

# EVOLUTIONARY EPISTEMOLOGY, MEDITATION, AND MERTON

— by **Don R. Osborn**

To the extent that science and monasticism both seek clearer understanding and greater knowledge in their respective fields, there is the potential for the application of scientific facts and theorizing to monasticism. This is a relatively uncommon type of endeavor in that those who are involved in each of these different areas are not likely to be informed or interested in both. In this article I will suggest several ways, one theoretical and one practical, that such interdisciplinary work could proceed. I will concentrate on science as applied to monasticism though I believe that the reverse relationship could also be developed. There are two aspects of scientific work I will review in this article. The first issue to be considered is theoretical work on evolutionary epistemology and the second is psychological and physiological research on the effects of meditation.

Epistemology is the theory or science of the methods and grounds of knowledge. The type of evolutionary epistemology which can be usefully applied to monastic meditation practices is associated in science with Karl Popper and can be called a natural selection epistemology. As a philosopher of science, Popper was concerned with how the growth of scientific knowledge has similarities to biological evolutionary processes as described by Charles Darwin among others. While Popper has been almost exclusively concerned with scientific knowledge, Donald T. Campbell (1973)<sup>1</sup> has applied these ideas more broadly and argued that the variation and selective retention process of evolutionary adaptation can be generalized to cover a hierarchy of individual and social knowledge processes.

Campbell, a psychologist, has suggested that one of the implications of this work is an appropriate respect for cultural beliefs and practices which do not agree with scientific theories. For example he has cautioned psychology teachers not to dogmatically reject free will, as many scientific theories do, since the long standing general cultural belief in free will deserves, at the least, consideration as a possibly true belief by virtue of its long standing existence across many generations and cultures. From his view, a truly scientific approach would consider this evidence, based on evolutionary epistemology, as worthy of consideration.

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I suggest that we should also extend an evolutionary epistemology viewpoint to monastic practices since the survival and development of such orders, devoted to creating a closer relationship with and understanding of God, should provide beliefs, techniques and practices that all could learn from. In fact meditation practices in Christian and non-Christian religions share many similarities which increases the likelihood from an evolutionary epistemology viewpoint that they are valid. One of the well known Eastern techniques, Transcendental Meditation, has been taught in Cistercian houses in the U.S.A. and some work has been done on its contribution to the monastic life (Marechal, 1973).<sup>2</sup>

Meditation is one monastic practice which has been empirically investigated. The Students International Meditation Society, known popularly through its teaching of the Transcendental Meditation technique, was convinced that meditation could have a measurable impact on physiology and personality. They encouraged scientific experimentation that led to the conclusion that meditation did have positive effects (Kanellakos and Lukas, 1974).<sup>3</sup> Other research established that this effect was not peculiar to the TM technique and was based upon inherent characteristics of human beings. This type of collaborative research, if more widely practiced and encouraged, could benefit both science and religion.

During his last years Thomas Merton was quite involved in the universal interests and shared concerns among religious, East and West. While firmly committed to the Christian vision he saw much of value in Eastern monastic life and practices. He spoke on the specifically Christian version of the type of meditation I've discussed in "Losing and Finding the Way" in the Mystic Life Series available from Electronic Paperbacks. I highly recommend this to those concerned with deepening their religious experience.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Campbell, D. T. Evolutionary epistemology. In *The Philosophy of Karl R. Popper*, edited by Paul A. Schilpp, The Open Court Publishing Company, La Salle, Illinois, 1973.

<sup>2</sup>Marechal, Paul. Transcendental meditation and its potential value in the monastic life. *Cistercian Studies* 8(3), 1973.

<sup>3</sup>Kanellakos, Demetri P. and Lukas, Jermone S. *The psychobiology of transcendental meditation: A literature review*. W. A. Benjamin Inc., Menlo Park, Ca., 1974.