

FOURTH TEMPLETON LECTURESHIP  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA MEDICAL SCHOOL  
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This presentation is about the idea of *direct supernatural action in the world*. This is distinct from the idea of the supernatural itself, which without action in the world is metaphysics (e.g., the difference between a miraculous physical healing in response to prayer [supernatural action in the world] and the belief that God is infinite and eternal [metaphysical]). Today the word *supernatural* is thoroughly stigmatized, but it simply refers to *spirit* in the traditional sense, and supernatural action in the world refers to direct *spiritual cause*. Such causes may have either external effects, as in healings, or subjective effects, as in visions.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there appeared to be a consensus among Western intellectuals regarding *spiritual causes*: (1) that there is no rational evidence for such action, and (2) that belief in supernatural action is naïve and primitive—in a word, *superstition*. So (1) skeptics assumed that since supernatural action is the core of religion, religion would die as modern education spread, and (2) many theologians tried to purge religion of reference to supernatural action in the world—and perhaps to the supernatural in general. This fit perfectly with Max Weber's characterization of modernity as *disenchanted* – without spirits or supernatural action.

But by the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century it became clear that traditional spiritual beliefs and visionary spiritual experiences have remained prevalent in modern society, even among the well educated and scientifically sophisticated. Their apparent disappearance was the result of suppression within contemporary discourse, largely produced by the use of ignorance and mental illness to explain them, rather than any substantial change in experience and belief. At the same time, scientific research and peer reviewed publications, especially in health care, have reflected dramatic shifts in official scientific views, and these topics have gradually begun to return to public discourse.

Traditional spiritual ideas have been radically contested in the modern world, i.e., both the ideas and the experiential data on which they rest have been ignored, dismissed, stigmatized and explained away. In order to understand radically contested ideas it is necessary to analyze their opposition as well as their support, and to be scrupulously empirical and fair in the process. This requires multi-disciplinary scholarship, but in this case conventional scholarship has been the mechanism of suppression.

Therefore, the recent re-emergence of traditional spirituality contradicts major aspects of all modern theories of religion and spirituality in fields ranging from history to anthropology, sociology, religious studies, philosophy and theology. Conventional theories obviously cannot be used to understand their own complete failure, but that does not mean that these fields are useless in solving this puzzle. The main failing has been an uncritical acceptance of the modern construction of cultural authority based on untested applications of scientific knowledge beyond its appropriate boundaries. If allegedly scientific assertions regarding spirituality are subjected to the same kind of scrutiny as spiritual knowledge claims are, and if unargued assumptions are disqualified—the process I have called methodological symmetry, we can find very useful concepts for understanding both spiritual belief and experience *and* the resistance they have encountered in recent centuries. *Cultural authority* is one of these useful concepts. Today I will also use Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions plus Jean Piaget's adaptation model of cognitive development, built on the complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation. To these I will add a version of modern linguistic and perceptual psychology to sketch a new paradigm for the productive study of spirituality in the contemporary world. This effort builds on my first 3 lectures. I will begin with Kuhn's example of Copernicus' overthrow of the Earth-centered astronomy of Ptolemy, and then examples of spiritual healing and visionary spiritual experiences that I presented and analyzed in my first 3 lectures.

A new and robust understanding of the spirituality-in-modernity enigma is important because (1) false theories have produced serious harms including misdiagnosis, culturally inadequate healthcare and mistaken barriers between “Western” and “non-Western” cultures, and (2) because social and behavioral theories, important to understanding humanity, have been confounded and made incoherent by this enigma. In addition to these necessary corrections, there is the potential for a major positive revisioning of life: traditional spiritual ideas, if found valid, offer an empirical grounding for a form of body-soul dualism, the view that is foundational in most spiritual traditions of humanity but dismissed as obsolete by modern intellectual tradition.