

Potential future research; Paradigm Shift and religion

1. Immaterial dimensions of belief

It is true that research into an issue as obviously subjective and personal as faith in something immaterial or supernatural is difficult to measure, replicate and predict, and thus take beyond the classic epistemological scope of the sciences (Jeffers, 2003; Mousseau, 2002). However, the material component, the ‘translation’ of faith into a concrete human experience, through rites and other behaviours and attitudes, is entirely observable and thus can constitute the subject of empirical research.

However, while the epistemological limit of a scientific approach to religion is fairly clear, some problems do persist with regard to paranormal beliefs. Indeed, one of the three elements of the definition of the paranormal, established by Tobacyk and Milford (1983) and generally used thereafter, is that “the paranormal is incompatible with normative perceptions, beliefs and expectations about reality”. But, what are normative perceptions and beliefs about reality? A factor analysis of items relating to 61 areas considered to be paranormal (Tobacyk & Milford, 1983) produces 7 dimensions underlying the structure of these beliefs: traditional religious belief, psi belief, witchcraft, superstition, spiritualism, belief in extraordinary life forms and precognition. All these elements are completely incompatible with a material perception of reality.

Materiality is therefore the standard and immateriality or supernaturality, the limit.

Over the decades, these seven dimensions have been grouped into “individually oriented beliefs” and “socially oriented beliefs” in the Revised RPBS (Lange, Irwin & Houran, 2001 ; Watt, Watson & Wilson, 2006). Thus, the dimension of “traditional religious belief”, initially set apart, is buried within a much broader measuring scale. Now, Tobacyk, Miller and Jones (1984) observed that traditional religiosity is negatively correlated with paranormal belief. So, when traditional religion is included within the scope of the paranormal, this only weakens a clear definition. From study to study, these definitions of the paranormal and phenomena considered such are subject to significant variations in the categorisation of dimension and makes it difficult to interpret and replicate results (Mousseau, 2002).

Of course, traditional religion does possess, within some of its immaterial dimensions of belief, elements that are similar to paranormal belief, such as faith in an invisible reality like heaven or hell, or immaterial forces like angels or demons, etc. (Goode, 2000). And in some circumstances, such as the awareness of mortality, an intensification of religiosity and faith in supernatural agents may occur (Norenzayan et Hansen, 2006). If openness to the supernatural is moderated by the experience of a negative affect, it predicts an interest in the paranormal rather than conventional religion (Beck & Miller, 2001). Therefore, dimensions notwithstanding, greater religious belief may be associated with greater paranormal belief (Orenstein, 2002), and Rice (2003) observes that 40% of the population do not believe traditional religious beliefs are incompatible with classic paranormal beliefs. Religion and the paranormal are not necessarily contradictory. Indeed, in some societies, *magic*, *superstition* and *religion* are closely linked. It is important not to use these concepts without reference to a

cultural and historical context, (Tambiah, 1990), or interpret certain practices based on our own paradigms (Evans-Pritchard, 1965).

Both have this supernatural component that positions them on the same axis, but in different places. The *supernatural* could therefore be a metadimension, a common, transversal dimension crossing all the dimensions grouped under concepts of *religion* and the *paranormal*. This transversal dimension would be present to varying degrees because, for example, the supernaturality of a belief in the existence of the Big-Foot and that of the practice of spiritualism or prayer will probably not be the same. Studies in the field of religion with scales of measurement applied to religion may therefore also be applied to the study of the paranormal.

It would be interesting to investigate to what extent the paranormal and the religious, in certain areas, coincide or differ in their approach to the real and unreal, natural and supernatural, within the social and individual experience. Juxtaposing these two types of beliefs and these two systems for individuals to follow may reveal the specific ontological characteristics of either type of belief (Boyer, 2000 ; Lindeman & Aarnio, 2006). While the positive parameters provided by religion have been stressed in numerous studies (for a review see *inter alia* King & Furrow, 2004), it may well be that the paranormal contributes similarly to the level of psychosocial well-being or illness of the individual.

2. Supernaturalness as a coping tool

Let us take coping as an example. The “supernaturalness” of paranormal and religious belief systems results in similar coping tools. Indeed, the supernatural dimension enables an individual to believe in the existence of external forces, which in turn enables them to absolve themselves of total responsibility for their

existence, their actions and the results thereof (Dag, 1999 ; Dudley, 1999 ; Hergovich, 2003 ; Watt, Watson & Wilson, 2007). This also allows some management of anxiety (Lange & Houran, 1999 ; Streib, 1999), of insecurity connected to childhood (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001), or of failure or abuse during early childhood (Perkins, 2006). Our findings reveal significant correlations between most forms of active coping, whether behavioural or cognitive, and the different forms of PE. In addition, a linear regression confirms the predicted link between 1) coping through use of instrumental support and consulting a healer/hypnotist ($t = 6.24$, $p < .001$) or clairvoyant ($t = 5.83$, $p < .001$), and 2) other forms of coping with the practice of spiritualism ($t = 5.66$, $p < .001$). In the interviews, the majority of them say they were aware of using spiritualism as a means of coping. These young people are seeking answers about death and need to feel listened to when adults are not around enough.

However, if there is a mechanism for coping through adhesion to a system of beliefs in one or more external supernatural forces, either as a religious individual or a paranormal believer, the intellectual and emotional appraisal to belief (Rogers, Qualter, Phelps & Gardner, 2006; Dudley, 2002) and the properties attributed to these external forces are probably not identical. We may suppose that to believe in a merciful God or request the intervention of occult supernatural entities will ultimately not have the same coping effect or the same psychosocial impact on an individual. Furthermore, the degree of religious socialisation of the individual relating to conventional religious practice (McKinnon, 2003) is also a factor in the effectiveness of the coping mechanism (King & Furrow, 2004).

It may well be that, on the same natural-supernatural axis, certain religious and paranormal beliefs and practices are relatively close, albeit without a complete

overlap. Much will depend on the dimension being considered in either type of belief. It is important therefore that future research in these fields can further specify the exact categories and dimensions of both types of belief in order to accurately measure a real human experience. For example, this supernatural aspect of religion, difficult to rationalise, may explain the occurrence of a *paradigm disturbance* similar to that seen for some PEs. It can originate from the perception of a phenomenon beyond our understanding in certain less common religious experiences: the experiences of healing and conversion. Again the person goes through various steps at a cognitive and emotional level, in sequence and according to a structure that corresponds with the patterns already mentioned for PE but with reversed valences.

3. Paradigm Shift and religion

To illustrate this, let us take the case of Violaine, a 36-year-old housewife, who had suffered from multiple sclerosis since 8 years at the time of her statement. The experience of her unexplained healing was reported by Dr Patrick Theillier (2008), head of Lourdes Medical Bureau, a major site of Catholic pilgrimage:

"The following morning, I got up and went to the bathroom. The door closed behind me, so I called for help. I realised I had not taken my stick with me and I did not know how to get out on my own. Suddenly, I went dead. I had no pain. I started to panic. My pain told me about myself, where my body was, that there was life in my legs. This morning, nothing, I felt nothing. I was lost. Hauling myself up, I went back to my bed. I looked at my legs, they were still there. I pinched myself and it hurt, me who never had any sensation. I was really frightened. This was not

normal. I did several tests that usually didn't work. My feet proved obedient. I did not know what to do and I was terrified without my bearings... In the afternoon, back in the room, I stayed in the background and did some tests on my hands. I touched my nose straightaway. Fabulous, magic! I started to relax and laugh about the situation. At the same time, I was suspicious and did not want to rejoice too much. I told myself this might be the 'Lourdes effect'."

We observe the same development of paradigm shift in different stages: 1) *Suddenly, I went dead. I had no pain...* cognitive observation of an "anomaly". 2) *I started to panic... I was really frightened. This was not normal:* strong emotion following the cognitive disturbance. 3) Cognitive fight, attempt to "bring a sense of order" to this disturbance: *I did several tests that usually didn't work. My feet proved obedient. I did not know what to do and I was terrified without my bearings.* 4) Acceptance and paradigm change: *Fabulous, magic! I started to relax and laugh about the situation. At the same time, I was suspicious and did not want to rejoice too much.*

The close link between cognition and emotion is clear: the realisation of an anomaly is immediately followed by anxiety. This is then followed by a cognitive fight; "Is it really true? I have to check" which aims to maintain the existing paradigm. It is only after this work "taming" the anomaly, cognitive adaptation, that Violaine can accept the new situation...and relax.

The relationship between cognition and emotion could usefully be explored in other types of experience with a disturbing impact.

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