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## Charisma, Magic, and Spirituality as Socially Engaged Processes: Lucian's (circa 120-200) *Alexander the False Prophet* and People's Accounts of the Supernatural

**Abstract** Focusing on *Alexander the False Prophet* and *The Lover of Lies*, two texts from the Greek poet-philosopher Lucian of Samosata (circa 120-200) of the Classical Roman era, this paper considers (a) charisma, magic, and spirituality as aspects of an interconnected, collectively achieved, developmental process associated with the emergence of a religious cult. Somewhat relatedly, this paper also acknowledges (b) people's broader, longstanding fascinations with matters that seem incredulous.

Depicting a more sustained realm of prophetic activity and an account of people's intrigues with the supernatural, Lucian's texts offer some especially valuable transhistorical and transcultural reference points for the broader sociological study of human knowing and acting. The paper concludes with a consideration of the implications of these matters for the study of people's involvements in religion and spirituality as humanly-engaged realms of endeavor and interchange.

**Keywords** Magic; Charisma; Religion; Spirituality; Supernatural; Pragmatism; Symbolic Interactionism; Lucian of Samosata; Prophecy; Belief; Doubt; Community

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Attending to pragmatist viewpoints and ethnographically-oriented accounts of human group life, encountered in the developmental flows of Western social thought, he has been working with ethnohistorical materials in the interrelated areas of religion, education and scholarship, rhetoric,

poetics, philosophy, history, love and friendship, politics and governing practices, and deviance and morality.

As with the present statement focusing on Lucian's work on charisma, magic, and the supernatural, Robert Prus has been indicating, in more direct conceptual terms, the exceptional scholarly advantages of developing more sustained transsituational (transcontextual, transhistorical, and transdisciplinary) analytic comparisons of human lived experiences from the classical Greek era to the present time through the more extensive use of ethnohistorical and contemporary ethnographic materials.

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The philosopher-poet Lucian of Samosata (circa 120-200) is scarcely known to those in the human sciences more generally or among those in religious studies more specifically. Nevertheless, some of the more discerning, even if sometimes openly sarcastic, analyses of religion from the more distant past are those that Lucian has provided.

As part of a larger project on the development of Western social thought, particularly that pertaining to the study of human knowing and acting from a pragmatist standpoint, I have been examining the works of various scholars from the classical Greek and Latin eras.<sup>1</sup> Plato (circa 420-348 BCE) and Aristotle (circa 384-322 BCE) are by far the most consequential classical scholars because they so astutely address a wide range of matters pertaining to human knowing and acting. However, other scholars from the Greek and Roman eras—such as Herodotus (circa 485-425 BCE), Thucydides (circa 460-400 BCE), Xenophon (circa 430-340 BCE), Cicero (106-43 BCE), Dio Chrysostom (circa 40-120), and Lucian (circa 120-200)—also have contributed substantially to the study of community life as a humanly engaged process.

I have written on some of Lucian's works elsewhere (Prus 2008b; 2008c; 2015b), but here I focus more directly on *Alexander the False Prophet* and *The Lover of Lies* or *The Doubter*. Although Lucian has written on many other aspects of religion, the two statements considered here have a somewhat more sustained quasi-ethnographic quality.

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller sense of the base on which the larger "Greek" project has been pursued, see Prus (2003; 2004; 2007a; 2008a; 2009; 2010; 2011a; 2015a). Some other publications derived from the Greek project can be found in Prus (2015b).

Whereas Lucian's account of prophecy focuses more specifically on the life and times of Alexander of Abonoteichus (circa 120-200), a person whose spirituality-based prophecies achieved some prominence in the classical Roman era, Lucian's *The Lover of Lies* deals with people's intrigues with the supernatural.

Rather than dismiss these materials as accounts of some quaint features of a bygone era, I contend that these materials have an enduring relevance not only for comprehending people's involvements in spiritual or religious matters more generally but for a fuller understanding of community life. Thus, Lucian's statements provide valuable transhistorical reference points for comprehending important associated matters, including magic and religion, character and charisma, authenticity and realism, human agency and resourcefulness, beliefs and intrigues, impression management and influence work, ambiguity and commitments, forming and objectifying associations, and people's participation in collective events. It is not possible to address these topics in any detail in the present statement, but readers will find material pertinent to all of these (notably inter-related) matters in the "chapter and verse synopses" provided for these two texts.

Lucian may have written these texts as a poet-philosopher or philosopher-poet rather than adopting a more exclusive or explicit role as a historian or ethnographer, but he addresses aspects of people's involvements in religion and their attentiveness to the supernatural in ways that much contemporary scholarship focusing on religion fails to accomplish. Moreover, he does so in ways that are highly

suggestive for future inquiry into the nature of people's experiences with religion and their intrigues with the supernatural. Thus, even though openly depreciative of those who promote and/or accept religious standpoints at times, Lucian is a remarkably astute student of the human condition. Approaching prophecy and spirituality as realms of activity and interchange, Lucian draws attention to the reality of religion as a humanly engaged process.

After brief commentaries on (1) some noteworthy affinities between religion and spirituality, (2) some other authors who have dealt with religion in the classical Greek and Roman eras, and (3) Lucian's work more generally, (4) a synopsis of Lucian's *Alexander the False Prophet* is presented, followed by (5) a consideration of the significance of this text for comprehending magic, charisma, and cultic associations. The next part of the paper deals with (6) *The Lover of Lies* or *The Doubter*. Mindful of the broader pragmatist or constructionist approach that informs the present statement, I conclude the paper by (7) asking about the relevance of Lucian's texts for understanding and studying people's participation in religious movements and their broader intrigues with spirituality and the supernatural.

Building on symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993; Prus 1996; 1997; 1999; Prus and Grills 2003), this statement on Lucian's works also is informed by the Chicago-style ethnographic literature developed over the past century. As will become evident, this statement benefits from other pragmatist-oriented scholarship from the classical Greek and Roman eras, as well as some more contemporary pragmatist-oriented sources of which

Emile Durkheim's (1915 [1912]) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is especially consequential.

### Religion and Spirituality: Noteworthy Affinities

Because this paper rather inevitably takes us into considerations of religion and spirituality, it is appropriate to acknowledge some preliminary (even if only sketchy) distinctions and *affinities* between these two realms of people's beliefs and practices.<sup>2</sup> Some material developed by Emile Durkheim and two of his students, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, has been particularly instructive in this regard.

After stating that neither (a) conceptions of the supernatural nor (b) figurehead (anthropomorphic or personified) visions of divinities are essential for religion, Durkheim (1915 [1912: Book 1]) identifies three fundamental criteria for a religion. These are: (1) a set of distinctions between the *sacred* and the profane, (2) a set of practices associated with those distinctions and related beliefs, and (3) the development of a moral community in which those beliefs and practices achieve a collective adherence and enacted vitality. While I very much concur with the position on religion Durkheim assumes in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, it is appropriate to acknowledge some important affinities between religion and spirituality.

<sup>2</sup> Recognizing some of the ambiguities and controversies surrounding religion, spirituality, and mysticism, an Appendix (On Studying Religion and Spirituality: Attending to the Realism of Elusive Essences) is provided to clarify some conceptual aspects of religion and spirituality, as well as to briefly consider the potential of spirituality as a subject matter for more sustained interactionist inquiry.

People defining themselves as "spiritualists" often contend that they are not involved in religion—which to them often is envisioned in terms of institutionalized beliefs, practices, formal organizations and material structures, and various centralizing God figures. Much like Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert (1964 [1898]; 1972 [1902]) and Emile Durkheim (1915 [1912]), I envision people's conceptions of spirituality as (a) involving essences or forces that not only (b) exist beyond currently living humans but that also (c) have capacities to assume agency (exercise deliberation and choice) and affect human life-worlds in ways that are (d) only selectively receptive/amenable to human influence or control.

Relatedly, although it may be tempting to envision spirituality as an individual phenomenon, it appears that all conceptions of mystical essences emerge as products of group interchange rather than the spontaneous independent creations of individual consciousness somehow apart from their earlier group-based capacities for language and conceptuality. All human capacities for conceptuality, thought, memory, and reasoning are contingent on group interaction and the symbolic interchanges taking place within (see: Prus 2007b; 2007c; also Mauss and Hubert 1964 [1898]; 1972 [1902]; Durkheim 1915 [1912]; Mead 1934; Blumer 1969). Still, dependent on the group for their very existence—emergence, viability, and longevity, only some activities and indications taking place in any group setting are likely to become linguistically more sustained, as well as more fully interactively systematized into community life.

Even though linguistically-enabled individuals (i.e., "ethnologists"—Prus 2007c) may find things meaningful—interesting, worthwhile, important, and amazing, as well as banal, disappointing, puzzling, frightening, and so forth, all conceptions of the supernatural, as well as specific variants of divinity, spirits, ghosts, and the like, are to be understood within the context of the linguistic group(s) of orientation of the individuals involved. Indeed, without some conceptual connectedness with linguistically-enabled others, individual humans would have no basis for puzzlement, amazement, repulsion, or doubt.

Like religion, spirituality only achieves a meaningful quality within the context of the human group, and only within the context of the human group might viewpoints and practices achieve some longer-term presence. Relatedly, without in some way linguistically accessing the collectively attained conceptualizations of "whatness" (what is and what is not) of the community, there would be no whatness (substance, conceptuality) of thought for humans who lack symbolic exposure to some group of orientation.

Whereas people defining themselves as participants in more established religious communities may dismiss "spiritualism" as sacrilegious, fringe elements of society, both sets of participants commonly also ascribe sacred (revered, awe-inspiring, mystical) forces and agency qualities to evil, as well as benign essences (Durkheim 1915 [1912]). Adherents to conventional religions, like the "spiritualists," also often embrace, if not more

explicitly insist on spiritual transformations and mysterious interventions.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note, thusly, that “realities and relativism aside,” all religions—like all more systematized realms of spirituality—seem attentive to matters of life and death, as well as the fears, losses, hopes, and frustrations that people experience in contending with circumstances seemingly beyond human control.

Like Mauss and Hubert, I also envision spirituality as denoting socially accomplished products and processes. Relatedly, earlier collectively experienced aspects of spirituality seem foundational to virtually all conventionalized religions. Even though particular individuals may be involved in interpretations of instances and enactments of “spirituality,” these expressions and possible extensions also are most appropriately understood as variants of more foundational group viewpoints and practices (also see Mauss’ 2003 [1909] statement on prayer).

Mindful of (a) the preceding qualifications, (b) the desire to avoid artificial distinctions between religion, cults, and spirituality, and (c) the not uncommon categorical assertions on the part of various sets

<sup>3</sup> As Mauss and Hubert (1964 [1898]; 1972 [1902]) and Durkheim (1915 [1912]) also indicate in more distinctively pragmatist terms, people’s conceptions of the “sacred” and “profane” become “objectified” (Berger and Luckmann 1966) through the activities, interchanges, terms of reference, and emotional engagements of particular groups of people. As the cross-cultural and historical literatures indicate, people’s viewpoints and practices regarding humans, other life-forms, and other objects of human awareness do not have inherent meanings. The meanings of referenced phenomena reflect “the realism” assigned to them by particular groups of people. Religion and spirituality, along with all matters associated with these realms of involvement, are no exception.

of believers that they more exclusively possess and enact “the truth” pertaining to religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, I will use the terms religion and spirituality in ways that reflect their mutualities. The emphasis, accordingly, is on the ways that those defining themselves as “conventionalist” and/or “spiritualist” attend to those essences or forces that they envision as *more autonomous agents* with capacities to affect, as well as attend and adjust to the views and practices of particular groupings of people and/or more individualized representatives thereof. Still, because Lucian appears to have had a good classical Greek education, it also is important to situate his scholarly productions within that context.

### Analytic Precursors in the Classical Greek and Latin Eras

As noted in an earlier paper (Prus 2015b), Lucian is by no means the first of the classical Greek and Latin scholars to discuss religion as a realm of human lived experience. Hence, while recognizing the central roles assumed by Homer (circa 700 BCE) and Hesiod (circa 700 BCE) in crystallizing images of the Greek Olympian gods,<sup>4</sup> it is important to

<sup>4</sup> In addition to Homer and Hesiod, it may be noted that the Greek playwrights Aeschylus (circa 525-456 BCE), Sophocles (circa 495-405 BCE), and Euripides (circa 480-406 BCE) also give considerable attention to the Greek gods and human morality. Like the texts attributed to Homer and Hesiod, the plays of these three tragedians are rife with images of living, thinking, acting, and interacting characters. The human characters portrayed in these texts often intermingle with immortal Greek gods and other fictionalized beings, but virtually all participants assume human-like stances (with capacities for activity, linguistic communication, and tactical, minded interchange). Aristophanes (circa 450-385 BCE), the playwright who wrote a number of highly intricate, deceptive, multi-themed comedies, not only presents human characters in extended ranges of expression, activities, and

note that other Greek authors were more explicitly attentive to the pragmatist or constructionist features of religion.

Thus, Protagoras (circa 490-420), whose texts were publicly burned, encountered considerable hostility on the part of some of his contemporaries for insisting (more pragmatically) “that man is the measure of all things” and Herodotus (circa 485-425) in *The Histories* openly identifies the Olympian gods as the fabrications of Homer and Hesiod. Plato (see *Republic* and *Laws*) also clearly recognizes the problematic nature of claims about divinity even as he stresses the interdependency of morality, religion, education, and law for propping one another up and their overall importance for maintaining the functional/operational cohesiveness of the community (also see Prus 2011a; 2011b). Relatedly, the Roman author Marcus Tullius Cicero’s (106-43 BCE) exceptionally astute *On the Nature of the Gods* (Prus 2011d) and the Greek author Dio Chrysostom’s (circa 40-120) *On Man’s First Conception of the Gods* (Prus 2011c) also should be recognized as particularly noteworthy precursors to the materials that Lucian develops on religion.

Lucian’s references are not sufficiently precise to establish definite lines of influence with these earlier authors. Minimally, however, Lucian has had considerable exposure to Greek philosophy (and

relationships, but also adds yet other dimensions to his comedies (and literary criticism). In *Frogs*, for instance, Aristophanes presents the earlier playwrights (Aeschylus and Euripides) as the primary contestants (and explicitly critical confrontationalists) for the “throne of tragedy” situated within “the enduring world of the departed.” For a complete collection of the (extant) texts from these Greek dramatists, see: Oates and O’Neill (1938).

theology), rhetoric, and poetics. As well, despite the overtly cynical, sometimes sarcastic manner in which he discusses the validity of people’s religious beliefs, Lucian brings “to life” a number of features of people’s religious beliefs and practices in ways that are not encountered elsewhere in the literature.

### Lucian on Religion

The eight volumes in the Loeb collection of Lucian’s works contain about 70 separate articles, most of which have been developed as dialogues and many of which have a notably playful, poetic quality. Whereas Lucian’s texts are rather diverse in their overall coverage, a substantial portion of these statements specifically deal with religion, philosophy, and rhetoric.

In addition to the two texts considered here, Lucian has written a number of dialogues that focus on the ways in which people engage aspects of religion. These include: *On Sacrifices*, *On Funerals*, *Icaromenippus*, *Menippus*, *The Parliament of the Gods*, *Zeus Rants*, *Zeus Catechized*, and *A Conversation with Hesiod*. Lucian is pointedly cynical about the viability of people’s religious beliefs and practices, but his texts are remarkably attentive to the socially constituted features of people’s religious viewpoints and activities (for more detail, see: Prus 2015b).

Lucian deals with a wide, somewhat overlapping array of issues in developing these other statements on religion. Among the more central themes Lucian addresses in the preceding texts are people’s (a) sacrifices and other attempts to influence divine

essences, (b) notions of fatalism or predestination, (c) debates about the existence of divine beings, (c) means of legitimating divine beings, (d) images of and preparations for the afterlife, and (e) intrigues with the supernatural. Although many of his statements on religion are situated within “the community of the Olympian gods,” Lucian is attentive to a wide range of viewpoints on divinity (Greek and barbarian). He also recognizes the competitive, comparative, and shared qualities of differing religious standpoints. Thus, despite its poetical qualities, Lucian’s “anthropology of religion” is strikingly pluralist and generic.

### *Alexander the False Prophet*<sup>5</sup>

Although Alexander achieved honour not only in his own country, a small city in remote Paphlagonia, but over a large part of the Roman world, almost nothing is known of him except from the pages of Lucian. Gems, coins, and inscriptions collaborate Lucian as far as they go, testifying to Alexander’s actual existence and widespread influence, and commemorating the name and even the appearance of Glycon, his human-headed serpent. But were it not for Lucian, we should not understand their full significance. [Lucian 1913-1967:173 (Harmon introduction to *Alexander the False Prophet*, vol. 4, 1925)]

<sup>5</sup> This synoptic statement on Alexander of Abonoteichus has been developed primarily from A. M. Harmon’s (1925) translation of *Alexander the False Prophet* from *Lucian* (Loeb edition), volume 4, pages 173-253. I also worked with a translation from H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler (1905), entitled *Alexander the Oracle Monger*. The references provided in the present paper are to the (now standardized) notations that accompany the Greek texts in the Loeb English translation. Readers are referred to the fuller, considerably more detailed account found in the Harmon translation.

In developing *Alexander the False Prophet*, Lucian provides an account of the practices of Alexander of Abonoteichus and his associates that led to the emergence of a religious cult that not only lasted well over a century but that also appears to have attained considerable prominence during the classical Roman era.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas Lucian explicitly describes Alexander as a despicable character, Lucian simultaneously seems intrigued with the prophet Alexander. Thus, he describes Alexander as an exceptionally knowledgeable, creative, resourceful, astutely analytic, and daringly bold individual, as well as someone with extensive interpersonal skills. More importantly yet for our purposes, and despite his open hostility towards Alexander and his pointed depreciation of the mentality of Alexander’s followers, Lucian provides an instructive, well-informed account of Alexander’s activities.

Still, it should be acknowledged that although Lucian was a “participant-observer” in the broader theatre in which Alexander operated as a prophet, Lucian’s statement is much more a product of “investigative reporting” than an account based on extended insider access to the prophet Alexander and his practices.

Despite these limitations, Lucian provides one of the more sustained, directly descriptive accounts of

<sup>6</sup> Although I had not made the linkages myself, Daniel Ogden (2009:61-77) explicitly identifies Alexander of Abonoteichus, along with Apollonius of Tyana (circa 15-100) and Simon Magus (lived first century CE), as rivals of sorts to Jesus of Nazareth. For some other accounts of neo-Pythagorean religious representatives and comparisons with Jesus of Nazareth (circa 7 BCE - 36 CE [outer range estimates of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* records]), see: W. Turner (1911) in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

the activities of a prophet and the associated emergence of a religious cult from the more distant past, but he also addresses important features of charisma, deception, and authenticity within religious contexts. Thus, whereas Lucian very much focuses on Alexander’s practices as a prophet, Lucian also provides background materials that are particularly valuable for illustrating ways that religious movements may emerge and take shape as organizational phenomena.

Relatedly, it is apparent that Alexander’s *successes as a prophet are contingent on the images he invokes and the associations he cultivates in the process of collectively pursuing his more personal interests amidst the viewpoints, interpretations, and activities of others in the community*. Thus, there is an “emergent oneness of the cult (i.e., the subculture) with the prophet.”

Lucian (*AFP*:1-2) opens *Alexander the False Prophet* by stating that he is preparing this text for his friend Celsus who requested that Lucian provide him with a history of Alexander’s involvements in and practices pertaining to his religious cult.<sup>7</sup> Lucian notes the irony involved in both Celsus’ interest in preserving the memory of a scoundrel of such magnitude and the work that Lucian, himself, will put into developing this statement.

Still, venturing forth, Lucian (*AFP*:3-4) says he will first attempt to describe Alexander’s appearance and character. Lucian says that Alexander not only

<sup>7</sup> According to Harmon (1925, the translator), whereas Alexander’s own religious activity took place about 150-170, the cult that Alexander had generated survived for at least another century.

was tall and exceptionally handsome, almost god-like in appearance, but that he also had a gaze that was strikingly intense and captivating. Consistent with his other external virtues, Alexander’s voice is described as not only particularly clear but also distinctively melodious.

After describing Alexander as strikingly attractive in all respects, Lucian observes that Alexander also possessed a level of comprehension, a quickness of mind, and a pronounced aptitude for learning and absorbing materials that readily distinguished him from others. Moreover, Lucian continues, almost everyone who met Alexander was readily impressed by his magnificent, highly affable character.

Attempting to piece together Alexander’s past, Lucian (*AFP*:5) surmises that Alexander likely began to develop, as well as benefit from, these emerging qualities as a youngster. Lucian further notes that while still a youth, Alexander had become acquainted with an older man involved in mystical incantations, the preparation and sales of potions and remedies, promises of revelations, and the like. It is here, Lucian supposes, that Alexander learned to make use of the effects of magic and to appreciate other modes of trickery.

After his mentor died, the still youthful Alexander (*AFP*:6-8) formed a partnership with an entertainer, Coconas. At some point the pair became acquainted with a Macedonian woman who, in addition to supporting them for a time, also took them to the once flourishing community, Pella. It was there that they learned about some very large but highly domesticable snakes.

It is not apparent just how extensively the two had planned things out at this point, but anticipating that they could benefit by incorporating a serpent into their routines, they purchased one. And, working on the premise that hope and fear are two matters that offer great potential for personal gain, the two partners developed the idea of founding a prophetic shrine wherein they might embark on the selling of oracles.

Next, Lucian (*AFP:9*) says, came the planning stage as Alexander and Cocconas considered where, when, and how they might best pursue their venture. They decided to locate in Chalcedon, a region in which Alexander had grown up, but more importantly it gave them access to the temple of Apollo.

The two worked in tandem, but appeared separately to the townspeople. Thus, whereas Alexander began establishing his own presence in the community, his associate Cocconas spent time announcing obscure oracles among the populace. Cocconas had been emphasizing the name Alexander as a prophet in conjunction with vague, but frequent references to Asclepius and Apollo.<sup>8</sup>

As part of their scheme, Alexander and Cocconas shallowly buried some tablets near the temple. The tablets stated that Asclepius, along with his father Apollo, would soon take up residence in that area. With conditions arranged to foster curiosity, the subsequent discovery of the tablets by some local

<sup>8</sup> As Harmon (1925:173) notes, (sacred) snakes were featured at the sanctuaries of Asclepius whose role was to heal the sick. Apollo was considered an important source of oracles or prophecies. Alexander and Cocconas were setting the stage with considerable insight and ingenuity.

citizens generated great excitement and anticipation on the part of those in the community.

Cocconas died shortly after the tablets had been discovered, but their earlier dramaturgical arrangements had been more extensive yet.<sup>9</sup> Alexander earlier had entered Chalcedon attired in a manner consistent with the oracles that Cocconas have delivered. As well, beyond Alexander's intendedly striking, noble appearance, he also took care to display occasional fits of madness wherein, after chewing on some soapwort, Alexander generated yet greater attention with an incredible foaming of the mouth.

Another part of their earlier preparations had involved the manufacture of a human appearing serpent's head. Made of linen, this object had been painted to look both human and life-like. Moreover, Alexander and Cocconas, through the use of string controls, had developed a technique to simulate the appearance of conversation with this prop. Thus, they could open and close its mouth, as well as move its forked tongue. This mechanism would be used along with the body of the serpent obtained from Pella to create some exceptionally compelling effects.<sup>10</sup>

Still, as Lucian (*AFP:13-17*) indicates, Alexander (now acting on his own) would embark on a yet more

<sup>9</sup> It is apparent that Cocconas very much worked behind the scenes. The plan was to visibly establish Alexander as the principle agent in their theatre of operations—a role that Alexander readily assumed on the death of his associate.

<sup>10</sup> As Durkheim (1915 [1912]) indicates, the relationship of religion and magic is multidimensional. Thus, while those practicing religion may be hostile towards magic and magicians may be skeptical of religion, the base-line features of religion and magic are more integrated than these viewpoints suggest. Not only may magic (like science) develop as an extension of religion but the mystification of religion also bespeaks effects that have "magical" qualities.

elaborate, resourceful, compelling presentation. The night before a major event was to occur, Alexander had placed a newborn snake in a blown out goose egg, sealed it, and deposited the egg in some water that had accumulated at the newly dug foundations intended for construction by the local residents of what was to be a special temple for Apollo.

The next day, after appearing in a highly frenzied state and gathering a crowd amidst promises of the visit by a god and uttering many obscure but intensely excited references to Apollo and Asclepius, Alexander ran to the temple foundations where he continued with a display of incantations and praises to Apollo and Asclepius. It was in the midst of his excited state that Alexander would publicly discover the egg he earlier had placed in the wet mud. Breaking the egg open, the crowd witnessed, with some awe, the arrival of the promised god, in the form of a very young snake. Having thusly established the young snake's presence, relevance, and prominence, Alexander immediately ran off home with the new-found god whose arrival he had enabled.

After remaining in seclusion for a few days, Alexander allowed people to see him in a partially lit room. Attired in a manner befitting royalty Alexander now appeared in the presence of an exceedingly large but highly docile serpent. It was a setting in which he was able at once to focus attention on this wondrous phenomenon and yet quickly move individual viewers along in what would be a passing crowd of people eager to witness matters firsthand.

Concealing the snake's head in his attire, Alexander adeptly manipulated the more human-like face

of the artificial serpent's head that he and Cocconas had constructed. Keeping the highly intrigued crowd moving past himself and the god he presented, Alexander not only generated amazement at the phenomenal growth of the snake but he also provided the passing onlookers with opportunities to witness the affected movements of the (artificial) snake's head. To further establish the authenticity of the illusion he had created, Alexander let people touch the serpent's body so that they might directly ascertain its realism for themselves.

As word spread that people not only had witnessed the birth of a god but that many also had actually touched it, Lucian (*AFP:18*) notes that people begin to make paintings, statues, and other representations of the god that Alexander would announce as *Glycon*, the grandson of Zeus and the source of light to humanity.

It was at this point too, Lucian (*AFP:19*) explains, that the purpose of the larger scheme might be invoked. It was to make predictions and give oracles in order to achieve personal and financial gain. Although by no means the first to offer good fortune by foretelling the future, Alexander had announced that Glycon would make predictions and that those who wished to do so could submit written questions. Moreover, Alexander invited interested parties to place their own wax seals on their statements saying that he would return these to them unopened.

After describing some ways that one might open wax seals without detection (*AFP:20-21*), Lucian (*AFP:22*) comments on the overall resourcefulness of Alexander's responses to these questions. In

addition to combining guesswork with deception and obscurity, Alexander also would make use of his own knowledge of various medical treatments whenever these might seem appropriate. As well, whereas Alexander's predictions often were far from specific, he claimed that the meanings of his prophecies were contingent on subsequent manifestations of Glycon's will along with Alexander's prayers.

Stating that the fees charged for individual oracles were very modest overall, Lucian is quick to observe that wealthy or greedy people often submitted several questions at a time. Still, Lucian (*AFP:23-24*) notes that Alexander eventually hired a set of assistants to support his ventures. In addition to writers of oracles, sealers, and collectors of information, Alexander also sent agents to more distant areas of the Roman Empire to announce his success in solving all manners of difficulties that people might have.

As Lucian (*AFP:25*) makes clear, Alexander also had detractors. Thus, although Alexander seemed comfortable with the Platonists, the Epicureans became an obvious source of difficulty and resentment for Alexander.

Along the way, (*AFP:26*) Alexander arranged to exhibit Glycon for those who requested to see the god, although he primarily limited exposure to the serpent's body. Still, Alexander eventually promised something even more astonishing. He would provide direct consultations with (a speaking) Glycon without acting as a personal intermediary. Arranged as private hearings, these oracles involved an accomplice who spoke through a crane's wind-

pipes that had been attached to Glycon's artificial head. These communications, Lucian observes, were reserved for those sufficiently generous in their rewards for Alexander's efforts.

Whenever Alexander's prophecies proved unsuccessful, Alexander (*AFP:27-28*) adjusted and reinterpreted his messages as he developed more fitting, "after the fact," oracles.

As well, Lucian (*AFP:29*) notes, Alexander astutely befriended other priests and prophets by using certain of his oracles to encourage specific people to seek readings from these other sources.

Then, after noting that Alexander's fame had spread substantially and aroused great attention in Rome, Lucian (*AFP:30*) observes that Rutilianus, a superstitious but distinctively prominent Roman official, took particular interest in Alexander and had sent a number of messengers to consult with Alexander.

For his part, Lucian (*AFP:31*) observes, Alexander received visitors most graciously and generously, thereby encouraging good will on the part of all who contacted him. Still (*AFP:32*), as a means of exercising some personal control over certain wealthier, more powerful people, Alexander also sometimes avoided returning replies to those who sought his counsel.

After stating that a number of oracles that Alexander provided failed to materialize, Lucian further observes that when Rutilianus asked Alexander for his advice on managing his affairs, Alexander suggested that Rutilianus marry Alexander's daughter.

Rutilianus did so, seemingly envisioning that as a way of achieving a greater level of heavenly grace.

Still, Lucian (*AFP:36*) notes, Alexander's ventures assumed even grander dimensions. Thus, for example, Alexander sent messengers to several Roman cities warning the occupants of plagues, earthquakes, and other disasters that Alexander alone would be able to help them avert.

Around this same time, Alexander dispatched a series of agents to Rome to keep him informed of the concerns and circumstances of more prominent persons. As a result, Alexander often knew about these people's situations and dilemmas before they sought his counsel.

In addition to his other activities, Alexander (*AFP:38-40*) also established an annual three-day "Celebration of Mysteries" in which he affirmed his heavenly presence to the faithful. Atheists, Christians, and Epicureans were explicitly excluded from these events.

Then, after commenting on Alexander's licentious behavior at the celebrations of mysteries, Lucian says that Alexander not only had sexual relations with younger boys but also involved himself with any woman he found attractive. So compelling was Alexander's presence, Lucian says, that in many cases these women and their husbands boasted about having a child by Alexander.

Shifting topics, Lucian (*AFP:43-47*) next recounts an incident in which the Romans had lost twenty thousand soldiers in an invasion that Alexander had pre-

dicted as a victory. Alexander justified his oracle by saying that while god said there would be a victory, he did not say whether the Romans or the Germans would prevail.

Alexander (*AFP:49-51*) also devised a procedure for "providing oracles during his sleep." Collecting the scrolls on which questions were asked, Alexander stated that he would sleep on them and report the revelations that god had provided in a dream. While more impenetrable scrolls typically received more obscure responses, Alexander's responses often assumed the form of riddles.

Notably, too, for the more persistently curious, these ambiguous responses also provided opportunities for financial gain by third party translators. Sharing their fees with Alexander, these third party mediums interpreted Alexander's replies to the questions asked.

To add to the overall aura of his presence, Lucian says that Alexander at times also publicly delivered oracles to people who were not present, as well as to people who had not submitted questions, or who simply did not exist.

When sealed scrolls were delivered in languages other than those familiar to Alexander, Lucian notes that Alexander not only faced the task of accessing these materials but also that of finding translators.

Again, reminding readers that Alexander had his detractors, Lucian (*AFP:53-54*) says that he, himself, had submitted many paid inquiries to Alexander, but had received only obscure, if not more

directly irrelevant and incomprehensible, answers to his questions.

Along the way Alexander not only became aware that Lucian had been criticizing him to others but also learned that Lucian had earlier advised Rutilianus against marrying Alexander's daughter. Still, on hearing that Lucian had arrived in the community (AFP:55-56), Alexander in an apparent display of congeniality invited Lucian to visit him.

However, the already disaffected Lucian was much less gracious. Thus, when the two met and Alexander extended his hand for Lucian to kiss, Lucian reports biting Alexander's hand with such intensity that some of Alexander's supporters began beating and choking Lucian. Still, Lucian notes that Alexander quickly gained composure and announced that he would take this troublesome individual as an indication of Glycon's abilities to turn bitter enemies into friends.

After dismissing the others, Alexander informed Lucian that he knew exactly who Lucian was. Mindful of his dependence on Alexander for his immediate safety, Lucian quickly became much more accommodating to his host. Thus, when Lucian subsequently appeared with Alexander, those who had witnessed his attack on Alexander were amazed to observe the dramatic transformation that Alexander had so quickly produced.

Later, on learning that Lucian was planning to leave the community, Alexander not only sent Lucian a generous assortment of gifts but also provided a boat and crew for Lucian's voyage. [As a testimony

of sorts to Alexander's persuasive capacities, Lucian reports accepting Alexander's offer of a trip home with confidence.] Only later, on route, would Lucian learn from the ship's captain that Alexander had paid the captain to have his crew dispose of Lucian once they were well underway.

Following Alexander's attempt to have him drowned at sea, Lucian (AFP:57) says that he was determined to prosecute Alexander for his misdeeds and misrepresentations. In compiling evidence for his case, Lucian says that he found an assortment of other people to support him in this undertaking. However, much to his dismay, Lucian subsequently found that the territorial governor was deeply concerned about maintaining the good will of Rutilianus and effectively discouraged Lucian from pursuing the case.

Before concluding his account of Alexander, Lucian (AFP:58-60) comments on the Alexander's continued brashness. Thus, for instance, not only did Alexander insist that the Emperor change the name of the community to one of Alexander's preference but Alexander also proposed that the governor strike a new coin with Glycon on one side and Alexander on the other. [As Harmon (1925:173) observes, some of these coins and associated artifacts have survived the passage of time.]

Despite predicting that he would live to be 150 years of age, Alexander died at the age of 70, one of his legs having become infested with maggots. Although several of Alexander's supporters subsequently sought control of his shrine, Rutilianus proclaimed himself to be the person most fitted to assume this role for his master Alexander.

In closing this statement, Lucian (AFP:61) says that while he is pleased to provide this account for his friend Celsus, in recognition of his reason, wisdom, and quest for the truth, Lucian also offers this statement to exonerate the philosopher Epicurus and his pursuit of liberating thought. Still, Lucian hopes that this text might have some broader value to those readers who pursue reason and understanding.

As readers may appreciate, after reading the preceding material, Lucian's *Alexander the False Prophet* is much more than an account of Alexander's deceptive practices. Thus, in the process of elaborating on Alexander's activities in some detail, Lucian sheds light on many other features of Alexander's theater of operations. As a result, Lucian not only has generated an instructive account of magic, charisma, religion, and people's participation in collective events but he also provides considerable insight into activity and relationships, influence work and deception, and authenticity and realism.

Since all of these matters deserve our attention as students of the human condition, one of the problems with which I have grappled was that of selecting from among these topics one of the better ways of developing a line of analysis. Mindful of Alexander's activities as a tactician, I started with a consideration of magic as a matter of intersubjective accomplishment.

### Putting *Alexander the False Prophet* in Perspective

So magic, basically, is, you take the reality and you change it, and the way you impose your interpreta-

tion is by not allowing the audience the ability to sort of form alternate theories. Now the reason they can't form alternate theories is, they don't know what's about to happen. When you structure the trick, they don't know what to pay attention to. When I say I'm imposing my interpretation, in a sense I'm editing what things they pay attention to, right? If I keep it very narrow, they have to come to these conclusions... You have to do it this way, because if they can follow the events the same way you do, there will be no illusion. See, and that's a method thing, it doesn't have a lot to do with the presentation. What is the audience thinking at this point? What are they interested in at this point? How do I change things to create the illusion? You have to go through the trick and figure out each point what they want to know, and that's a method. On the presentation side, you have to go through the trick and say, "Why is the audience interested at this point and how do I keep their interest?" [Prus and Sharper 1991:256-257]

[I]t's very difficult to learn to become natural. It's something that we're not naturally inclined to do. Handling things with grace and making it appear that nothing happens is an unnatural activity...So there is the juxtaposition between nothing going on and something magical happening...The first illusion is that nothing is going on. Most people aren't aware that that is the real illusion! To the audience, there is only one illusion, "What does the magic look like?" Well, by then it's too late, because they've already been deceived by the prior illusion that nothing has taken place. [Prus and Sharper 1991:205]

As suggested in the preceding extracts, I have focused on magic as a social process in addressing

Alexander's activities as a prophet. Although people often think of magic as an individual accomplishment in much the same way that they envision charisma as an individual quality, a fuller consideration of "magic as a realm of intersubjective accomplishment" provides a valuable analytic viewpoint for comprehending aspects of charisma, religion, reality, and collective interchange.

Moreover, because both Alexander's charisma and his success as a prophet were contingent not only on his activities but also on the relationships that Alexander developed in conjunction with his followers and their interpretations thereof, these processes are very much intertwined and draw attention to some highly consequential but comparatively overlooked features of cultic life.<sup>11</sup>

Although many people may envision magic as an illusion or trick that fools and amazes the naive and temporarily baffles more knowledgeable individuals, those more thoroughly embedded as performers in "the magic community" (Prus and Sharper 1991) not only are much more attentive to the dramaturgical aspects of magic but also to the importance of performers connecting with their audiences in shaping and reshaping the definitions of reality that others experience (also see: Mauss and Hubert 1972 [1902]).

<sup>11</sup> For a fuller sense of the interconnections of people's activities and relationships, along with the associated matters of people acquiring perspectives, developing identities, making commitments, experiencing emotionality, forming and coordinating associations, and participating in collective events, as well as people's involvements and continuities in particular realms of activity and associated life-worlds or subcultures, see: Prus (1996; 1997; 1999; Prus and Grills 2003).

Relatedly, whereas many people appear to think that a central aspect of being a magician is acquiring a "bag of tricks," presuming that magic exists within the props or devices that performers might use to create illusions, magic is better envisioned as a matter of intersubjective accomplishment.

Quite directly, magic does not inhere in some apparatus or movements (as in slight of hand) but is most centrally dependent on the target(s) of the illusion accepting, if only briefly, the images conveyed by the performer. Without this, even temporary acceptance of the reality [of the presentation], there is no magic. Relatedly, any intended misrepresentation that the other accepts as viable may be seen as an instance of magic, for however long that misrepresentation or fictionalization is accepted.

Like all instances of shared humor and effective communication more generally, all successful instances of illusion (i.e., all instances of deception) are dependent on audience viewpoints, interests, and interpretations. Lucian does not dwell on this, but he does point out that Alexander has had an apprenticeship in magic, as well as "the thief subculture."<sup>12</sup> Thus, a more contemporary statement on deception serves as a relevant point of departure for an analysis of Alexander's prophetic endeavors:

From this viewpoint, a theory of deception would have the following elements. First, we would ask about the "perspectives," interpretive frameworks, or belief

<sup>12</sup> Although both magicians and thieves may use deception in pursuing their objectives, it is important to distinguish "deception as a mode of entertainment" from "financial scams," "confidence games," and other means of theft that depend more centrally on deception or misrepresentation.

structures in which people conceptualize, present and experience deceptions or illusions. Within this notion of perspectives, we next ask about the definitions of self, other, and the situation that the "perpetrators of the deception" invoke. What are their interests, preliminary considerations, plans, preparations, and attempted presentations? Likewise, we would attend to the "audiences," asking how targets receive presentations of illusions. What are their interests, and what sorts of interpretations and adjustments (influences and resistances) do they make to performers as their mutual encounters transpire? Fourth, we would ask about the ways in which performers and targets view each other (identities) and the types of relationships or bonds that develop among themselves as their encounters take place. Fifth, the theory would be processual; we would try to follow the sequence along, as it was developed, experienced, and modified by the parties involved. Viewed in this manner, deceptions are social constructions. They may entail creativity and resourcefulness and may be implemented with any variety of interests or motives in mind, but they are developed in anticipation of audience reactions and only through audience reactions can they hope to achieve a sense of viability. [Prus and Sharper 1991:301]

Lucian's account of Alexander's prophecy does not address all of the aspects of deception just outlined in the sort of detail that one might desire. Nevertheless, it is apparent from the material Lucian presents here that Alexander's activities and cultic relationships are highly consistent with this broader set of processes.

Still, whereas most performances of magic, even those that are more extensively staged, have a rel-

atively fleeting quality—with these events often lasting only a few hours at most, it is worth noting that Alexander's "magic" had a considerably more encompassing and enduring quality.<sup>13</sup> As well, even though a great many performers may acquire some mystique or charisma because of their capacities to transcend the abilities and/or knowledge of others in the setting, seldom are they envisioned in the potent, almost god-like terms, in which Alexander was "enshrined."

Some (including Lucian) may be tempted to dismiss those who made commitments to Alexander's oracles as gullible or naive, but it is very important to observe that Alexander not only knowingly had entrenched his persona and prophetic activities within the religious viewpoints of his contemporaries but he also actively generated an extended array of contact points between spiritual matters and the illusions he presented. As a result, Lucian's account of *Alexander the False Prophet* offers an opportunity to consider *the linkages of magic and religion* in ways that are seldom made so explicit.

Moreover, it is apparent, from examining Lucian's text, that Alexander's "magic," as well as his broader success as a prophet, involved much more than tricks or illusions and needs to be understood in terms of the ways in which Alexander dealt with his associates.

<sup>13</sup> Among other things, this means that those so inclined would have had more time to observe, engage, study, and analyze (as did Lucian) Alexander's activities than is the case for many performing as magicians. This, in itself, is not a basis for skepticism as much as it would provide opportunities for exposure by those who in some way had become skeptical.



Thus, to put Alexander's prophecy in perspective, it is necessary to acknowledge various other, seemingly more mundane things that Alexander did and to recognize that many of these other matters, as well as the effects of his more specific illusions were instrumental for sustaining his personal prominence. In that regard, *Alexander the False Prophet* offers considerable insight into the matter of "cultivating charisma."

As used here, *charisma* reflects notions of esteem, intrigue, mystique, aura, or other prominent images, awes, or auras that people attribute to others (individuals, groups, or categories of people).<sup>14</sup> Still, although charisma, like magic, is contingent on the definitions of others, charisma also is best understood as an intersubjective process. Thus, in addition to considering (a) the processes by which people attribute auras (e.g., intrigue, affection, fear) to others, a fuller understanding of charisma requires that scholars also examine (b) the enterprise in which tacticians engage in attempts to have themselves envisioned in certain fashions, (c) the manners in which tacticians endeavor to utilize current imputations of mystique, and (d) the ways that others (supporters, competitors, oppositionary parties) view and deal with these tacticians and their practices.

These matters are useful for highlighting and summarizing some of the ways that Alexander was able to establish himself as a charismatic figure, as well as alerting readers to the sorts of things that other

<sup>14</sup> For two reviews of the literature focusing more directly on "charisma," see: Gardner and Avolio (1998) and Dawson (2009). For a more sustained analysis of influence work (and resistance) across the fuller array of interpersonal and organizational contexts, along with an ethnographic research agenda for studying the activities of tacticians and targets of persuasive endeavor, see: Prus (1999).

prophets, mediums, or psychics may do in attempts to establish their credibility and presence among their associates (also see: Cheung 2006).

Still, because Lucian more centrally focuses on Alexander "as a tactician," I will use that as a point of departure in this consideration of charisma. Mindful of tacticians' attempts more generally to shape the images of reality that others experience, I briefly reference some of Alexander's plans and preparations, as well as some of the methods he appears to have used to establish himself as someone of exceptional significance in the community.

As the earlier consideration of magic suggests, Alexander took exceptional care in shaping the images of reality or notions of "whatness" that those in his audience might experience (and act upon). While there is no guarantee that instances of truthful communications will be more readily accepted than those that are deceptive at the core, intended misrepresentations appear most effective when these are situated within contexts that targets consider authentic in other ways. Alexander seems to have been abundantly aware of this and astutely used this to his advantage.

As well, even though some illusions may be generated through the use of devices, props, sleight of hand, and other movements, performers also may selectively invoke speech, sounds, and background appearances to create more compelling (seemingly impossible) effects.

Relatedly, the things that are left unsaid or undone on particular occasions may be more consequential

for generating particular illusions than the things that people actually say or do. Moreover, as with other communications, in which speakers routinely connect all sorts of matters as they make indications to the recipients, performers also may create or accentuate illusions by focusing on (a) things that their audiences have experienced, (b) current or earlier audience emotional states, (c) their general curiosities and more particular intrigues, (d) the things they do or do not believe or "know" about some particular phenomenon, and (e) their ambiguities, hopes, and fears. Thus, whereas only some illusions may more exclusively involve abstractions or conceptual matters (what is sometimes referenced as "mental magic"), all illusions are contingent on the conceptual frames that recipients use to make sense of the matters at hand (also see: Mauss and Hubert 1972 [1902]).

Rather than simply dismiss those who accept the intended illusions, deceptions, or fictions as gullible, weak-minded, and such, it is instructive to ask *when and how anyone* might accept instances of representations as viable.

Even though some people may be defined as "more superstitious" or "spiritually-oriented" than others, and on this basis may be more likely to accept certain claims (and illusions) about the things they encounter, we might observe more generally that people's sense of confidence in the particular things they experience not only reflects the particular worldviews with which they work but also seem likely to be heightened when they can identify more substantial and/or multiple contact points with other things that they know (accept as viable) regarding

some phenomenon (i.e., can establish more indisputable and/or multiple "points of authentication").

Looking back over Lucian's account, it appears that Alexander and Cocconas not only were highly attentive to the matters of fitting their illusions into the prevailing conceptual frameworks of their associates in formulating their plans and making preparations but Alexander and Cocconas also built a series of interpretive bridges to foster credibility of Alexander's role and persona.

This is evident not only in Alexander's and Cocconas' activities involving the Temple of Apollo but also, on an ongoing basis, throughout Alexander's career as a prophet—wherein he continued to generate points of authentication on the part of those more receptively and intimately involved in his theatre of operations.

In order to focus attention on Alexander at the outset, Alexander and Cocconas went to considerable effort—before Alexander began more openly to assume the role of prophet—to establish the relevance of the name "Alexander" and to have Alexander adopt appearances of nobility, as well as assuming a degree of eccentricity as a base for what would be his emergent, visible, highly exceptional character.

Likewise, in presenting the newborn snake and then his own serpent as the god Asclepius (whom Alexander subsequently renamed Glycon), Alexander developed an extended set of authentication points. This included numerous instances of visual, witnessed activity, as well as offering spectators more immediate and undeniable physical contact with part of Glycon's

body. Later, Alexander even provided opportunities for a more select set of people to directly converse with his representation of this deity.

Even though much less dramatic, another very important aspect of Alexander's planning and preparation process was that of attending to the circumstances of his targets and their associates—what Mead (1934) would describe as “taking the role of the other” in both more generalized and more particularized terms.

Alexander and Cocconas were not only mindful of people's broader viewpoints and interpretive practices in formulating their collective venture, but they also recognized that people commonly experience more particular, more personal, often intense desires, ambiguities, and anxieties. Alexander and Cocconas planned to use these fears, desires, and ambiguities as leverage points around which to obtain financial and other considerations by offering to help people deal with their predicaments and aspirations.

In addition to comprehending these broader aspects of the human condition, Alexander also assumed a notably active role in learning more about people's circumstances. Not only did Alexander explicitly encourage people to reveal their concerns and troubles to him, but he also investigated the situations of noteworthy individuals and kept track of the matters in which these people were involved.

Whereas the preceding considerations of preparations and attending to target circumstances represent an important base for cultivating relationships in Alexander's prophecy, it is important to acknowl-

edge some other aspects of Alexander's activities that likely contributed to his success as a prophet and, by implication, consider the relevance of related practices for other psychics, spiritualists, mystics, and religious leaders.

Although a more marginal observation in some respects, it is worth noting, as Lucian points out, that Alexander had an exceptionally striking appearance and character. Lucian suggests that Alexander seemed to have become aware of the way others tended to see him early in life and not only cultivated these qualities along the way but also built advantageously on this realization as he related to others more generally.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to learning about people's circumstances, Alexander also appears to have taken what was interpreted by these others as a visible, empathetic interest in their situations. Thus, whereas his offers of help were financially accessible to many, the people with whom Alexander interacted typically seemed confident of his capacity to help, as well as his interests in their well-being.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> This process seems to parallel what Goffman (1963) refers to as “the natural cycle of passing,” wherein someone who is stigmatized, passes (as a normal) on occasion, begins to see benefits of being treated in this manner, and then endeavors more systematically to pass as a normal. Orrin Klapp (1969) outlines a similar set of processes in discussing the careers of those (“heroes,” “villains,” and “fools”) who become “symbolic leaders.” Indeed those recognized as “celebrities of sorts” (including Alexander) may find themselves accepting the reality of the definitions of the other, even though they may somewhat simultaneously realize that their personal roots and activities do not justify these claims. Also see Mauss and Hubert's (1972 [1902]) remarkably astute *A General Theory of Magic* which they developed around spiritually-enabled healing.

<sup>16</sup> This capacity to generate trust on the part of the other rather notably included Lucian. Thus, despite Lucian's pronounced earlier cynicism and disaffection, Lucian reports that he had no reservations about accepting Alexander's offer of a (presumably safe) voyage home.

Notably, too, even in responding to people's requests of help, Alexander not only maintained a sense of mystique and encouraged a loyalty of dependency on the part of those wishing to know (and shape) the future. Moreover, Alexander appears to have strategically invoked his intermediate role as a messenger—sometimes claiming much closer affinities with divinity and sometimes disclaiming personal accountability for more ambiguous or erroneous prophecies as a mere messenger of the gods.

As well, it is worth noting that while dealing with both spectators and adherents over a period of twenty years, Alexander continued to adjust, improvise, and extend his qualities, abilities, and claims as a prophet. In the process, Alexander gave people even more of what they wanted, reworking his routines mindful of their desires and their willingness to support him and his ventures.

Still, whereas Alexander achieved a substantial following, he also had an assortment of competitors and opponents (including Lucian) with whom to deal. Alexander seems to have offset some potential animosity and criticism from his more immediate competitors (priests, prophets, psychics, spiritualists) by assimilating some of these practitioners into his broader theater of operations.

Nevertheless, as Lucian indicates, Alexander also had his detractors, most notably the skeptics, the Epicureans, and the Christians. When unable to reason with, charm, or otherwise neutralize opponents, Alexander (with the apparent assistance of his supporters) explicitly sought to exclude these people from his assemblies. As well, in Lucian's case

at least, Alexander appears willing to more completely eliminate his opponents using the screens of tolerance, friendship, and trust.

Before turning more directly to the second of Lucian's texts considered in this paper, it may be appropriate to comment, albeit briefly, on the authenticity and illusions invoked by prophets, spiritualists, psychics, mediums, and the like.

Attending to the analyses of prophecy and destiny developed by Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) in *On Divination* and *On Fate* (Prus 2011d), it may be observed that all instances of foretelling the future are fraught with inauthenticity.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while not denying the relative accuracy of some predictions of the future, and allowing for all matters of coincidences, as well as the more systematic patterns that people may discern in nature more generally and the human condition more specifically, prophecy and other claims to foretell the future are subject to a conceptual problematic.

First, if all is fated, there is no reason to suppose that knowing the future would offer any advantage. Indeed, the best that could happen is that people could watch with anticipation that which is about to unfold. Relatedly, if all were fated, there would be no capacity for human intervention—either through people's more direct physical activities or through their thoughts, hopes, prayers, and the like.

<sup>17</sup> While not referencing predictions based on more sustained study as infallible, Cicero distinguishes scientific predictions (based on studies of past experiences) from claims of predestination or fatalism based on interpretations of signs that are not amenable to sensory examinations.

Indeed, only if it were possible for people to knowingly and deliberately enter into “the process of becoming” before particular things took place, would it be useful to know aspects of the future.

However, if people could “enter into the process of becoming” in some meaningful, intentioned, interventionist terms (as though activities), then the future would no longer be fated and thus would be unknowable.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, since all aspects of the future would be intricately related to the things that happened in the past, any intervention would restructure the future. It is not possible, therefore, to viably claim combinations of fate or destiny and agency.<sup>19</sup>

This is not to deny the value of prophets, mediums, spiritualists, and others for providing people with a sense of direction or for suggesting ways of dealing with their dilemmas, troubles, or aspirations within the ambiguities of community life.<sup>20</sup> However, to claim any special insight beyond that associated with (possibly more) knowledgeable and/or thoughtful individuals suggests an illusion. These [claims] may be perpetrated (articulated, objectified, acknowledged) through long-standing variants of

<sup>18</sup> Lucian, in *Zeus Catechized* (i.e., Zeus instructed) in Volume II of the Loeb Series (also see: Prus 2015b), provides an insightful, albeit somewhat playful, consideration of the implications, as well as the limitations of theories of predestination.

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, to claim that, “everything happens for a reason” is to beg a series of questions, as in “What reason?” “Whose reason?” and “Can the reason ever change—and, if so, how might this happen, and how many different reasons might there be?”

<sup>20</sup> It may be recognized that because sessions with prophets, psychics, and other spiritualists provide opportunities for personal revelation, information sharing, and advice and direction, as well as catharsis or emotional release, these interchanges represent viable alternatives to sessions with psychiatrists, social workers, and other counselors.

mysticism—as evidenced in the formulation of ideologies or belief systems, points of reference, procedures, and assemblies, as well as indications that others accept, believe in, and act on these claims to knowing.

While it is important that the relationship of religion and magic (as in the practice, promotion, and acceptance of illusions) be studied more systematically by those in the human sciences, it is also worthwhile noting, as Emile Durkheim (1915 [1912]) observes, that people’s involvements in religion provide a collective source of confidence and personal strength, direction, and community that those lacking these involvements may not possess.

That is, regardless of the authenticity of the claims that might be made for these viewpoints, these expressions of spirituality and the particular communities or cults that develop around these realms of activity and interchange nevertheless represent mechanisms by which people may deal with ambiguity, trouble, loss, as well as sustain hopes and desires.

Consequently, beyond the things that specific prophets or spiritualists do or do not do, it is important to attend to the matters that adherents experience on more personal, as well as collective terms as they interact with prophets and other spiritual leaders, as well as participate in collective events with others in their respective communities.

In addition to the presentations (and claims) generated by prophets and spiritualists, as well as the ways they relate to those who attend to their mes-

sages, it is instructive to be mindful of the matters for which their audiences might desire assistance, the ways they pursue these interests, the experiences they have as a consequence of their association with those “visionaries” or “mediums,” and the things that these people do to support and maintain their spiritual leaders, as well as help sustain one another within the broader collectivity of which they are part.<sup>21</sup>

It is mindful of people’s desires to shape the future amidst the challenges, struggles, and uncertainties of everyday life that we now turn to a somewhat broader set of people’s intrigues with the supernatural.

### *The Lover of Lies, or The Doubter*

Whereas Lucian’s *The Lover of Lies, or The Doubter* [hereafter *LL*; although more appropriately entitled “the lovers of lies and the doubter”] revolves primarily around incredible claims pertaining to the supernatural,<sup>22</sup> this little text provides some valuable transhistorical materials and associated in-

<sup>21</sup> Although Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert (1972 [1902]) seem unaware of Lucian’s account of *Alexander the False Prophet*, their cross-cultural, ethnohistorically informed analysis of magic as spiritually-enabled problem-solving is notably consistent with the conceptual materials introduced here. More methodologically rigorous as well as more explicitly sociological in emphasis, Mauss and Hubert also address (and illustrate) in some detail the centrality of people’s perspectives on the nature of “the whatness of reality”—with magicians giving meaning to the problems and ambiguities that people are experiencing through their preparations, activities, impression management, and the establishing of connections. In both cases, we begin to see successful instances of the contrived shaping of reality as *collectively achieved events*.

<sup>22</sup> This statement has been developed from A. M. Harmon’s (1921) translation of *The Lover of Lies, or The Doubter* from Lucian (Loeb edition), volume 3, pages 320-381. The references provided in the present paper are to the (now standardized) notations that accompany the Greek texts in the Loeb English translation. Readers are referred to the fuller, considerably more detailed account that Harmon provides.

sights of relevance to the broader sociological study of human knowing and acting.<sup>23</sup>

Relatedly, while some contemporary readers may be inclined to dismiss both the fabrications and the apparent willingness of people to accept these fictions as indications of less sophisticated, less scientifically informed, and less technologically advanced times, it may be acknowledged that many of our contemporaries accept or even adamantly insist on the viability of fatalism or destiny, prophecies, and dream-based messages, visions, and other spiritual predictions of the future, and miracles, as well as ghosts, angels, and other spirits. Many also are intrigued with the possibility of communication with the deceased, reincarnation and earlier lives, and instances of the resurrection of the dead.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, even though some may be highly skeptical of these matters, others may assign exceptionally high levels of realism to these viewpoints and employ these as particularly consequential, if not primary, reference points for directing their own lives and those of others. As well, although people’s beliefs may be “individual matters” in certain respects, the expression, confirmation, articulation, and maintenance of these standpoints, including the tendency to explain puzzling features of one’s own experiences in supernatural terms, is most evident in, and appears to derive substance through, group interchanges involving like-minded others.

<sup>23</sup> For a more sustained conceptual account of “in defense of knowing as well as in defense of doubting,” see Prus’ (2006) interactionist analyses of Cicero’s *Academica*.

<sup>24</sup> It should not be assumed that those adopting and/or encouraging these viewpoints are poorly educated people.

In what follows, I provide a synoptic rendering of Lucian's *The Lover of Lies*, attending to the overall flow of his text. Still, before doing so, it may be helpful to highlight some of the conceptual themes Lucian addresses in this statement.

First, while acknowledging people's more general intrigues with the supernatural, Lucian's statement suggests that some of the best educated and most thoughtful individuals of his time found conversing about supernatural matters and listening to the accounts offered by others to be a matter of considerable interest.<sup>25</sup> Rather than questioning the viability of one another's remarkable claims, they appear to accept these other accounts as providing credibility for their own intrigues and/or claims about the supernatural.

Although Lucian does not dwell on this point, it is apparent that the people he discusses not only have been exposed to conceptions of the supernatural at young ages but that the mystification that they experience also has a broader base in the community.

It also is evident that disbelievers or doubters are not especially appreciated in the settings in which claims about the supernatural are made. Thus, whereas attempts variously may be made to inform, explain, and convince skeptics of the viability of the supernatural in certain settings, those

<sup>25</sup> As indicated in the text compiled by Theresa Cheung (2006), intrigues with the supernatural, as signified by séances, prophecies, parapsychology, and the like in the 1850s-1900s not only attracted but also were endorsed at various points in time by a broad assortment of intellectuals, celebrities, and other public figures.

who refuse to accept standpoints of these sorts can expect to be confronted, chastised, ridiculed, excluded, and/or more directly rejected from those settings in which those assembled make claims about the supernatural.

Whereas the occasion that Lucian discusses lacks a clear, particular religious focus, Lucian suggests that the emotional involvements of the participants in collective events can notably overshadow the same people's more characteristic concerns with reason and evidence. Interestingly, as well, there is the further suggestion that *even skeptics* require the association of like-minded others if they are to sustain an emphasis on reason and authenticity.

In making this point, I am contending that the interchanges that Lucian depicts here involve much more than the portrayal of two different, seemingly incompatible viewpoints. Thus, the significance of people's participation in and experiences with these collectively accomplished events should not be overlooked—for it is in these interactional contexts that the particular things that people say and do (including the ways the participants express, attend to, and sequentially participate in the development of these interchanges with others) acquire a realism that transcends the particular things they say or do.

Lucian presents *The Lover of Lies* as a dialogue between two speakers—Tychiades and Philocles. Tychiades describes his recent experiences while visiting with a group of highly educated and respected associates at the home of Eucrates, a person whom Tychiades notes is generally considered to epitomize local trust, truth, and wisdom.

Lucian (LL:1) opens *The Lover of Lies, or The Doubter* with Tychiades asking his associate, Philocles, why people take such great pleasure both in telling preposterous tales to others and attentively listening to others who also make claims about incredulous matters.

Observing that he can appreciate the sensibility of people who "lie for gain," as well as the practices of poets who fabricate for purposes of entertainment, Tychiades says he is highly perplexed by those who not only tell incredible tales but who then further insist on their truthfulness. This is even more perplexing because some of these people are among the most thoughtful, responsible, and discerning members of the community.

As he elaborates on his experiences, Tychiades (LL:6) stresses the overall wisdom and virtue of those assembled at Eucrates' residence. Tychiades (LL:7-9) explains that these people had been discussing ailments and treatments, but then began to talk about remedies of such increasingly fabulous sorts that Tychiades felt obliged to ask if anyone could actually believe in these cures.

To his surprise, Tychiades not only encountered ridicule for his skepticism, but amidst his attempts to defend himself, Tychiades (LL:10) also was subsequently accused of disbelief in the gods and all that is holy. Although he directly affirmed his respect for the gods and acknowledged the good that they do, Tychiades defended his skepticism, saying that this did not justify the fabulous claims being made.

Tychiades (LL:11-14) subsequently found that his reasoned protests were dismissed as others at the

gathering proceeded to provide accounts of people being brought back to life, of people flying, walking on water, and being transformed into other life-forms.

Following further objections on his part, Tychiades (LL:15-19) was presented with additional second-hand, as well as first person testimonies of people exorcising spirits, encountering spirits, and witnessing statues coming to life.

Along the way, Tychiades (LL:20-28) also was cautioned about his skepticism and chastised for his alleged sarcasm, amidst accounts of the extensive harm that inanimate objects can intentionally inflict on people, as well as accounts involving incredible creatures, trips to Hades (Hell), and deceased individuals being restored to life.

While anticipating an ally in his quest for reason with the arrival of another renowned sagely guest, Tychiades (LL:29-32) was even more surprised to find that once Arignotus the Pythagorean had been appraised of the overall conversational flow, the newcomer not only rebuked Tychiades for his skepticism but also asserted that he himself had driven a terrifying spirit out of a house in Corinth and proceeded to provide a detailed account of the event.

Even as Tychiades' hopes for a sensible intellectual companion vanished, the host, Eucrates (LL:33-36), presented another testimony regarding his own observations and personal experiences with some mystical incantations that had the capacity to generate extended movement in inanimate objects.

Then, after dismissing Tychiades' (LL:37-38) protests that the speakers should be mindful not to fill the minds of some young people present in their midst with fear, terror, and superstition, Eucrates began an account of yet another incredible event.

Noting that he subsequently had constructed an excuse for departing in the middle of Eucrates' tale, Tychiades (LL:39-40) tells Philocles that he now has a pressing desire for a dose of forgetfulness, lest the preceding topics of conversation stay with him in less beneficial ways. Philocles acknowledges the effects of such accounts not only on those who experience them more directly but even those, such as himself, who are exposed to those ideas through secondary sources. Tychiades concludes their interchange with the observation that as long as they can be attentive to the truth and sound reasoning practices, they should be able to minimize the effects of encounters of the sort he has been discussing.

### A Contemporary Sequel... Encountering Spirituality

Although Lucian's account of Tychiades' experiences may seem like a quaint episode from the distant past, I will briefly comment on some of my own, albeit limited experiences as an outsider at a few collective events involving people from some spiritual communities.<sup>26</sup>

At one of the first "spiritualist" gatherings I attended I was quickly struck by the abrupt but clearly assertive claim that, "There are no coincidences!"

<sup>26</sup> I did not attend these events as a researcher, but instead was a guest of one of the participants.

[The associated claim is that "Everything happens for a reason."] When I said, "Of course, there are coincidences," I, like Tychiades, was subjected to a series of rebuffs, explanations, accounts, and testimonials, as well as some visible disaffection and some pointed distancing.<sup>27</sup> I had not anticipated the ensuing reception to my comment, but apparently I had breached some sacred conceptual territory.

As with Tychiades, I found that many of the accounts and modes of evidence that my associates offered were dubious, if not distinctively far-fetched at times. I also found that those defending the group's position not only bounced from topic to topic but they also freely mixed accounts of personal experiences with reports about third party others, references to particular mystical ideologies and authorities, metaphors about the problems of truly knowing in other contexts, and references to the potency of dreams and meditation experiences. As

<sup>27</sup> Only later would I realize that the claim [more accurately expressed] is that there are no random occurrences—that everything somehow is [has always been?] rationally predetermined by the [vague] forces of the universe. This often is more casually expressed as, "Everything happens for a reason." Still, despite claims regarding predetermined occurrences, the same people insist that they, themselves, can enter into the causal process as agents—with little apparent attentiveness to either (a) the broader (universalistic) implications of their own acts or (b) the effective *invalidation* of the claimed predestined course of events.

Individuals questioning or disagreeing with this position, variously, may be patiently, abruptly, or aggressively informed of the outsider's failure to "comprehend how things really are." Questions such as "whose reason prevails" or "what is the source of the reason" at best are followed by an insistent contention that "everything can be reduced to energy" [as if reason inheres in energy]. In most cases I've observed, especially in group contexts, emotional conviction to a spiritualist viewpoint is seen as vastly superior to comparative analyses and resultant conceptual implications.

Readers are referred to Cicero's *On Divination, On Fate, and On the Nature of the Gods* for much more sustained, conceptually sophisticated analyses of the associated materials on human knowing and acting as this pertains to the matters of fate, predestination, divination and divinity (Prus 2011d).

well, there were some general insistences that, "You just feel it!"

Some of the more common claims I encountered (with widespread acknowledgments among the participants) involved reincarnation, messages embedded within dreams, predestination, and knowledge about people's former as well as future (after death) lives, as well as affirmations about the powers of particular psychics or mediums. Relatedly, there were claims and acknowledgements of the spirits of deceased individuals returning in other life-forms to communicate with the presently living. I also noticed that people would sometimes reference aspects of particular movies, spiritualist and clearly recognized fictional publications, and even staged magic performances as (metaphoric) evidence that the claims they were making had greater authenticity (allegedly reflecting the realistic realms of possibilities) than outsiders might acknowledge. Likewise, if particular claims could not be directly disproved by outsiders, this was often taken as evidence that an openness to the broader realm of claims was indicative of more informed (spiritualist) minds.

Speaking more generally, I would describe the people participating in these events as competent, responsible, and well educated people. I also was pointedly informed on numerous occasions that many people adopting spiritualist viewpoints were scientists, engineers, and educators—many of whom "had now become aware of how things really are"—that there are many matters beyond human comprehension and rational thought. Overall, more women than men appeared to be involved in spiritualist

life-styles and, as far as I can tell, most of the people I encountered actively participated in in spiritualist-related alternative health practices. Still, it seems difficult to differentiate the participants in these events in most other ways from people with similar educational and vocational backgrounds. Likewise, with a few more idiosyncratic exceptions, most of the people I encountered in the settings would readily blend into the more conventional community.

Even though it was evident, from some more isolated comments that some of the participants later made, that my skepticism was at times shared by some people in these settings, seldom were the participants directly questioned about the most incredible claims they might make. Instead each speaker was seen to offer something valuable to the gathering, as well as interesting to the individuals present. Tolerance granted to earlier speakers also seemed to help provide a context in which the views of other participants might more readily be accepted.<sup>28</sup>

While in these settings, I was bothered by what seemed a very easy but uneven mixing of aspects of

<sup>28</sup> When I later pointedly asked some of the participants with whom I had closer contact if they really believed some of the things that others had claimed, I frequently was told that "anything is possible" and "there are many things beyond our comprehension"—often supplemented by instances of matters involving the speaker and others that were envisioned as inexplicable in other terms. Thus, whereas these people (at other times) might voluntarily express doubts about things that certain others had said, outsider requests for fuller explanations or other sustained quests for details generally were not welcome. More persistent curiosity on my part was not appreciated and emotional disaffection and detachment typically were part of the treatment I encountered for my desires for clarification. Relatedly, I was reminded of Mauss and Hubert's (1972 [1902]) observation that belief in any part of the spiritual world implies a broader (emotional), even if notably softer, receptivity to other expressions (casual hearsay, specific claims, activities, and interchanges) of associated spiritual and mystical matters.

truth and fiction. It also became quite apparent that the notions of authenticity (as with cross-cultural and cross-contextual comparative analysis) with which I worked were not shared by most participants when spiritualist topics were being discussed. However, I know from other conversations that the same people can be highly analytically discerning when dealing with other topics. Still, as I attended more of these gatherings and talked with the participants in other settings, I also began to realize that these events could assume a variety of “intellectually engaging” dimensions for the participants.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, in addition to more casual intrigues, as well as more intense fascinations, with broader ranges of matters pertaining to spirituality and divinity, desires for insights into the future, and the prospects of other lives,<sup>30</sup> some people participating in these events might have more immediate, more intense senses of anxiety, fears, and losses, while others might share some more general, but still noteworthy apprehensions about the future.

As with people involved in other subcultural contexts (Prus 1997), both particular events and more casual gatherings offered many “continuities of re-

<sup>29</sup> Although this observation surprised me, even as I thought about it, it appears that for some people an engagement of spiritualist matters (as in discussions, testimonials, lectures, reading and other media materials, and the like) might be *the major source of intellectual continuity in their lives*. Notably, thus, people’s more technically demanding work roles often appear to be taken for granted or seen as uninspiring. By contrast, people developing active intrigues in spiritualist matters might engage these “fields of study” in highly sustained, focused ways—especially when in the company of similarly fascinated others.

<sup>30</sup> Despite some intense claims on the validity of an afterlife existence, most also seemed fearful of dying. When I asked more about this seeming contradiction, I sometimes was told, “You just don’t understand! You need to learn more about this area!” or, “I don’t want to get into that!”

ality.” This became evident in matters pertaining to group related identities, activities, expressions of emotionality, relationships, and consensual validations of claims to knowing, as well as memories of shared events and references to challenges, tactics, resources, commitments, sacrifices, and spiritually-related accomplishments. It also became apparent that the broader matters of sociability, friendship, entertainment, and shared meals and refreshments, along with the affectivity associated with participants’ personal observations and acknowledgments within these gatherings, contributed notably to the continuity of people’s *attentiveness to spirituality* as a meaningful, consequential realm of personally lived experience.

Accordingly, while I experienced a number of parallels with the interchanges that Tychiades reports to his friend and “trusted other,” Philocles, it appears that attention to these other matters may help explain some of people’s tendencies to engage, as well as sustain collectively expressed images of the supernatural. Minimally, these would seem to suggest points of inquiry for those who wish to learn more about people’s involvements in spirituality and their intrigues with the supernatural.

## In Conclusion

There are a number of branches of philosophy that have not as yet been by any means adequately explored; but the inquiry into the nature of the gods, which is both highly interesting in relation to the theory of the soul, and fundamentally important for the regulation of religion, is one of special difficulty and obscurity...The multiplicity and variety of the opinions held upon this

subject by eminent scholars are bound to constitute a strong argument for the view that philosophy has its origin and starting-point in ignorance, and that the Academic School were well-advised in “withholding assent” from beliefs that are uncertain...[M]ost thinkers have affirmed that the gods exist, and this is the most probable view and the one to which we are all led by nature’s guidance; but Protagoras declared himself uncertain, and Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene held that there are no gods at all. Moreover, the upholders of the divine existence differ and disagree so widely, that it would be a troublesome task to recount their opinions. Many views are put forward about the outward form of the gods, their dwelling-places and abodes, and mode of life, and these topics are debated with the widest variety of opinion among philosophers; but as to the question upon which the whole issue of the dispute principally turns, whether the gods are entirely idle and inactive, taking no part at all in the direction and government of the world, or whether on the contrary all things both were created and ordered by them in the beginning and are controlled and kept in motion by them throughout eternity, here there is the greatest disagreement of all. And until this issue is decided, mankind must continue to labour under the profoundest uncertainty, and to be in ignorance about matters of the highest moment. [Cicero 1933, I:1-2]

Lucian may have lived some 2000 years ago, but the matters he discusses in *Alexander the False Prophet* and *The Lover of Lies* have considerable relevance to the situations and practices of a significant proportion of contemporary society.

Thus, whereas some may hope, anticipate, or claim that science will provide all of the answers pertinent

to human knowing and acting, it is apparent that neither philosophy (Cicero 106-43 BCE) nor science (Durkheim 1915 [1912]) have the capacity to answer many of the questions that people have about the cosmos, people’s places within, and the ever unfolding nature of the future.

Even though people, rather inevitably, make claims about the future, as well as “what presently is,” as they go about their activities, the future represents realms of ambiguity—the significance of which is intensified as a consequence of people’s hopes and fears regarding the future. Moreover, because individual instances of human life are so fundamentally intermeshed in the life-worlds of their associates, people often seem to appreciate knowing that they share significant points of uncertainty with an extended set of others.

As well, whereas science and logic operate on an impersonal level, people live their lives on much more personal, intimate levels. Thus, while people may abstractedly, more impersonally consider the nature of things, they still typically experience their own hopes and fears, comforts and pains, and opportunities and dilemmas in much more direct and immediate terms.<sup>31</sup>

Mindful of these matters, there are many opportunities for prophets, mediums, psychics, and spiritu-

<sup>31</sup> When people have experiences that they are unable to explain or resolve in more conventional terms, especially if these experiences are more disconcerting (as in troubling dreams, peculiar coincidences, unexpected sensations, unusual curiosities or fascinations, shameful behaviors and desires, as well as matters of illness, losses, and pressing dilemmas), they may through senses of curiosity and/or desperation continue to seek answers in alternative sources.

alists to enter into the meaning-making process of any who might desire “insider information” about the future.

Moreover, because they offer portals through which those experiencing dilemmas, anxieties, suffering, and loss may gain glimpses into the future, prophets, psychics, and other spiritualists may be able to generate more personalized instances of dependency and loyalty on the part of individual associates, as well as develop and maintain more distinct sets of collective followings.

Proportionately few contemporary spiritualist leaders may have approximated the success that Alexander was able to achieve. Nevertheless, there are a great many opportunities for interpersonal and financial gain for those who more systematically cultivate the means of relating to others in prophetic and/or spiritualist terms.<sup>32</sup>

Very few of the people I encountered in the spiritualist community seem attentive to history or so-

<sup>32</sup> In addition to the numerous individuals who have achieved fame and fortune as spiritualists of various kinds (see: Cheung 2006), it may also be observed that a smaller but still significant number of people have achieved some, albeit typically lesser, degrees of fame and fortune in the process of debunking spiritualist claims, practices, and personas (also see: Cheung 2006). Although only one of many televangelists claiming to dramatically cure illnesses and otherwise dramatically improve the lives of particular individuals as agents of God, Peter Popoff, emerged as an exceptionally prominent 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century American televangelist, prophet, and faith healer. Popoff had achieved a substantial following and an associated base of financial support (1977-1986), prior to his exposure on national television as having systematically used electronic communication to mystify his audiences. While subsequently filing for bankruptcy, Popoff would somewhat successfully re-emerge in the 1990s, targeting other television audiences and claiming to restore failing health through his access to the curative qualities of “Blessed Water” and “Holy Sands” (Wikipedia [see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Popoff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Popoff)]. Retrieved September 01, 2017)).

cial process in careful, sustained ways.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, even though they frequently referenced and read popular publications on spirituality, most avoid detailed analyses of the phenomena in which they are involved. Not infrequently, thus, they often insist that spiritualist claims and practices are distinctively powerful. Many also suggest that these spiritualist viewpoints are relatively recent and insightfully unique to our own time. Still, as Mauss and Hubert (1972 [1902]) observe, even the most original and daring spiritualist magicians (presumably including Lucian’s Alexander here) typically build on the traditions (as in viewpoints, practices, images, legends, knowledge and technologies, interactional styles, emotional expressions, and dependencies) developed by their predecessors.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of whether claims and prophecies are developed in (a) more distinctive religious or spiritual terms, (b) particular entertainment motifs, (c) embedded in fictionalized conceptions of science, or (d) ideologies of political activism, they offer hope and direction to those who desire ways of

<sup>33</sup> In contrast to most of the people that I encountered in the spiritual communities discussed herein, I have also met people who engage spirituality in much more sustained conceptual, analytic, and historical terms at academic conferences on religion and spirituality. Whereas some of these people approach spirituality more consistently in pluralist analytic terms, others approach the study of spirituality more selectively and in ways that more closely approximate the pursuits of studious church-based theologians.

<sup>34</sup> As well, it is to be acknowledged that even those who may be inclined to be skeptical or cynical about prophecies, mediums, and other spiritual advisors are apt to have experienced wide ranges of interpersonal exposure and media portrayals since early childhood. Likewise, a great many people are likely to have encountered others who have had involvements with psychics, fortune tellers, spiritualists, and other mediums offering advice pertaining to the future, as well as providing accounts of alleged instances of encounters with spiritual and other mystical essences.

transforming themselves beyond the limits of their present circumstances.

Relatedly, as people (a) develop contacts with others who participate in the supernatural as consumers or practitioners, (b) experimentally venture into spiritual arenas, and (c) make investments or other commitments along these lines, they seem apt to become more intrigued with other variants of mystical beliefs about the future and practices thereof. Moreover, insofar as they find others who share these viewpoints, they are even more apt to become more convinced of “the realism of spirituality”—a process that seems to be heightened when they, themselves, successfully appear to persuade others to accept these viewpoints (a point clearly made by Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter 1956).

As Lucian suggests in *The Lover of Lies*, adherents may make some attempts to integrate skeptical associates into spiritualist practices and events, but those who more extensively question spiritualist claims in these settings are apt to be dismissed, excluded, and sometimes sharply rejected.

*The realism of spirituality* does not just exist at the cognitive, informational level of “beliefs” or the behavioral level of “practices.” *It is also embedded in people’s emotional experiences and their relations with others in the setting.* These consequential aspects of people’s spiritual realism also reflect (a) the more particular emotional experiences that they associate with spirituality—as in wonder, excitement, novelty, fascination, fears of the unknown, and anxieties about mystical essences or forces, (b) the broader range of emotionality that people might ex-

perience with any realms of activity, relationships, identities, settings, and accomplishments that they might associate with spirituality, and (c) the more particular senses of hope and direction, as well as fear and desperation associated with illness, trouble, loss, and so forth.<sup>35</sup> Relatedly (as Durkheim 1915 [1912] so instructively indicates), there are (d) emotional states associated with people’s senses of direction, answers to dilemmas and problems, and the collective experience of being part of a potent essence that not only transcends one’s own personal limitations but also those of other people. Both the collective events and the seemingly more routinized organizational activities in which people participate, thus, are not just sets of beliefs and behaviors but are contingent on the emotional states associated with “a minded awareness of involvement,” expressing oneself, managing difficult circumstances, and accomplishing something worthwhile *through and within a community of others.*

Even the aspects of entertainment that people associate within these contexts are not limited to (a) the conceptual contents, sensations, and emotionality associated with the things that others might say and do. Entertainment also reflects (b) people’s own involvements as performers in sharing matters of interest with others and, perhaps more importantly yet, (c) actively developing mutual

<sup>35</sup> Rather than envision emotionality as a “psychological matter,” I (like Mauss and Hubert 1964 [1898]; 1972 [1902] and Durkheim 1915 [1912]) have approached emotionality as a biologically-enabled but *socially constituted* (i.e., interactively achieved, conceptually informed, engaged, enacted, adjustive) process (see: Prus 1996; 2008a; 2010; 2013a) that is amenable to ethnographic inquiry and sustained comparative analysis.

intrigues in conjunctions with others in the course of ongoing collective events.

Although the interactionists have given relatively little focused attention to people's involvements in religion and spirituality,<sup>36</sup> some instructive research on these sectors of community life has been conducted within the interactionist tradition. This includes J. L. Simmons' (1964) account of people involved in an extrasensory perception cult; John Lofland's (1977 [1966]) depiction of conversion processes in the doomsday cult; E. L. Quarantelli and Dennis Wenger's (1973) study of a Ouija board cult; Prus' (1976) study of the recruitment practices of Christian clergy and some Jewish Rabbi; Samuel Heilman's (1976; 1983) work on synagogue life; Sheryl Kleinman's (1984) depiction of seminarians as humanist professionals; Gordon Shepherd's (1987) social construction of a religious prophecy; William Shaffir's (1991; 1993; 1995; 2000a; 2000b; 2001; 2002; 2004; 2006; 2007) insightful studies of Orthodox Judaism and prophetic events; Danny Jorgensen's (1992) account of the occult milieu and Tarot card reading; Alexander Chirila's (2014) insightful study of the extension of a folk Nigerian religion's movement into North America and other contemporary international contexts; and Arthur McLuhan's (2014) study of social production of character in two different Christian seminary contexts.

Also noteworthy are works that display strong affinities with the interactionist tradition. This

<sup>36</sup> In addition to her own work, Tumminia (1998) provides a brief review of some other ethnomethodological works pertinent to the study of prophecies and the maintenance of other spiritualist/religious viewpoints.

includes Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert's exceptionally detailed analysis of religious sacrifice (1964 [1898]) and spiritually enabled healing (1972 [1902]), as well as Marcel Mauss' (2003 [1909]) account of prayer as a socially engaged process; Emile Durkheim's (1915 [1912]) highly sustained ethnohistorical and conceptually astute study of religion; Leon Festinger and colleagues' (1956) and Tumminia's (1998) studies of the maintenance of failed prophecy in flying saucer cults; Marcelo Truzzi's (1971; 1972; 1975) analyses of the occult as a realm of popular culture; Charlotte Tatro's (1974) account of Gypsy fortune-telling; John Heeren and Marylee Mason's (1990) depiction of visions and spiritual readings; David Van Zandt's (1991) account of life in the Children of God; and Graham Jones' (2012) study of conjuring practices intended to generate interest in Christian theology.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to an earlier statement from Lucian that engages other aspects of people's conceptions of knowing and their associated experiences with divinity (Prus 2015b) and the present statement

<sup>37</sup> Clearly, there are other materials in anthropology, philosophy, classical studies, religious studies, theology, history, and the broader humanist literature that offer valuable reference points for a fuller comprehension of people's lived experiences relative to the study of religion and spirituality. Still, the most valuable materials are those developed more extensively in detailed, pluralistic, activity-oriented terms, and more particularly discuss the materials at hand from the view of the participants. By contrast, researchers and analysts, as well as practitioners and others, who impose analytic frames on the participants, typically contribute little to the study of religion and spirituality as humanly engaged, humanly experienced life-worlds or the broader study of human lived experience. This includes most materials developed by (a) structurally-oriented psychologists and sociologists, (b) commentators striving to appeal to popular audiences and/or catering to other vested interests, and (c) those promoting activist standpoints. For an elaboration of these and related practices as discussed by Lucian and some contemporary interactionist scholars, see: Prus (2008c).

from Lucian that addresses (a) the life and practices of "Alexander the false prophet" and (b) the long-standing intrigues of people with the supernatural and their disaffections with those who would doubt their claims, readers also are referred to other pragmatist-oriented ethnohistorical materials on religion found in Plato's (420-348 BCE) considerations of the processes and problematics of defending and questioning religion within the enacted, moral, and organizational context of community life (Prus 2013b), Marcus Tullius Cicero's (106-43 BCE) remarkably astute analyses of the philosophy (and sociology) of divine and human knowing (Prus 2011d), and Dio Chrysostom's (40-120) insightful consideration of the processes and problematics of artistically representing divinity (Prus 2011c).

More work along these lines is important for achieving more comprehensive understandings of religion as a humanly-engaged realm of activity. However, given the still notably extended and detailed set of materials referenced in this paper, researchers and analysts would have considerable resources with which to tentatively but still more systematically examine, delineate, assess, and more precisely articulate concepts (i.e., generic social processes) pertaining to people's involvements in religion and spirituality as collectively achieved, enacted, and sustained realms of human lived experience.

Researchers and analysts attending to the interactionist tradition have an extended array of resources (theory, concepts, methodology, and nearly a century of conceptually-oriented ethnographic

inquiry) with which to establish the conceptual and methodological parameters of their inquiries. By examining people's activities, relationships, perspectives, identities, emotionality, collective events, and other organizational interchanges across wide ranges of community life, researchers are in a position to develop more extensive inquiries regarding people's involvements in religious and spiritualist life-worlds—both in our own time and through the ethnohistorical accounts of people's life-worlds that we encounter in the broader literature. Moreover, by approaching things in process-based, conceptually-oriented terms, students of the human condition also may begin to better appreciate the developmental, activity-grounded interfusions of various aspects of community life.

Lucian could have been more precise, thorough, and attentive to the fuller range of the experiences of those whose life-worlds he addresses in the two texts featured here. Likewise, Lucian's accounts may appear notably modest when compared to the work on religion provided by Plato, Cicero, and Durkheim, for example. However, we can be grateful to Lucian for extending our understanding of religion and spirituality as humanly engaged social processes. Not only do Lucian's accounts of *Alexander The False Prophet* and *The Lover of Lies, or The Doubter* provide numerous departure points for further thought and inquiry on religion and spirituality, as well as the associated matters of charisma and magic, but these two statements also offer a set of resources that could be used in developing more comprehensive understandings of human lived experience and interchange.



## Appendix

### On Studying Religion and Spirituality: Attending to the Realism of Elusive Essences

We have said that there is something eternal in religion: it is the cult and the faith. Men cannot celebrate ceremonies for which they see no reason, nor can they accept a faith which they in no way understand. To spread itself or merely to maintain itself, it must be justified, that is to say, a theory must be made of it. A theory of this sort must undoubtedly be founded upon the different sciences, from the moment when these exist [i.e., as conceptual understandings begin to emerge in any community context—RP]; first of all, upon the social sciences, for religious faith has its origin in society; then upon psychology, for society as a synthesis of human consciousness; and finally upon the sciences of nature, for man and society are part of the universe and can be abstracted from it only artificially. But howsoever important these facts taken from the constituted social sciences may be, they are not enough; for faith is before all else an impetus to action, while science, no matter how far it may be pushed, always remains at a distance from this. Science is fragmentary and incomplete; it advances but slowly and is never finished; but life cannot wait. The theories which are designed to make men live and act are therefore obliged to pass science and complete it prematurely. [Durkheim 1915 [1912]:478-479]

Recognizing the enduring importance of religion (as a collectively achieved and enabling overarching set of conceptual images and practices) for hu-

man group life (see: Durkheim 1915 [1912]), I have used this appendix to further address and hopefully clarify some issues pertinent to the study of people's experiences in religion and spirituality, as well as the potential that religion and spirituality (with their attentiveness to mystical elements) offer sociologists and other students of the human condition in their quest to more fully comprehend the nature of human knowing and acting. Reflecting my exposure to a related body of literature that developed by pursuing this statement on Lucian, I am grateful to have the opportunity to share these "working insights" with the reader.

Although some authors (Swatos 1990; Sharp 1999; Corbett 2009; Nartonis 2010) have observed that it is the "communication between living persons and (the spirits of) those who have died" that constitutes a centralizing, if not the essential, feature of "the 19<sup>th</sup> century spirituality movement," it is important to (a) acknowledge people's long-standing (and cross-cultural) intrigues with spiritual essences, as well as (b) recognize that the matter of spirit-human communication is just one aspect of spiritualism as a social phenomenon.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, while recognizing that a large number of people (notably including Emmanuel Swedenborg, the Fox sisters, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Minot Jud-

<sup>38</sup> For a notably scholarly, early 20<sup>th</sup> century discussion of spirituality associated with the Catholic Church, see: Maher and Booland's (1912) "Spiritualism."

son Savage, and William James) assumed significant roles in the popularization of 19<sup>th</sup> century spirituality (see: Swatos 1990; Sharp 1999; Cheung 2006; Corbett 2009; Chirila 2014), it seems appropriate to consider people's broader, transhistorical, and cross-cultural attentiveness to seemingly active essences that transcend the recognized conditions and limitations of human mortal life.<sup>39</sup>

There may be limitless variants of spiritualism, but one relatively encompassing spiritualist implication is that all humans (and possibly other life-forms and even seemingly inanimate objects) possess mystical qualities or essences that exist beyond the boundaries of the more generally knowable sensate world. Not only, thus, is there the possibility of a *spiritual afterlife* but also the potential for a co-existent *spiritual otherlife* involving "living mystical essences" that may be connected with other mortal creatures in ways that transcend normal human capacities. Whereas allegations of human encounters and/or communication with the spirits of deceased persons and other spiritual essences have achieved a great deal of public attention, claims of these sorts often are represented as compelling possibilities, if not also promoted as "proofs of the afterlife" by many spiritualists.

<sup>39</sup> Theresa Cheung's (2006) *The Element Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Hauntings* represents a valuable starting point for many topics pertaining to people's involvements in and intrigues with "the supernatural." Thus, her volume provides (a) a remarkably broad collection of commentaries on a great many better known individuals' participation in mystical essences, spiritualism, and the paranormal, (b) an extended assortment of accounts of better known mysterious events, and (c) a wide array of Western and cross-cultural concepts pertinent to the viewpoints, definitions, and studies of "supernatural phenomena."

Even though some spiritualists claim (one-time, occasional, or more sustained) lived personal contact with particular mystical essences, some also argue for more cyclical forms of spiritual communication through the transmigration of souls—as the same (enduring) spirit occupies a number of human bodies or other material life-forms in sequences of sorts (also see: Plato's 1997 *Phaedo* and "The Myth of Er" in Book X of *The Republic*).<sup>40</sup>

Given the apparent inability of ordinary people to directly communicate with spiritual essences whenever they might like,<sup>41</sup> spiritualists tend to place particular emphasis on the mediums or channels thought to provide human linkages with spiritual essences. These mediums may be (a) spirits that present themselves to people and/or (b) persons presumed in some way to have exceptional access to aspects of other life-world spirits. However, mediums also may (c) take the form of "events," "dreams," or other "signs" (e.g., images, sounds, or other sensations) that could be interpreted as *instances of spiritual essences communicating with humans*. In still other cases, people (as individuals and in groups) also may (d) assume more personalized roles as mediums by calling upon, initiating

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, outside of some Catholic scholars (see: Maher 1909), comparatively few of those discussing spirituality appear to have referenced conceptions of the mortal-sensate / spiritual-otherworld *dualism* associated with Socrates' depictions (via Plato) of religion (see: Prus 2013b).

<sup>41</sup> Despite its supposed capacity for connecting "everyday believers" and particularly consequential spiritual essences (Deities and related representatives), *prayer* is seldom referenced in this regard. For a partial but particularly instructive sociological analyses of prayer, see: Marcel Mauss (2003 [1909]).

contact with, or otherwise directing communication towards spiritual essences through linguistic expressions and associated activities. [Readers may note that these aspects of spirituality are prominent features of many conventionalized religions.]

Likewise, regardless of whether communications with spirits of “the afterlife” or “the otherlife” are seen as possibilities, probabilities, or actualities—or whether these communications are seen as desirable or undesirable kinds of contacts—conceptions of these sorts minimally suggest that people might avoid the finality of death. And, in some cases, these notions are explicitly referenced to avert some of the ambiguities and fears people might associate with death or other losses. Although not core elements of spiritualism, the related matters of forgiveness of sins or other transgressions also may be invoked to appeal to those who envision afterlife experiences as contingent on people’s honorable personal involvements in the thoughts, words, and deeds of the human world.

Another noteworthy theme that is sometimes incorporated into conceptions of spiritualism is the idea that “other world spirits” are more knowledgeable about things in the human world than are living humans and, thus, may be able to provide glimpses into the future. This aspect of spiritualism offers those who allegedly have contact with spirits (directly or through mediums of some sort) the potential to gain greater control over their lives and circumstances. Revelations obtained through spiritual contact, thus, represent opportunities for those who have access to this in-

formation to tactically reshape their own futures and those of their loved ones.<sup>42</sup>

Part of the appeal of contemporary (19<sup>th</sup> and post-19<sup>th</sup> century) spiritualism appears to revolve around claims of spiritualism’s greater connectiveness with, if not broader receptivity to, science than are the more traditional religions (Swatos 1990; Sharp 1999;<sup>43</sup> Nartonis 2010).<sup>44</sup> Thus, while relying on an assortment of mystical features and claims, some of those promoting contemporary spiritualism often profess to be on the most consequential and intriguing boundaries of science. Relatedly, supportive testimonies of people involved in science, medicine, and teaching professions are frequently invoked to authenticate spiritualist viewpoints. Nevertheless, many spiritualists also appear quick to dismiss the relevance of more routine empirical science and sustained conceptual analyses in favor of (a) “feelings” [allegedly

<sup>42</sup> Although seldom referenced in contemporary discussions of religion and spirituality, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) provides an exceptionally insightful and detailed analysis of the claims and problematic features of divination, revelation, fate, and determinism, along with the implications of these and related matters for subsequent choice-making adjustments (Prus 2011d).

<sup>43</sup> Sharp’s (1999) analysis of “the struggle for adherents among Spiritualists, Catholics, and Popular Religion in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France” provides a particularly instructive account of some of the issues and challenges that spiritualism represents for more established Christian churches. As Swatos (1990), Corbett (2009), and Chirila (2014) also indicate, spiritualism lends itself to considerable conceptual adaptation. Still, it should be appreciated (as history teaches us) that even highly articulated religions can be incorporated into, as well as modified within, wide arrays of cultural contexts.

<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, it is the position of Emile Durkheim (1915 [1912]) and his students, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert (1964 [1898]; 1972 [1902]), that science has emerged not as a social phenomenon entirely onto itself, but as a longer-term derivative of people’s enacted and conceptual experiences with spirituality and religion.

heightened sensitivities—“You just feel it!”] that adherents have and (b) an emphasis on the position that “the possibility of human-spirit communication cannot be scientifically disproven”—thereby arguing for the viability of possibilities, probabilities, and claims of actual human-spirit communication.<sup>45</sup>

That people’s experiences with spirituality may have elusive qualities does not mean that these experiences are inconsequential or that they should/could not be viably studied as genuine realms of human knowing and acting. Indeed, not only may inquiries into spirituality and religion—as realms of activity—better enable us to comprehend human knowing and acting more generally but they also can help social scientists better understand the fundamental, socially enabled features of “humanly experienced reality.”

Without making claims as to what is and what is not true, religion and spirituality, like other realms of community life, can be studied empirically (referring to the close, process-oriented ethnographic examinations of instances of some

<sup>45</sup> As a further indication of contemporary interest in spiritualism, the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century literature also suggests noteworthy popular intrigues with astrology, palmistry, numerology, Tarot cards, and Ouija boards, as well as the more dramatic variants of spiritualism signified by witchcraft and Satanism. Although public interest in spirituality and the supernatural seems to have waned somewhat in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one might acknowledge a (media intensified) resurgence of interest in the occult in the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Some parallels may be noted between people’s involvements in spirituality and people’s intrigues with contacts between extraterrestrial beings and humans. However, because the latter allegedly involves other *mortal beings* whose lives somehow might intersect with living humans, reference to extraterrestrial contacts of various sorts differs significantly from spiritualist communications.

phenomenon and sustained comparative analyses thereof). In the case of human group life, this can be done more effectively by (a) defining the terms of reference under consideration, (b) minimizing researcher/analyst moralism and/or dramatism, and (c) ethnographically examining the ways in which people make sense of all aspects of the phenomena under consideration (as in participant viewpoints, language, concepts, definitions, interpretations, explanations, dilemmas, comparisons, and analyses) and go about all of their activities (meanings, intentions, practices, relations, interchanges, emotionalities, objects, technologies, and adjustments).

It is by attending to the viewpoints, practices, relations, and situated interchanges of the participants in particular religious/spiritualist life-worlds (as well as their interchanges with outsiders), across a variety of contexts and over time, that we may be able to achieve a more viable, authentic—pluralistic, ethnographically and ethnohistorically informed—corpus of materials pertaining to people’s viewpoints and activities that can be subjected to more sustained instances of process-oriented comparative analyses. By developing comparisons *within* particular arenas of group life, as well as *across* other realms of community life, we may contribute to a fuller conceptual specification of the processes and features of human knowing and acting in these and other areas of human group life.

The existence of worshippers, beliefs and creeds, oral traditions and texts, sermons and prayers, incantations and spells, posturing and meditation,

practices and procedures, assemblies and celebratory events, material structures and other associated artifacts, as well as sacrifice and other modes of dedication—taken by themselves or in comprehensive combinations—does not prove the existence of god(s) or other spiritual essences. However, that other people might not give credence to particular religious or spiritualist life-worlds—or might more directly and intensively contest the viability of the viewpoints, practices, and associations therein—does not invalidate “the realism of believer views and activities.”

This is because (as Durkheim 1915 [1912] observes) it is *the group-based nature* of people’s focal points, beliefs, activities, interchanges, emotionalities, and organizational arrangements that serves as the foundational testimonies to *the realism* with which spiritual/mystical essences are viewed, as well as *the realism* within which the lives of the participants take shape—become enacted, inter-fused, experienced, organized, sustained, and modified. It is to these actively engaged features of community life and people’s lived experiences within that we as sociologists, as students of the human condition, might most productively attend. Relatedly, people’s religious and spiritualist life-worlds, along with the broader matters of human knowing and acting, will be best com-

prehended when researchers and analysts adopt (a) relativist/pluralist orientations, (b) embark on careful, extended, participant-oriented ethnographic inquiry,<sup>46</sup> and (c) subject these materials to both sustained context specific and extended cross-contextual comparative analyses, attending to the conceptual implications thereof.

### Acknowledgements

I especially would like to thank Natasa Bereneant for taking me, as her guest, into some spiritualist communities and for her thoughtful discussions about these life-worlds with me. I also would like to thank Sara Ann Ganowski, Bill Swatos, and Beert Verstrate for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. The helpful feedback on this project received from Magdalena Wojciechowska (editor), Krzysztof Konecki, Anna Kacperczyk, and Łukasz Marciniak, as well as the assistance of the editorial staff at *Qualitative Sociology Review* in preparing this manuscript for publication, also is very much appreciated.

<sup>46</sup> On a very practical note, it is apparent that ethnographers are very much dependent on the willingness of these others to share their life-world experiences with researchers in open, extended detail. The ethnographic challenge, thus, involves “achieving intimate familiarity with the life-world of the other,” while still attending to a pluralist sociological agenda (see: Blumer 1969; Prus 1996; 1997; 1999; 2007d; Prus and Grills 2003).

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