas. Doing so will improve our understanding of reason, curtail the academic appetite for intellectual fashion, and—just possibly—allow modern society to come to terms with spirits. If this were to happen the result would be a more humane science and theology, an end to the brutal use of psychopathology against spiritual experience, and a new openness to the role of spirituality—not just psychology in religious terms—in healing. To get such a result will require a radical humility among intellectuals, a new openness to the “folks in the pew” (and those who did get the message and have since left the pew!). Ordinary people, people like those I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, are not just to be learned about, they must also be learned from. To address seriously the idea of spirits, from human souls to angels to God, will require the unlearning of historical bias as much as the learning of new methods. In this Murphy’s “folks in the pew” and Goulet’s “native informants” are advantaged by having much less to unlearn.

It is no longer feasible simply to dismiss spirit belief as delusion and spirit experiences as hallucination. I strongly recommend that we all take a closer look. The vast majority of humans throughout recorded history—including the present moment—have believed that spirits exist and have claimed to have evidence supporting that belief. This does not guarantee that the beliefs are true, but it should certainly raise the question and motivate serious research.

Notes

Earlier versions of this chapter have been presented at the XX World Congress of Philosophy, Boston, August 8–16, 1998, and at the 97th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Philadelphia, December 2–6, 1998.

1. Among those is one contributor to the present book, Edith Turner.

2. The most wide-ranging discussions of this position have taken place in writings related to the philosophy and psychology of mysticism. Strong contextualist positions denying the possibility of cross-contextual comparisons to justify mystical claims of perceptions of the ontologically real are well illustrated by Steven Katz (1978) and Wayne Proudfoot (1985). There are many criticisms of this view. Anthony Perovich (1985) provides an excellent critique based on the earlier treatment of “incommensurability” and the epistemological problems of strong contextualist positions in the philosophy of science.
3. In some belief systems it is suggested that spirits may have some other kind of body, a “subtle body” or in Christianity a “resurrection body.” The idea of conscious beings in this definition does require identity, but whether identity requires some kind of body must be left open in order not to build into the definition a feature that favors some spirit-belief systems over others. It should also be understood that many forces interact with the physical world without possessing bodies, for example gravitational fields, and many deep questions remain about such forces and how the interaction operates. It should not be too difficult, therefore, to imagine a disembodied spirit having an effect on the physical world, either directly or through direct influence on the minds of the living.

4. The authors cited by Goulet and Young as “taking seriously” spirit beliefs are among a few rare exceptions.

5. See, for example, MacIntyre 1970; Wilson 1998; Murdock 1980; Thomas 1971.

6. This shift and its theological ramifications is well described and analyzed by Kellenberger (1985).

7. John Calvin 1535, chapter 2; quoted in Dillenberger 1971, 274.

8. For this illustration from the psychiatric literature I am indebted to Mary Ann Bucklin and her paper “Social Constructivism Employed against Traditional Belief” (American Folklore Society Annual Meeting, 1999).

9. For example, the American Heritage College Dictionary (3rd ed., p. 1221) gives as its second definition of science “2. Methodological activity, discipline, or study: I've got it down to a science.”

10. Interestingly, anthropology has even found room to question whether one major variety of pain, “chronic pain,” has objective reality (Kleinman et al. 1992).

11. I agree with the position on such inference that is taken by Robert Hahn (1973, 208). Cognitive beliefs “are a part or aspect of the individual’s awareness, but in behavioral terms. This allows for ‘covert categories’ (Berlin et al. 1968) as constituents of beliefs, so long as the natives approve of them.”

12. Dixon’s work has been used very little by folklorists and anthropologists studying belief, although his approach is very appropriate. I first learned of Dixon’s work from Mary Ann Bucklin’s paper “Social Constructivism Employed against Traditional Belief” (American Folklore Society Annual Meeting, 1999).

References


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