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Spiritual Consciousness and the Age of Quantity

The Strange Case of Jean Piaget's Mysticism¹

Abstract: *The article discusses little known spiritual themes from Piaget's life and work. Piaget wrote about many aspects of spirituality, identifying God with the evolution of life into the Good — a theme that echoes the perspectives of many contemporary transpersonal authors. Although Piaget produced most of his spiritual work in the first half of his life, there is evidence that these themes continued to be important for Piaget in later life. A characterization of Piaget as a transpersonalist and mystic as well as a psychologist and epistemologist is appropriate. Arguably Piaget's spiritual experiences motivated the world famous psychological studies themselves. The article seeks to inform readers of the nature of Piaget's spirituality, whilst setting that spirituality in the context of the changing relationship between qualitative and quantitative data sources in the history of the study of consciousness.*

Many psychologists are aware of the spiritual persuasions of Fechner, Baldwin, James, Maslow, and Kohlberg. It is perhaps less well known that arguably the most influential of all psychological theorists, Jean Piaget, also had powerful spiritual experiences and set out detailed frameworks of ontogenetic and phylogenetic spiritual growth.² In fact, Piaget passed through a profound crisis in his adolescence,

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[1] The author thanks two anonymous reviewers for comments on the article.

[2] The claim regarding the extent of Piaget's influence comes from L'Abate (1969).

which would now be called a 'spiritual emergency' — a period of transformation concluded through spiritual realization (Lukoff, Lu and Turner, 1998). Piaget recounts events which are similar to the mystical experiences recorded in the great eastern and western mystical treatises, as well as those reported in modern psychospiritual transformation literature (e.g. Grof and Grof, 1990; Washburn, 1995). Work which has explored the role of religion in Piaget's life has treated religion as something that was relevant in youth, but was quickly abandoned by the more mature Piaget (e.g. Vidal, 1994). But this conclusion is not accurate. Piaget continued to speak of his spirituality in later life and declined many opportunities to rebuke its ongoing significance. In fact he did the opposite on several occasions and affirmed that spirituality was indeed still meaningful. Moreover, Piaget's personal experiences of spiritual consciousness appear to have been a strong motivational drive for the psychological studies.

The particular issue of Piaget's own spirituality sits within the context of a larger issue — the question of which aspects of consciousness are considered worthwhile or valid areas of study, and how this has changed from the inception of scientific psychology to the present day. Both consciousness and spirituality were central issues for the pioneers of modern psychology. The article argues that the brief fall and subsequent reassertion of interest in subjective, qualitative data relating to consciousness in the twentieth century, and its chronological relation to the course of Piaget's career, can explain the somewhat puzzling attitude that Piaget took to the public presentation of his own spiritual views. The strange case of Piaget's spirituality — strange because he attempted to conceal it — is best understood when situated within the context of the history of approaches to psychology and consciousness.³

1. The Historical Context of Quality and Quantity

The history of the study of psychology can be understood as a general interplay between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and corresponding shifts in the parameters of the study of psychology can be observed. The subjective experience of consciousness has been afforded more and less significance at different periods in history. The middle portion of Piaget's career unfolded in unusual times, in which qualitative contributions to the study of consciousness were eschewed by mainstream psychology following the rise of behaviourism which

[3] The topics of Piaget's spirituality and the status and role of spirituality in the past and future of psychology are discussed in more detail in Dale (forthcoming a).

explicitly rejected subjectivity. This stands in contrast to both early modern psychology in which introspective reports were considered valid and important, and pre-modern psychology in which introspectionist phenomenologies dominated. It also stands in contrast to more recent trends in psychology: the re-establishment of the study of spirituality within psychology can be viewed as a result, at least in part, of the re-establishment of qualitative data sources as valid sources of data on consciousness. But this re-establishment largely post-dated Piaget's career.

Many of psychology's pioneers had fathers who were pastors, and saw psychology as the appropriate arena for the resolution of the investigation of the relationship between science and religion.⁴ Psychology was viewed as the melting pot in which science and religion, separated through the discoveries of Galileo and Newton, and driven still further apart by the rise of Darwinian theory in the eighteenth century, could be recast in a new relationship. Piaget himself entered psychology as a means of informing his epistemology, and his epistemology was a means of addressing the conflict between science and religion which was both a prominent theme in early twentieth-century culture, and a resonant issue for Piaget personally (Piaget, 1918a). But Piaget eventually found psychology to be an unsuitable arena for the discussion of spiritual themes, a result of the prevalent behaviourist environment at the time. Today once again the study of consciousness is a discipline in which debate concerning the relationship between science and issues that were traditionally considered the province of religion or religious mysticism can flourish, and this has given rise to the contemporary field of transpersonal psychology.

Transpersonal psychology is generally taken as having begun in the 1960s, a creation of Maslow, Grof, Sutich, Assagioli, and others. But this should really be understood as a late-modern revival of an area of investigation which has much older roots. For most of its history, psychological investigation and spiritual investigation have been inseparable. The Hindu stages of life culminated in a hermetic existence and the realization of the insights of the *Upanishads*. European psychologies can be traced to the theories of the psyche and anima in pre-Socratic thinkers (Guthrie, 1962). The early psychologies of Plato, expressed in the *Symposium*, and Plotinus, expressed in the *Enneads*, described an ontogenetic development towards moral perfection and the concomitant experience of the Good. A similar orientation predominated in the Far East in Taoist, Confucian, and Mohist thought

[4] I am grateful to a reviewer for this insight.

(Yu-Lan, 1983). Likewise early psychologies of perception were allied to the spiritual roots of material appearances. The Samkhya theory of perception, an early perceptual psychology, was merely the surface of a more general framework in which the individual egoic identity (*ahamkara*) was transcended in the realization of the liberated consciousness of *purusha* (Radhakrishnan, 1927). In Abhidharma Buddhism the study of the perceptual units of the phenomena of sensory perception (*satipatthana*) was a gateway to the altered states of consciousness pertinent to the tradition (*anatta, sunyata*), which later were retained as the basis of Mahayana Buddhism (Snellgrove, 1987). Phenomenologies of a central channel and *chakras* were reported across the Far East and the Indian subcontinent. These bore resemblance to the *phrenes-thymus* axis described in Homer and Hesiod, and were reflected in the world-tree symbolism of indigenous cosmologies; the journey up and down the world-tree was a metaphor for the shaman's journey up and down the spinal column (Eliade, 1991).

These early psychologies were based around introspective phenomenologies. Likewise, qualitative methods got much attention at the inception of modern psychology in the laboratories of Fechner and Wundt in the nineteenth century (Fancher, 1996) where it was automatically included as a part of their theorizing, and featured prominently in the master volumes of American psychology's 'father' William James (1890; 1902). Although Freud's work served to relegate many altered states of consciousness which had previously been afforded religious significance to an infantile status, subjective reports were still central to Freud's methods. It is only with the rise of the behaviourism of Titchener, Watson, and Skinner that study involving the quantifiable aspects of the mind and brain rapidly came to be at odds with study based around the qualitative aspects of consciousness. The result of this was that spirituality, which was primarily the province of the qualitative introspectionism reported in the world's mystical literatures, was sidelined as a legitimate area of study for most of the twentieth century.

The revival of interest in transpersonal consciousness which has occurred across recent decades can be understood as a revival of interest in the qualitative basis of introspective phenomenologies. The influential works of Wilber (e.g. 1980) were based around phenomenological eastern texts, and were specifically concerned with integrating Advaita Vedanta and Tantric Buddhist phenomenologies with data derived from experimental developmental psychology. Washburn's (1995) work integrated western developmentalism and psychodyna-

mic theory with the literatures of western medieval mysticism. Transcendental Meditation studies were based around self-report measures as well as neuroscientific data (Orme-Johnson, 2000). In all of these cases, transpersonal theories were made possible by the readmission of qualitative data sources as valid sources of evidence alongside the quantitative data of experimental psychology.

But these approaches, and the concomitant return of qualitative methods, came after Piaget's time. One reason for Piaget's failure to develop the transpersonal aspects of his work to as full an extent as his psychological theory might have been his realization that transpersonal investigation was not yet at a sufficiently quantitative level to be admissible in psychological debate. Piaget's strange concealment of his spirituality — involving firstly the partitioning of his work in philosophy and religion from his work in psychology, and then the near abandonment of spiritual reflection altogether (at least in his formal writing) — was a product of the early and middle twentieth-century atmosphere in academic psychology. This atmosphere was a unique one in psychology's history. But Piaget's abandonment was not complete: in fact he dropped many hints to readers that spirituality remained personally significant, even providing the motivation for the better known psychological work, and examples of these hints are elaborated as the article progresses. Hence, the relationship between quantity and quality provides the broad horizon against which the case of Piaget's spirituality can be analysed. Such a relationship is not merely relevant historically. In fact, as discussed at the end of the article, alternative directions offered by quantitative and qualitative paths currently polarize opinion within the subfield of transpersonal psychology itself.

2. Piaget's Early Life and Spiritual Crisis

Piaget began his academic career early. He was active in local societies in his town of birth, Neuchâtel in Switzerland, producing a written paragraph in the newsletter of the Jura Club at the age of 11 (Piaget, 1907). Piaget published his first academic article in a journal at the age of 15, and by the age of 18 had published over 30 articles. By this stage his attention had already turned to spiritual matters. It was a friend of Piaget's father, Paul Godet, who introduced the ideas of Bergson to Piaget — to a profound effect at around the age of 15. Bergson's (1911) philosophy was reminiscent of that of Hegel (1807/1967), Teilhard de Chardin (1965), Jantsch (1980), or Wilber (2000). God was 'immanent', to use Piaget's (1918a) term, in the

evolutionary movement of life. Evolutionary theory, rather than confounding religion, took on a role of religious significance; God became immanent in the world as evolution progressed. In 1965 Piaget reflected on his introduction to Bergson, writing ‘in a moment of enthusiasm close to ecstatic joy, I was struck by the certainty that God is Life’ (Piaget, 1965/1971, p. 5).

At the age of 19 Piaget published an extended poem called *La mission de l'idée* (1916). The poem expressed the neo-Platonic basis of Christian philosophy, and explored ideas concerning the unfolding of life into ‘the Idea’. The Idea is a term akin to the Spirit in German idealist thought. Piaget gives an interpretation of the opening of the *Gospel of John* and identifies the ‘Word’ with the Idea. The realization of the Idea unfolds through the process of evolution. Piaget (1916) wrote:

It is the deepest part of our being from which the Idea emerges, from this fertile and mysterious region which man on his own never reaches. It is this vital source from which emanations well up only under a sublime influence. (Quoted in Thoman, 2007, p. 90)

But the most revealing document the young Piaget left behind is the autobiographical *Recherche* (Piaget, 1918a).

Recherche, translating in this context as *Search* or *Quest* or *Journey*, is an extraordinary, and often overlooked, document in the history of psychology. The book is an autobiographical novel describing events that occurred to Piaget when he was 15 or 16 years old, recounted through the novel’s protagonist, Sébastien. The novel falls into three parts: the preparation, the crisis, and the reconstruction. The preparation section involves Sébastien reviewing a number of intellectual positions including Catholic and Protestant theology, the philosophy of Fouillée, James, and Bergson, the relationship between the sciences, the literature of Barrès, Bourget, Péguy, and Rolland, and the political stance of Swiss Protestant socialism. In general Piaget is highly critical, though aspects of Bergson’s work are treated favourably. Sébastien is described as an individual in ‘disequilibrium’ with the world. The crisis section describes the culmination of the spiritual emergency. As the section unfolds Sébastien moves from great distress to great integration and peace, through a number of experiences that bear similarities with those found in the literatures of religious mysticism. The reconstruction section involves the explication of Piaget’s early system of philosophy, based around a new relationship between science and religion, in which the three spheres of morality, science, and mysticism each unfold into an increasing awareness of

immanence. Sébastien is now refreshed and able to enthusiastically immerse himself in theoretical work, having resolved his personal conflict between science and religion by committing to the service of God through scientific research.

The setting of the novel is a mountain hospital in Lysin, Switzerland, in which Piaget was treated for tuberculosis. Piaget stated in his autobiographical essay (Piaget, 1952, p. 241) that he needed 'to spend more than a year in the mountains'. The hospitalization was not continuous, but consisted of intermittent periods lasting several weeks, punctuated by returns to Neuchâtel. The episode has the characteristics of what is now termed a 'spiritual emergency' or 'spiritual crisis' in therapeutic literature: events in which symptoms are experienced which are very similar to clinical psychopathological symptoms, but which are eased through the emergence of a sense of spiritual resolution and realization rather than through a return to the preclinical normal functional level of the individual. Mental disorder was not the official reason for hospitalization: Piaget was officially sent to the hospital to recover from tuberculosis (Vidal, 1994). But Piaget believed that mental disorder was at least partly responsible for his breathing difficulties, and that the disorder stemmed from his intellectual and personal struggles to bring together science and religion in his early work and in his life. Piaget (1952, p. 241) comments, 'I began to write down my ideas in numerous notebooks. These efforts affected my health'.

The personal causes of the disorder can be traced back to his family, and the opposing ideas of his strictly Christian mother and atheistic father (Thomann, 2007). Piaget was introduced to Protestant Christianity by his mother. She apparently tried to actively impose religion upon him, sending him to classes on religious instruction, which strongly conflicted with his interest in philosophy and sciences (particularly biology) which he had had from a young age. Whatever its causes, the period of hospitalization appears to have been the trigger for psychic disturbances to surface and for an intense period of transformation to unfold which can be likened to both traditional and modern spiritual development frameworks.

It appears that Piaget had significant experiences of a mystical nature. The forthcoming paragraphs give a flavour for Piaget's transformative experiences. It is important to recognize that although the reports are a part of a novel, they are not fictitious, and they describe experiences which actually happened to Piaget. In a letter to Arnold Reymond, Piaget wrote:

You must know that the second part [the crisis] is based on a diary I kept in Leysin, without knowing I would use it later. It is simplified, but entirely true... As far as sincerity is concerned, there is nothing I have written that I did not experience. (Piaget, 1918b, p. 1)

It appears that Piaget actually experienced events that can conceivably be described as a spiritual emergency, as those terms are defined in contemporary transpersonal literature.

The novel begins with a picture of a troubled Sébastien: 'While the war sustained in everyone's spirits the greatest disequilibrium ever suffered by thought, Sébastien concentrated within himself the pains of this world in turmoil' (Piaget, 1918a, p. 11). The hospital setting of Leysin provides an analogy to the isolated withdrawal that often accompanies spiritual transformative experiences.⁵ Experiences of insomnia, intense anxiety, and hopeless despondency are described: 'whilst shaking and sobbing, he (Sébastien) would cry out to God to relieve him of his pain, as Jacob had done, and to come to his aid in exchange for a divine mission' (Piaget, 1918a, p. 13). They are also common in western settings: Underhill (1911/2002, p. 177) writes, 'sometimes the emergence of the mystical consciousness is gradual, unmarked by any definite crisis. The self slides gently, almost imperceptibly, from the old universe to the new. The records of mysticism, however, suggest that this is exceptional: that travail is the normal accompaniment of birth'.⁶

'Chaotic dreams' are described (Piaget, 1918a, pp. 92–5), a common feature of transformative experiences. Piaget described the disappearance of the self into the whole, 'his (Sébastien's) person dissolved in the whole. However, he remained a glimmer, a seat of consciousness, watching the rest of himself disintegrate' (*ibid.*, p. 95). Sébastien experienced the mystical voices and spiritual music commonly described in the western mystical cannon, 'he felt God take him without seeing him, hearing divine music that stirred the depths of his being' (*ibid.*, p. 96). There is a strong theistic and particularly Christian tone to *Recherche*. Piaget describes his emerging philosophical understanding of the harmonious relationship between science and religion as a mission sent from God, 'he was on his knees next to his bed, holding his whole being to God, unknowing he began to understand. And, full of sacred emotion, he received with joy but with fear the divine mission of reconciling science and religion' (*ibid.*, p. 96).

[5] *Recherche* falls into a genre of fiction concerning transformation in hospital settings. Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924/1996) is perhaps the best known example, in which tuberculosis is also a symptom of patients.

[6] See also Washburn's (1995) more recent work.

For Piaget (*ibid.*) sexual desires are a source of disequilibrium. Moving beyond such desires is an important part of Piaget's experiences in *Recherche* (e.g. pp. 118–25). The true seeker, Piaget tells us, should be celibate. Sexuality should be transmuted into a life of action through service. As Piaget writes, 'in contrast to the egohood which is its source, love can also be the absolute selflessness of sacrifice made in conjunction with divine value, though in seekers the gift of oneself to a woman is in contradiction with this sacrifice' (*ibid.*, pp. 118–9). Piaget quotes Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*, a novel which makes a case for celibate marriages, and argues that this should be the basis of the ideal relationship between man and woman. Piaget (*ibid.*, p.118) argues that sexual love belongs to the real, whereas the thinking individual must rise above the real and live in the Ideal.

As the crisis is concluded, the religious states of consciousness die down. Piaget's personal conflict between science and religion is resolved through his conclusion that the will of God is to be carried out through scientific work. A personal resolution and sense of life-mission is achieved which provides purpose for the rest of Piaget's life. 'I have recovered my God, my true God' concludes Piaget (*ibid.*, p. 143). Immanence is to be experienced through the pursuit of theoretical knowledge: the pursuit of knowledge is a form of spiritual realization (*ibid.*, p.113). This rather unusual view of spirituality had antecedents in the Swiss Protestantism which influenced Piaget (Vidal, 1987). In *Recherche*, Sébastien envisions, and resolves to create, 'an entire scientific system synthesising the life sciences, an expanded version of Comte's positivistic philosophy that might even produce social salvation' (Piaget, 1918a, p. 113). Piaget's later work, encompassing not just psychology but biology, sociology, the philosophy of science, and epistemology can be judged to have fulfilled this aim. Piaget's life's work had a spiritual motivation.

3. Partitioning the Spiritual and the Psychological in the 1920s and 1930s

Over the fifteen-year period following the publication of *Recherche*, Piaget conducted empirical investigations of religious development in children and adolescents, alongside his investigations of biology and cognitive development. He wrote substantially on the topic (1922; 1928; 1929a,b; 1930). These works are described over subsequent paragraphs.

The 1922 essay laid down the plan for the investigation of the development of morality in children that was to come to fruition a

decade later with the publication of *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (Piaget, 1932). A continuity is established linking the ideas first expressed in *Recherche* concerning the unification of science and religion with the empirical work that occupied Piaget's later studies: 'the problem of psychology and religious values must be conceived as a special case of the problem of science and religion that has perturbed people so strongly, especially in the 15 to 20 years before the war' (Piaget, 1922, p. 38). Piaget described observations of a group discussion of the Geneva Christian Association. Two main trends are reported to have dominated the discussion: the views of those who believe that God exists externally to the believer and can be engaged through conversational prayer in the manner that one human being would engage another, and those who believe that God has an internal existence and is known through the experience of communion rather than through the performance of dialogue.

It is suggested that the development of morality can be studied in the same way as the development of logic. Morality is the logic of acting on other persons. The development of religious values can be studied through the development of the logic of moral behaviour. As Piaget (1922) acknowledged, moral judgments are qualitative judgments, and whether a particular moral judgment is right or wrong cannot be determined through quantitative science. But what science can do is record the order in which particular judgments succeed others ontogenetically, and so determine whether or not there is a normative order to the development of moral judgments. If so, then the development of the experience of religious value, which for Piaget was synonymous with the development of morality, could be considered a normative human development. This is the basis of Piaget's transpersonal psychology.

The 1928 book chapter crystallized the 1922 dichotomy into a distinction between transcendent (external) views of God and immanent (internal) views of God. Transcendent views of God, which judge God to be a separate anthropomorphized being, consider moral behaviour to be behaviour that accords with the will of this separate being. Immanent views of God view moral behaviour as behaviour that must be determined by each person individually, in accord with the internal demands of their conscience. In contrast to *Recherche*, in which Piaget's personal relationship with God evidences both transcendent and immanent aspects, Piaget makes clear that he now firmly identifies with the immanent view alone, writing that modern psychology and sociology had 'exposed the illusion of the supernatural' and have 'destroyed classical theology' (Piaget, 1928, p. 26). The belief in an

external God is compared to the Platonic view of numbers existing externally as pure forms. This is quite different from the Christian tone of Piaget (1916) and Piaget (1918a). His faith was now more universal, based around the collective religious emphasis on morality and truth.

The 1929a and 1929b essays were responses to criticisms of Piaget's immanentist view of religion by Burger (1929) and Reymond (1929), which dismissed Piaget's views as incompatible with traditional Christian theology. In these articles Piaget shifted his definition of transcendence and immanence, defining them in terms of causality. A transcendent God was capable of being the cause of the universe for it stood outside of the universe. An immanent God could not be the cause of the universe for it came into being as a human experience as the universe unfolded.

Piaget's (1930) short book *Immanentism et foi religieuse* again explicitly rejected the notion of an anthropomorphic God, in favour of an immanent God which is concomitant with the deepening of the experience of being in sentient creatures. The notion of causation is considered once more. This time Piaget argues that, although the God of immanence is incapable of being the cause of the universe, the immanent God nonetheless exerts a causal influence over the unfolding of the universe in virtue of the moderating effect that human conscience has on human behaviour and human society. The world becomes increasingly 'spiritualized' as evolution unfolds:

If, beyond individuals, we examine the currents of thought that present a movement through phylogeny, immanentism appears as the continuation of the impulse towards spiritualisation that characterises the history of the concept of the divine. The same progress is accompanied from the transcendent God and its supernatural power to the purely spiritual God of immanent experience, as from the partly-material God of primitive religions to the metaphysical God. The crucial point is that to this progress in the vista of intelligence corresponds a moral and social progress, which is, ultimately, an emancipation of the spirit. (*Ibid.*, p. 54)

'God' can be understood in the Hegelian sense of God as 'Spirit'. This is not a teleological ascent towards a transcendent God. God is realized in the world through the crystalization of human knowledge.

Piaget's (*ibid.*) view is reminiscent of that of Einstein, for whom scientists sought to know the mind of God through their enquiries (Pais, 1982). Scientific work (particularly epistemological work) is divine work. Epistemological work is particularly important, because only epistemology could confirm knowledge. In Piaget's interpreta-

tion of epistemology no science could confirm its own findings, instead scientific findings could be confirmed only through mutual confirmation in other fields. Piaget thus solved the basis of his crisis — the conflict between science on the one hand (which tended to deny spirituality and affirm empiricism) and the church on the other hand (which affirmed spirituality and was antagonistic towards empirical science) — because scientific findings revealed the nature of God, and so scientific work could be work undertaken in service of God. Two strands to Piaget's mysticism — two ways in which immanence could come into being — can be identified from the work in the philosophy of religion. One was through moral development, and the other was through performing science. The relationship between the two strands of his mysticism was partially squared as both were forms of action: science addresses actions on objects, morality addresses actions on persons (Piaget, 1930).

Piaget (1932) positioned research into children's moral development in the context of the development of the individual and the evolution of society into increasing approximations towards the realization of the Good. The Good was not defined as an eternal Platonic absolute, but as 'a form of equilibrium immanent in the mind' (*ibid.*, p. 390). Through moral development, both individual and society grew towards the Good. Moral and religious development paralleled each other. Each involved development from fixed and eternal assumptions about the nature of God or the nature of what is right, to a flowing and dynamic understanding in which notions of God and notions of ethics became immanent in the world, and changed as the world evolved.

For Piaget, hard sciences described the external form of the development of human consciousness (*ibid.*). The highest level of biological harmony within the human organism resulted in the moral perfection of the mystics. The biological balance that comes through the physical health to which all organisms and societies aspire results in moral equilibrium.⁷ The more balanced society becomes — the more it complexifies — the more easily it can maintain moral equilibrium. The moral behaviour of societies consequently increases across history: Piaget (*ibid.*) saw the liberal democracies of modern Protestant nations as the societies that exhibited the greatest morality in their social and legal transactions, and therefore as advances on the preceding theocracies, gerontocracies, and medieval monarchies. Human self-knowledge was knowledge of the Spirit, and knowledge

[7] Equilibrium was Piaget's term for balance or harmony within the organism.

of the Spirit arose simultaneously with the enactment of the Good in the world. Thus, the evolution of society that brought the Good increasingly into awareness evidenced a moral development from pre-historical to ancient to modern western society. Modern western society embodied the closest approximation so far to the full manifestation of the Good in the world.

Piaget reported the view that the feeling that the right thing has been done when a quarrel is resolved is the experience of the Good emerging in the mind of the child: the Good is 'dimly felt on the occasion of every quarrel and every peace-making' (*ibid.*, p. 318). Much current transpersonal theory views spiritual consciousness as an adult-aged development, and this conclusion is often based around Piagetian and neo-Piagetian theory, which has conceived of transpersonal experiences as postformal cognitions (Orme-Johnson, 2000; Wilber, 2000). But for Piaget this was not the case: a spiritual equilibrium characterized by immanent moral determination could be achieved by late childhood. It is also interesting that Piaget (1918a; 1928) described the development of mysticism as a parallel facet to the development of the scientific faculty of thought. Although neo-Piagetian theory generally views transpersonal development as a post-formal advance on formal operational representational cognition, Piaget himself was more inclined to view mysticism as a collateral facet to representational cognition in line with the views of Hunt (1995) and Dale (2011; forthcoming a, b). Threads of this collateral view can be traced later in Piaget's career: Piaget and Inhelder (1966/1971; 1969) distinguished between representational and figurative 'poles' of cognition, the latter included the hypnopompic and hypnogogic dream states that have religious significance in many cultures, and Piaget and Inhelder (1966/1971) expressed regret at not having devoted more time to studying these states.⁸

An important concluding observation is that Piaget intentionally partitioned his religious and psychological investigation in the 1920s and 1930s. Concurrently to the religiously themed books and essays that were published in theological and philosophy of religion journals and by Christian publishing houses, Piaget was also writing the psychological works which had made him world famous by the beginning

[8] On the other hand Piaget (1945/1972) expressed the view that affective schemata could not reach a formal operational level. Piaget could, if he had wished, have used Baldwin's work (with which he was familiar as indicated in *Recherche*), to argue that affect could indeed reach spiritual heights. Although the tactic of removing spiritual implications from his psychological works, begun early in his career, was continued in his middle and later psychological works, readers will gather from statements made by Piaget well after 1945, cited in this article, that spirituality was indeed still personally important.

of the 1930s. Although his work in the philosophy of religion saw psychology as the means of unification of science and religion, he did not present this work to psychological audiences. None of the four best known Piaget works of the period (Piaget, 1923/1926; 1924/1928; 1926/1960; 1927/1930) cited any of the religiously themed books or articles. In fact, when religion was mentioned in these works, Piaget was highly critical of it, likening aspects of indigenous religions (for example, Levy-Bruhl's participation mystique) to the cognitions of young children and suggesting that indigenous cultures had not passed beyond the cognitive level of children (Piaget, 1923/1926; 1926/1960). There is no hint of suggestion in these psychological works that Piaget was persuaded by other notions of religion and spirituality. Even Piaget (1932), which engaged the moral development central to the spiritual theory, declined to reference the early religious books and essays.

The conclusion that suggests itself is that, although Piaget believed that psychology in general was an appropriate arena for developing the relationship between science and religion, he did not believe that the psychology of the 1920s and 1930s was sophisticated enough to be receptive to this endeavour. Hence, he purposefully separated the work that was intended for religious studies audiences from his work that was intended for psychologists. Piaget's near abandonment of spiritual writing for the remainder of his career is evidence that he did not observe a significant improvement on this front as the twentieth century progressed.

4. Concealment and Double Meanings in Piaget's Later Life

Piaget de-emphasized the spiritual side of his life and work (at least in his most public documents) once his psychological work had made him famous. Why he did this is unclear. Three possibilities appear to exist. The first possibility is that, having resolved spiritual matters to his satisfaction, he no longer felt that it was necessary to publish on them or discuss them. The second possibility is that his spiritual conviction faded as his life progressed. The third possibility is that he felt that in the intellectual atmosphere in which most of the twentieth century unfolded, spiritual interests would be damaging to the influence that his psychological work was having. (Consider, for example, the initial reception of Sheldrake's work, as recently as 1981.) In his conversation with Bringuier (1977/1980, p. 9), Piaget reports an awareness of the need for tact in conveying spiritual ideas, even at the time

he wrote *Recherche*: 'I was clever enough to know that its (*Recherche*'s) ideas were debateable, a bit bizarre; if I wanted them to be tolerated, I would have to put them in fictional form.' During the last decades of his life, Piaget's psychological theory increasingly came under attack from numerous angles. Piaget may even have died believing that his contributions to psychology were not going to be lasting. Providing his critics with another line of attack — the charges of scientific heresy that so often have accompanied spiritual and religious writings — may have prevented the further elaboration of his spiritual views. This concern could not have arisen in any previous age. It could have only arisen in an age in which qualitative data was considered dubious in comparison to quantitative data.

Of these options, perhaps a combination of the first and third is the most likely explanation. There are short passages in his later academic works in which Piaget briefly wanders onto spiritual themes. The presence of these passages is incompatible with the second of the possibilities described, and indicates that Piaget was still privately thinking about such themes. In *Structuralism*, Piaget (1968/1973, p. 141) wrote of the dynamic nature of God, in a passage reminiscent of post-metaphysical and participatory approaches to spirituality (Ferrer, 2002):

For the mathematician it is, of course, tempting to believe in Ideas and to think of negative and imaginary numbers as lying in God's lap for all eternity. But God himself has, since Gödel's theorem, ceased to be motionless. He is the living God, more so than heretofore, because he is unceasingly constructing ever 'stronger' systems. (Piaget, 1968/1973)

For Piaget God is dynamic, constructive, and enacted. There is no goal to morphological or religious evolution, just a continuing unfolding of Spirit into higher realizations. A continuity can be observed here with Piaget's views in *Recherche*: 'there is no metaphysics or finality whatsoever in this conception', writes Piaget (1918a, p. 97). In posthumously published work (Piaget, 1983/1987), Piaget returned to these evolutionary enactments, writing once again on the topic of teleonomy, and of the unlimited possibilities for the future of human evolution. In one place he writes, 'reality has only learned to know itself by giving birth (but only once and for all, so it seems, at least on this planet) to living beings, and through them to the epistemic subject' (*ibid.*, p. 33). Reality coming to know itself is an attitude that bares similarities to the unfolding of Spirit in Hegel (1807/1967, p. 807).

There can be no doubt that Piaget harboured transpersonal inclinations in terms of his theoretical ideas, and in this regard he deserves to be mentioned alongside other twentieth-century transpersonal authors. As well as the letter to Reymond cited above, Piaget also confirmed his identity with Sébastien much later in life in his dialogues with Bringuier. When asked by Bringuier on this matter, Piaget responded 'he was me' (Bringuier, 1977/1980, p. 10). This later confirmation is significant because the letter to Reymond was a response to criticism that *Recherche* had received. *Recherche* received critical reviews in *Semaine littéraire*, *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, and *La revue romande*, where it was generally regarded as pretentious and arrogant (Vidal, 1994). The letter to Reymond was a justification of the book, and this might draw into question the reliability of what it reports. But much later in life the sentiments expressed to Reymond are confirmed.

In part of the discussion reported by Bringuier, when asked if he missed having 'vertical feelings' Piaget replied, 'No, because to believe in the subject is to believe in the spirit. In that sense, I still believe in immanence' (Bringuier, 1977/1980, p. 51). These youthful 'vertical feelings' can be viewed as similar to Maslow's B-values: powerful spiritual highs which subsided into a less intense but more constant 'self-transcendence' in later life (Maslow, 1971). For Piaget, the spiritual life appears to have simply been to live ordinary life, engaging in moral behaviour and in the quest for knowledge. This is a highly secularized version of mysticism in comparison to the mysticism of Piaget (1918a). In Piaget (1968/1973) the notion of God is discussed, but this God is a teleonomic God that is identified with the unfolding of systems. This is not a God to induce the raptuous highs of traditional religious mysticism and the sensation of rising — the 'vertical feeling' which some mystics report in absorptions. Piaget's God now no longer induces a feeling of ascent, it is a God harmonious with the performance of science and social improvement, a God that is known through participation in the good and the true in the world. Finally, if Piaget's taciturn tendencies on the subject are anything to go by, it is a God about which very little need — or possibly can — be said. This is a response of an individual who has moved away from the guilt-ridden basis of his early Protestant faith and the desolate 'darkness' described in *Recherche*.

This part of the dialogue with Bringuier is an ideal opportunity for Piaget to publicly and unambiguously recant his spiritual views, if they had really been but brief, immature preoccupancies: but the opportunity to do so is passed up. Another place where Piaget appears

to decline the opportunity to sever his connection with his spiritual writing is the autobiographical essay (Piaget, 1952). Piaget claims he had 'forgotten' his early spiritual writings, but readers are given the following cryptic statement which is open to numerous interpretations — 'I find in them [*La mission de l'idée, Recherche*] one or two ideas that are still dear to me, and have never ceased to guide me in my variegated endeavours' (*ibid.*, p. 241), though he does not tell the reader what they were. Once again, this is a far cry from the outright dismissal readers would have expected if Piaget had rejected the spiritual inclinations of his youth and become an atheist.

Taken together — the lack of an outright denial of the spiritual aspect of human life, the apparent tacit confirmations of the sustained importance of spirituality, and the continued occasional forays into spiritual themes in his mainstream writings — these points constitute good evidence that spirituality remained personally important for Piaget in later life. Previous works that have investigated spirituality in Piaget's life fall short of the far reaching conclusions which should be drawn: spirituality was not something that Piaget embraced in youth but grew out of. Vidal (1994) is the only work that takes the role of religion in Piaget's life as its central concern. The book offers detailed coverage of Piaget's childhood and adolescence. But, as the title — *Piaget before Piaget* — suggests, Vidal wrote of religion as something that was irrelevant to the mature work of Piaget, and also irrelevant to the mature Piaget as a person. The conclusion that the spiritual phase was something that the later Piaget put behind him is typical of the reaction of those in psychology who are aware of the religious phase of Piaget's youth.

In the vast majority of treatments of Piaget's life and work, no mention is made of his writing in the philosophy of religion, or of the detailed early autobiographical work that described the spiritual crisis and its resolution. This situation is typified by Flavell's (1963) summary, which begins with Piaget (1923/1926), and fails to report the philosophy of religion works of the 1920s and early 1930s at all. If this is an oversight, it emphatically underlines the lack of knowledge of this aspect of Piaget's work. If this is not an oversight, it still speaks volumes about which areas of Piaget's investigation are considered worthy of coverage (and this in turns speaks loudly about the priorities of psychology). Perhaps more surprisingly, this lack of coverage also applies to the field of transpersonal psychology, to which Piaget's spiritual side is most relevant. Piaget's spirituality is not mentioned, for example, in the treatments of Hunt (1995), Wilber (2000), Kelly (2002a,b), McIntosh (2008), Grof (2008), or Walach (2013) which

discuss transpersonal and parapsychological interests of influential psychological figures. That such a central figure as Piaget escapes all of these treatments can only indicate that knowledge of his spirituality is extremely rare in transpersonal psychology as well as in general psychology. The oversights concerning Piaget's spirituality are best explained through consideration of the historical context of the relationship between quantity and quality.

Piaget's subjective experience of spiritual consciousness motivated his work in psychology and epistemology. As Piaget wrote in the 1952 autobiography, the psychological studies were engaged merely as a starting point for the broader epistemological frame. Epistemology was a spiritual undertaking: successive cognitive adjustments achieved across both phylogeny and ontogeny approximate towards the fullest experience of the Good (Piaget, 1918a; 1932). Divinity is known through thought's reflection upon itself, and hence epistemological work is divine work (Piaget, 1928; *cf.* Piaget, 1983/1987). Hence it follows that Piaget's subjective crisis, and its resolution through the subjective experience of immanence, was a direct motivation for the experimental quantitative studies which revolutionized psychology.

Piaget initially viewed psychology as a crucible in which the relationship between science and religion — a problematic relationship for him personally due to the conflicting attitudes of his father and mother — could be remade. But the rise of behaviourism made it impossible for him to pursue this aim publicly. Although Piaget's subjective experience of consciousness (and its transpersonal potentials in particular) were strongly influential in shaping his life and work, it seems he was still not able to free himself from the atmosphere of experimentalist behaviourism in which he was historically situated. Hence, Piaget's view of psychology seems to have shifted from a field in which the relationship between science and religion could be investigated (as it was seen in *Recherche*), to one through which he could perform spiritual service through undertaking science in line with his immanentism theory, but which was unsuitable for the exploration of the relationship between science and religion itself.

5. Conclusion

Piaget wrote a considerable amount about spirituality in the early part of his career. His theoretical views were of an evolutionary nature, influenced by Hegel and Bergson: cultural and individual development flowed into an awareness of the Good, Spirit, or Immanence.

These views did not entirely disappear from his formal academic writing in work published in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, but continued to appear in short, isolated passages, and the ongoing relevance of the mystical experience of immanence was confirmed in autobiographical writings and dialogues of the 1960s and 1970s. Piaget's subjective experience of immanence can be considered the driving motivation for his life's work. The real nature of Piaget's spiritual life, and the possibility that he felt he had to conceal it, speak volumes about the potential of individual development, of human potential, and of the challenges that the self-realization of modern psychology — as a field which investigates consciousness as well as behaviour — has faced historically, and continues to face in the present.

The most significant issues which the article raises are perhaps not the details of Piaget's transpersonal theory and personal mysticism, but the historical context of the interplay of the quantitative and the qualitative in the history of the study of consciousness. At times Piaget felt the need to hide his spirituality because he lived in an age dominated by the quantitative methods of behaviourism. This secrecy would not have been deemed necessary in previous ages, and is not necessary in the present age to the same extent. Psychology is once again becoming a theatre for the debate between science and religion, in the manner that it was conceived by many of psychology's pioneers. This re-conception of psychology is a direct result of the re-emergence of qualitative data as valid data on the nature of consciousness.

Two reasons can be identified why transpersonal consciousness has made a return across the final quarter of the twentieth century, and is continuing to gather pace across the twenty-first century. Firstly, qualitative reports themselves have regained purchase in the transpersonal field. Three important figures here are as follows: Maslow (1968), whose studies filled a hole that experimental behaviourism failed to address by reintroducing themes such as inspiration and ecstasy to psychological discourse. Indeed Maslow (1968, p. 3) expressed the opinion that the potential value of this qualitatively derived data justified its publication prior to an adequate quantitative formalization. Grof's (1979) LSD research made clear just how wide-ranging, colourful, and powerful the varieties of subjective consciousness which failed to register on the behaviourist map can be. A little later Wilber's experiential vision brought attention back to qualitative reports of eastern meditative traditions and aligned these in relation to developmental psychology. These are but three of many corpses of work in transpersonal psychology, but they serve as a basic

illustration of the strong qualitative component to transpersonal investigation. The second reason, related to but distinct from the first, is that neurophysiology has improved since the inception of behaviourist principles so that first-person reports about consciousness can now be corroborated in a third-person manner. For example, studies of waking and dreaming experience in TM meditators have been corroborated by neurophysiological readings (Orme-Johnson, 2000). The renewed focus on introspectionism is partnered by an anchoring in quantitative research methods.⁹

As a final side-issue, it is interesting that more recently still influential figures in the contemporary transpersonal movement should call into question once again the validity of the qualitative base of spiritual investigation. Indeed it is possible to identify two branches to contemporary transpersonal enquiry. One branch seeks to limit what is studied in transpersonal psychology to what can be measured and tested in the quantifiable terms of conventional modern psychology — see the work of Friedman (2013) and MacDonald (2013). The other branch contends that transpersonal psychology must go further in its reaffirmation of the aspects of consciousness which currently are only available to qualitative research methods — see the work of Anderson and Braud (2011), Ferrer (2002), and Tarnas (2007). Although subjective data is making a return following the rise of transpersonal psychology, the conflict between the quantitative and the qualitative now looms large within transpersonal psychology itself. How this latest chapter in the changing relationship between quantity, quality, and spirituality concludes remains to be seen. At the present time, the most profound spiritual experiences can still only be explored in a qualitative manner.¹⁰ Whether improvements in neurophysiological recordings, or some other method, will eventually make these experiences fully accessible to quantitative research is an open question. The relative weightings of qualitative and quantitative research methods in the study of spiritual consciousness in the twenty-first century awaits determination.

[9] It is interesting to consider this partnership in light of Adams' (2006), Freeman's (2006), Hartelius's (2006), and Tart's (2006) discussion of heterophenomenology, and Walach and Runehov's (2010) related article.

[10] MacDonald (2013) discusses aspects of spirituality that can currently meet the standards of conventional psychology: arguably, these are not the most inspiring aspects, which remain under the remit of the analysis of qualitative introspective phenomenologies.

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