

Popular Cosmology on the Threshold of the 20th Century

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The basis of my study is formed by a written material which was gathered in 1903 amongst Swedish-speaking Finns. Seven subject areas are covered: religion, mother tongue, geography, general history, arithmetic, geometry, and knowledge of nature. Several questions are answered according to an understanding of the world which is based on three aspects: the different subjects' own experience of physical existence, the teaching of the Church, and in some cases, on the reading of books. The worldview contained in those folklore narratives which also have cosmological themes is of a different nature. The analysis attempts to demonstrate how different worldviews are described in an interview and in narratives, respectively. *Bricolage* and codeswitching are scientific concepts used for this purpose.

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It is a well known fact that the word "worldview" has different meanings (cf. Knuuttila 1989:171). Concepts like "overall covering", "value system", "fundamental attitude" show that students with a philosophically sophisticated orientation think of worldview as something coherent, a consistent whole (Pentikäinen 1980: 238, Kurtén 1991: 1). But is it equally homogeneous and consistent among people who lack a philosophical and theological education? According to Knuuttila it is, however, impossible to consider the folk worldview inferior as regards its intellectual substance, since it can only partly be explained by the scientific one (Knuuttila 1989: 206).

Research on worldview can be divided into four different periods. First students concentrated upon the view of the physical environment, i.e. of cosmology. Thereafter they devoted themselves to the cultural meaning of this cosmology and as a corollary paid attention to the fundamental ideas of the worldviews. Now students claim that worldview is a logical whole consisting of disparate parts, and that it is necessary to look for the elements which constitute this logical whole.

To me worldview means cosmology, i.e. the idea of the universe, its genesis, evolution, and structure (cf. Dundes 1978: 118). I intend to examine a specific material in which six different persons from the same milieu describe their worldviews. Is this folk worldview logical and consistent? I assume that the cosmology as a common cultural heritage is fairly constant and that it should consequently generate fairly uniform descriptions.

My material was collected in 1903 by Hugo R. Sjöberg (1867–1941) at Replot, a Swedish-speaking fishing community in the Vasa archipelago, Finland. It consists of 210 questions and answers concerning six different disciplines, i.e. religion, geography, common history, mathematics, geometry and science. The answers were given by three women and three men aged 20–30 years, 40–50 years and 70–80 years. The informants were not able to write very well. This material is supplemented by some folkloristic records by Sjöberg (Sjöberg 1984: 11f). The informants never refer to each other, so probably Sjöberg interviewed them independently.

The creation of the world is given religious

and scientific explanations combined with *praxis* (Asplund 1991:10). The myths of the Bible make up the starting point for the ideas of how the world was made, but especially concerning the Replot archipelago, i.e. the environment of the informants, the picture of God is completed by a giant as creator.

The world can be divided into several parts. Heaven is above man, one informant was even skeptical as to whether heaven exists at all. Earth is said to lie on an axis, a needle or a point, which guarantees that it remains in space. But it can also rest on almighty God. Space is inhabited by living beings, i.e. the spirits of the dead. In folklore these spirits can walk around on earth and appear before living people (Sjöberg 1984: 72f, 75, 77ff). The moon is described in scientific terms, there is no idea of a man in the moon (cf. af Klintberg 1988: 203ff).

The interior of the earth can be compact with mud, sand, stones and water which serve as nourishment for the plants, but the poisons of the earth are what frogs feed on. In the earth live some animals and also people; one informant even talked about a sunken city somewhere in America. In folklore there is a tradition of underground beings who can steal people's children. Hell is said to be in the underworld, in the sea, on earth or high up across the heavens. What is behind the sun and the stars is either unknown, or said to be more land and earth, or is explained by something God has created. When explaining the structure of the cosmos, the informants combine scientific knowledge, like astronomy, physics and biology, with facts from religion, folklore, *praxis* and common history.

The informants claim that the world is as round as a ball, because on the open sea they have got their personal experience of the horizon as a circle. The earth is kept in balance thanks to the axis or to God's omnipotence, but on the other hand it is said to go round, too. The power that keeps all things and human beings on earth is said to be the air, gravity or God's power. Science, like geometry and astronomy, is combined with religion, folklore and *praxis*.

The world changes. Some natural phenom-

ena, like rivers and mountains, grow. Earthquakes and erosion explain changes, and the uplift of the land, which is very remarkable at Replot, is a real experience of changes in the landscape. But the earth has also changed as it has become more sinful.

Eternity lasts forever but is incomprehensible. But it is also seen as a synonym for hell, due to a cited verse: "O eternity, your length frightens me", or to the idea of eternity as being worse than life, because it is said, probably in some devotional book, that the worldly punishment is nothing compared with the eternal one. A more mathematical explanation tells us that eternity has neither a beginning nor an end. Here, too, *praxis*, science, folklore, religion and history are combined.

Cosmology is thus described within several disciplines. The informants use concepts from the Bible and the Lutheran church, folklore and experience. The ideas are used indiscriminately, sometimes complementing each other, sometimes contradictory. On this level the folk cosmology does not seem to be logical or consistent. It is nothing new, though, that folk ways of thinking are not consistent. Folk ideas can even be diametrical (Dundes 113ff). Lévi-Strauss introduces the concept of *bricolage* in order to explain the folk way, or rather, the mythical way of thinking as opposed to scientific thinking. *Bricolage* means that man uses only limited resources for his thinking, he never adds new elements, but he is able to construct new constellations of the existing components, constellations which he can use when necessary (1968: 29ff).

I would like to see the cosmological knowledge of the Replot inhabitants as a *bricolage*. How is it composed? The answers to the religious questions contain religious, historical and practical elements. The answers to the geographical questions contain religious, scientific, practical and geometrical elements. The answers to the historical questions contain folklore, religious, scientific and practical elements. The scientific questions are answered by religious, scientific, practical, and folklore elements. The conditions for a *bricolage* are fulfilled. The common theme is cosmology, the elements of thought are found in the

knowledge that the informants have from the different disciplines, folklore and *praxis*, and at the same time these elements are also limited by the disciplines, folklore and *praxis*. These elements are used in situations created by the interviewer. By combining the elements in different ways the informants can explain cosmology as required.

Thus, cosmology can be described in many different ways with concepts from many different spheres of knowledge. Still, it is the same world that is described, but different dimensions are pointed out in different situations and different contexts. The descriptions of cosmology depend on the narrator's, i.e. the ego's needs to understand and shape. By different forms of socialization (school, church, practical life, tradition) man has a store of ingredients (thoughts and conceptions of heaven, earth, the underworld and so forth), from which, under propitious circumstances (incentives from outside) he can collect elements for a cosmology to fit in a certain situation. In another situation he can fetch other useful elements. What keeps the elements/ingredients together is the sum made up of his knowledge and the situational needs, i.e. the situational context, which also decides what dimension should be accentuated.

This observation is combined with McConvell's model for codeswitching, a word used to describe a situation typical of multilingual communities, i.e. "the use of more than one language in the course of a single communicative episode" (Heller 1988: 1). McConvell shows how a speaker, in his communication with a partner, uses a certain strategy which is founded on the relations between the speaker himself, the addressee and the topic. These relations are, in fact, central in the speaking situation. According to McConvell not only the addressee's ability to understand the message is essential, as communication studies often put it (cf. Bringués 1979: 9ff); the theme or the referent is also of the utmost significance because it represents the speaker's position in the social arena in relation to the addressee. The referent decides what code of language should be used, and the speaker can in certain situations emphasize particular

relations between himself, the addressee, and the referent, whereas he simultaneously de-emphasizes other relations (McConvell 1988: 102ff, 111). Codeswitching is illustrated by concentric circles, nested layers, which in McConvell's examples represent different language speaker-sets consisting of a local dialect, a normal language for a linguistic minority and the official language of the local majority (ibid. 107). McConvell describes "a specific type of situation where otherwise mutually exclusive social arenas can be called into play during the course of a single social interaction" (Heller 1988: 17).

The term codeswitching is, however, limited to the change of language, but in my material there is no shift between different languages. This particular term cannot therefore be used here, but it is inspiring for my further considerations. In my material the informants change their means of expression on a semantic level rather than on a linguistic one. The world can be explained in several different ways although the same language is used. The informants choose different means of expression by picking resources from different spheres of knowledge or different cultural contexts. Thus, the way of describing, i.e. the mode, changes and therefore codeswitching could be replaced by modeswitching.

Just as the different languages in codeswitching can be related to each other as nested layers, so it is possible to look upon the different spheres of knowledge in modeswitching as concentric circles. It is, however, easier to define a switch between two different languages than between two different cultural spheres. The borderline between these, and at the same time between the concentric circles, cannot in fact be definite and fixed, and all circles are kept together by something, namely the theme, the referent. It is therefore more appropriate to think of a kaleidoscope which already contains all the ingredients but which also allows reorganisation when needed. A kaleidoscope contains all the parts needed in order to create a new constellation, a new image of reality. Man's thought can thus be said to be kaleidoscopic and can be changed according to the situation within the frames of a given

theme, the referent, by means of given elements of thought. The limits between religion, science, geography, history, folklore, and *praxis* are vague in describing cosmologies. Elements from the different spheres are mixed into a *bricolage*. According to this it would be more efficient to introduce the term modemixing instead of modeswitching.

The descriptions of the cosmology can be seen in a kaleidoscopic perspective. In my case the theme cosmology constitutes the frames of the kaleidoscope. When the interviewer Sjöberg brings cosmology to the fore in a religious context, the speaker is able to turn his "intellectual" kaleidoscope so that the terminology prevalent in religious descriptions proves useful. In a corresponding way he can use the kaleidoscope within the other spheres of knowledge, too. The relation between speaker and referent is thus central, as was the case in codeswitching. The informants can also answer questions from one sphere by modemixing between several spheres. Folklore, however, seems to be an exception, because in the texts collected within the frames of a folkloristic recording, cosmology is described only by folkloristic concepts. But folkloristic elements of thought were rather often used within other spheres of thought.

In all spheres except folklore God is introduced as a component in thinking. So he is a frequently repeated element in the kaleidoscope and it is possible for man to use him in varying connections. This happens especially when the informants' knowledge in other spheres does not suffice. They seem to think of God in cosmology when something is impossible to explain by other means.

Thus, thinking of cosmology is constructed by knowledge and experience, and where these factors do not suffice, the informants attribute it to the omnipotent God (Spilka et al. 1985). So the otherwise disparate set of different descriptions of cosmology has a logical consistency – provided that "logical" does not mean "scientifically logical", but appropriate and practical in the informant's present situation, like a *bricolage*. By attribution the informants use a functional logic as they show a complementary way of thinking. My material thus

shows that the inhabitants of Replot command many types of cosmologies, which do not necessarily have to be consistent, but it shows also that the informants know how to create consistency.

The fact that in folklore God holds an exceptional position, which means that he is not mentioned as an explanation in the cosmology of folklore, can be due to the way the recordings were made. The collectors' view of folklore as something other than normal culture may be the reason why, in folkloristic connections, the informants avoided referring to scientific or practical knowledge. In the same way it is possible that their methods of posing questions has steered the informants forwards to a special folkloristic sphere, where they did not associate with other forms of culture. This must be taken into consideration today in analysing the folk worldview.

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