

SCIENCE-SPIRITUALITY ANTIPODAL DEBATE – RESOLVING LONG-TIME CLASH THROUGH SYNCRETISM? READING FROM THE ACCIDENTAL SANTERA

Emmanuel Adeniyi
Federal University Oye Ekiti

Abstract

The conflict between science and spirituality is an established fact, even though some scholars dispute this reality arguing that it is rather unfashionable for contemporary academic inquiry. The present study interrogates the foregoing position, submitting that the conflict between the two fields of knowledge still subsists. It advocates the recognition of spirituality as an alternative knowledge field, despite its lack of deductive, empirical procedures. The proposition builds on the reality of existential risks threatening humanity which can be adequately tackled if the two domains collaborate to develop mechanisms for ending human misery. Using syncretism/hybridity as a conceptual touchstone, the article attempts a postcolonial reading of Irete Lazo's *The Accidental Santera* (2008) to pontificate about the imperativeness of mutuality between science and spirituality, and the danger inherent in a branch of knowledge displaying hubristic, overweening attitude towards another knowledge field. The study further suggests a new order to reposition the knowledge fields.

Keywords: Santeria; African Studies; Afro-Cuban Faith; Albert Einstein; Syncretism; the Yorùbá

Introduction

“I know there are those who are saying that we should depend on science, not prayers. But I want to reassure you that even science needs God” – Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta

Apart from a few other contentious debates that have dragged on since the dawn of time and yet continue to agitate the minds of scholars, historians of science and religion, scientific materialists, and spiritual scientists till now, the science-spirituality¹ dichotomy has proved to be outstanding (Albert, 1999, p. 45; Evans, 2018, p. 52; Benson, 1996, p. 171; Scott, 2009, p. 321; Smith, 2019, p. 1). The complexity of this dichotomy somewhat makes it topical and compelling, despite the rejection of the conflict thesis between science and spirituality by some thinkers. Interestingly, not all scholars believe in the conflictive relationship between science and spirituality. Many contend that there is no conflict between the fields of knowledge since they are not related, and the question of a clash of interests may not even arise (Dawes, 2016, p. 7; McGrath, 2004, p. 87; Smith, 1999, p. 1). They argue that the 19th-century belief affirming the rivalry between science and spirituality is erroneous and absolutely misleading. Gregory Dawes (2016), for instance, writes that “the so-called ‘warfare’ or ‘conflict’ thesis has become deeply unfashionable [while a] plethora of books and articles have appeared arguing that it is badly mistaken” (p. 7). Alister McGrath (2004) also argues that the conflictive relationship between science and spirituality is no longer taken seriously by any major historian of science, despite its popularity in the late nineteenth century (p. 87).² McGrath further submits that the *supposed* rivalry is a mere “caricature clearly untrue in the present day, just as historical scholarship has determined it to be misleading and inaccurate even when it first discussed centuries ago” (p. 87).³ However, a number of scholars validate the presence of clash and insuperable disagree-

¹Spirituality is used interchangeably with religion and faith in this article.

² See also Gregory Dawes (2016, p. 7).

³ Ibid.

ments between the two fields. In his defense of the validity and reliability of spiritual knowledge as a rival to scientific empiricism, Immanuel Kant (1998) claims that “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith [...] and the dogmatism of metaphysics” (p. 117). In the same vein, among his four taxonomies of the relationship between science and spirituality, the conflict mode tops Ian Barbour’s (1997) typology⁴ categorizing the relationship between the two fields. Barbour’s remaining modes of relationship between science and spirituality include what he identifies as *independence*, *dialogue* and *integration*. By independence, Barbour expresses the conflictive view or the existence of rivalry between the two fields. His view underscores the perception that each of the fields of knowledge has its own distinctive domain and characteristic methods of describing and verifying reality (Stenmark, 2013, p. 2310). By dialogue and integration, Barbour calls for a mutual understanding between the two domains, and the content of science and spirituality as well as an exchange of presuppositions (scientific and metaphysical), methods, and conceptual tools between the two domains (Stenmark, 2013, p. 2310). Mackenzie Brown (2003), Sam Harris (2004) and Richard Dawkins (2006) also believe that entrenched conflict exists between the two fields. Their positions on the conflict seemingly identify individual convictions as a major determinant of the question of existence or non-existence of science-spirituality rivalry.

The two knowledge domains do not agree, and their rift further accentuates the chasm between them. In his comment on Thomas Huxley’s agnosticism, Bernard Lightman (2011) corroborates this view that, “While religion belong[s] to the realm of feeling, science [is] a part of the world of intellect” (p. 252). Lightman’s exposition probably condemns spirituality to the margins of intellectualism. His approach is nothing short of intellectual and ideological pigeonholing of spirituality, and the construction of

⁴Other models of classification include John Haught’s typology (conflict, contrast, contact, and confirmation), and Mikael Stenmark’s (2013) typology (irreconcilability, contact, independence, and replacement). The two build on Ian Barbour’s model of taxonomy and on one another, even though each makes attempts to avoid some of the shortcomings noticed in the preceding typology.

science as a domain of empiricism or superior knowledge (Herndon, 2007, p. 34). Jerry Coyne (2015) intensifies this debate by arguing that there is a conflict between science and spirituality, since both compete to describe reality, while “the toolkit of science, based on reason and empirical study, is reliable [...] that of religion – including faith, dogma, and revelation – is unreliable and leads to incorrect, untestable, or conflicting conclusions” (p. 11). The conflict, according to John Evans (2018), is moral and systemic, especially on how to name reality or describe knowledge by the two spheres, even though both fields are “perfectly coherent hierarchical structures of knowledge or belief” (p. 22).⁵ Tiddy Smith (2019), similarly, posits that the supposed conflict between science and religion is as a result of difference in their functionality and methods of arriving at their respective conclusions. Drawing an inference from the biologist Stephen Jay Gould, he maintains that “science aims to uncover empirical knowledge, while religion aims to develop a sense of meaning and normative value” (Smith, 2019, p. 3). Gregory Dawes (2016) also expounds four different domains that may harbor the conflict between the two *knowledges*. These domains include: conflicting bodies of doctrine, which he calls “religious dogmas, on the one hand, and the theories of science on the other” (Dawes, 2016, p. 12); distinct communities comprising individuals who hold and employ “*contrastive norms* when dealing with knowledge claims, religious beliefs being treated quite differently from scientific theories” (Dawes, 2016, p. 14); modes of thought, as indicated in the belief that “religion and science represent differing *ways of thinking*” (Dawes, 2016, p. 14); and epistemic thought, pertaining to the dominant knowledge within religious and scientific communities (Dawes, 2016, p. 16).

In this article, I counter the prevalent submissions that science and spirituality are unrelated, and that no rivalry or conflict exists between them. While submitting that spirituality is not necessarily anti-science and sci-

⁵Contrary to the views of many scholars that support the asymmetry between the two domains, Evans seems to spot equality in the strength, functions, and powers of the knowledge fields.

ence is not anti-religion,⁶ I argue that the two fields of knowledge “express the same reality” (Gyekye, 2009, p. 1) in an attempt to understand cosmic mysteries and solve human problems. The article rejects the dismissive attitude of some scholars whose lack of intellectual empathy possibly blinds them to what John Evans (2018) calls “epistemological and moral conflict between religion and science” (p. 707).⁷ As a matter of fact, the dichotomy between the two mutually exclusive disciplines ingeminates the age-long disagreement between rationalism and fideism. While rationalism advocates reason, knowledge, and evidence-based deductive logic, fideism favors the weaponization of faith as an alternative to reason in describing reality or solving human problems. The present study is anchored in the belief that the gulf between the domains of science and spirituality subsists. It disputes McGrath’s hypothesis highlighting the ingrained divisions between the worlds of science and faith (Dawes, 2016, p. 17), but points out how contemporary scholarship is making attempts to bridge the divisions. I employ Santeria, the Afro-Cuban religious code, to represent the pantheon of global religions and asseverate how the inherent positivity in the two knowledge domains can be harnessed to help define reality and solve human problems.

Using syncretic/hybrid postcolonial model as a conceptual touchstone of reading Irete Lazo’s *The Accidental Santera*, I point out the advantages of interconnectivity or mutuality between the knowledge fields and the problems of a discipline displaying hubristic, overweening attitude towards another knowledge field. I use syncretism or hybridity purposively so as to advocate a harmonious relationship expected to exist between science and spirituality. This harmony further builds on interdependence that some scholars believe should exist between the two fields of knowledge. Petteri

⁶This is not absolute, though. This is because there are some scientists and scientific propositions that counter the existence of a supreme being. Some religious views also run contrary to certain scientific conceptions.

⁷This is the title of one of his articles.

Nieminen et al (2020), for instance, posit that “science and religion can share common goals to enhance human well-being [and that] the different types of evidence [they utilize] need not necessarily be obstacles for cooperation” (p. 448). Kwame Gyekye (2009) also contends that “religion and science will continue to be bed-fellows in the twenty-first century and beyond” (p. 19) as both share “perspectives on cosmic reality” (Gyekye, 2009, p. 1) and seek to understand “the wonders and mysteries of the created universe and the limitations of human intelligence” (Gyekye, 2009, p. 1), despite having different methods of interpreting reality.

Consequently, I argue that the two disciplines are enriching knowledge fields that can offer enormous opportunities and approaches for solving certain intractable human problems. Peter White (2014) acknowledges this coaction between the disciplines in the African health care system and emphasizes the existence of a symbiotic relationship between them. Syncretism or hybridity contemplates the fusion or conflation of ideas, concepts, and beliefs hitherto considered mutually exclusive. I have used it as a conceptual inquiry enabling me to clarify and probe into the possibility of uniting disparate elements from different cultural traditions to foster inclusion, equality and mine the strengths of the elements in a bid to engender and promote social harmony (Bentley, 1993; Ezenweke & Kanu, 2012; Gehman, 2001). This article leverages the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration by examining the possibility of conflating spirituality with science to solve some human problems as fictionalized in Lazo’s text. The claim of non-verifiability and lack of objective empiricism about spirituality and the mantra of science being overweening and excessively hubristic present a major problem impeding collaborations. An effective way of resolving this contention is to deepen our understanding of the disciplines and encourage the conflation of both knowledge fields in view of the monumental benefits accruable to humanity through it.

Between Materiality, Spirituality and Knowledge Bifurcation

The seemingly insuperable rivalry between science and spirituality and the intense scholarly debate generated has polarized scholars into two camps. The camps include that of those who believe science is not a promiscuous field, but a clinical endeavor that is unemotional in its approach to critically study nature, its forces, processes and development. The belief of this group is hinged on the claim that science should detach itself from any field of knowledge that lacks the nuances of empiricism, testability, provability, and observability. The other camp opposes the materialist philosophy in which science is anchored. It suggests a counter-discourse and holds the view that spirituality or religion possesses inherent qualities that enable it to identify and solve human, cosmic or environmental problems. Put succinctly, the science-is-unemotional-but-clinical group privileges science and reifies its assumptions as being the unparalleled or testable truth. To the group, science uses experimental evidence to understand nature, the environment, and man with a view to solving human problems through its materialist candor (Nieminen et al., 2020, p. 448). Spirituality, on the other hand, operates on the basis of experiential evidence (Nieminen et al., 2020, p. 448) as well as the revealed knowledge traceable to an incorporeal, immortal god/God whose wisdom is infinite, unparalleled and unquestionable. What those who essentialize spirituality do not want to let go of is that god/God has unparalleled, infinite status. Their perception of God/god is that of a numinous being possessing personal or impersonal character and particular properties or possibilities of action essential for the destiny and the welfare of humankind (Albert, 1999, p. 46). He/it does not have materiality, but possesses infinite energy, and He/it is the reality beyond human reality (Efori & Fătu-Hartmann, 2019, p. 323). Despite His/its lack of materiality, He/it has the ability to turn immateriality into materiality. The knotty point in science-spirituality antipodal debate and the supposed clash between the two fields, therefore, revolves around the possible testability and provability of the immaterial which is the genius

loci of religion or spirituality. In her estimation of the clash between reason and imagination, the relegation of spirituality in Nursing practice, and the construction of science/technology as the core of Nursing, Patricia Maher (2006) submits that three fundamental barriers separate the disciplines of (Nursing) science and spirituality (p. 423). Maher argues that spirituality does not possess objective scientific language to express spiritual concepts. Secondly, it lacks theoretical paradigms that can shape it as a “life-giving and integrating force essential for human healing” (Maher, 2006, p. 423). Thirdly, there is an absence of content in spirituality or religion.

Despite the polarity of scholars into two groups on the rivalry between science and spirituality, recent academic interest seems to tilt towards engendering synergy between the two domains. The synergy seeks a symbiosis between science and spirituality in order to aggregate the core benefits that the two fields of knowledge offer.⁸ This certainly holds some significance in view of the fact that some scholars are calling for a paradigm shift from the supposedly science-spirituality dichotomy to an enduring clinical relationship beneficial to humanity. These scholars are of the opinion that “the idea [that] there is a conflict between religion and science is extremely unfashionable within contemporary academia” (Smith, 2009, p. 1), and call for “historical and epistemological interplay and exchange” (Smith, 2009, p. 4). They posit that science and religion need not be adversaries but complement each other in fundamentally important ways. To them, conflict is a pessimistic option among other optimistic alternatives which may create a more complete or more fulfilling picture of the world (Smith, 2009, p. 4). Irete Lazo, whose text is analyzed in this article, belongs to this category, considering her syncretic advocacy between science and spirituality as a way of describing reality and solving human problems. For modern schol-

⁸Both science and spirituality are beneficial to society. Spirituality, for instance, ensures physical health of individuals by curing health challenges such as lower rates of coronary disease, emphysema and cirrhosis lower blood pressure and longer life expectancy and battle psychological disorders (see Mochon et al., 2011, p. 2). The benefits that science offers the society and individuals are not in any way different from the ones earlier highlighted.

ars in science and religious studies, they should be concerned with how rationalism can accommodate fideism in naming reality, or how both science and spirituality can borrow and learn from their respective knowledge principles. The present study dwells on this concern and draws from Lazo's authorial voice to expound the possibility of (re)naming reality and solving human problems through a careful utilization of scientific and metaphysical principles as well as research practices. The possible gap from the advocated symbiosis between the two fields may be on the workability of their hybridity, considering the existing gulf arising from their different views of naming reality, methodology, conceptualization, and problem-solution techniques. The study does not discuss this seemingly aporia by advancing propositions and philosophical thoughts needed for teasing out the possible synthesis of faith and science to solve human problems. It rather discusses the possibility of alignment of the two fields as fictionalized in Lazo's *faction*. The article leverages on the scientific orthodoxy and fideistic unorthodoxy to discuss the emerging collaboration between old and new orders, science and spirituality, and the attendant positivity from the synergy.

Since literature provides commentaries on society, it is understandable why one of the dominant tropes in Lazo's *faction* addresses the science-spirituality rivalry. While Lazo advocates a mutual understanding and possible collaboration (syncretism) between the two domains, her temperament tilts towards the grossly underestimated values and powers inherent in spirituality. This underestimation of potency of religion or spirituality to solve human problems is often perpetrated by scientists whose approach to arriving at truth is based solely on verifiable facts. It is a long-held belief in science that whatever does not have empirical evidence is outside the purview of science. Christine McLolland (2006) upholds this viewpoint, noting that "Science takes only the whole universe and any all phenomena in the natural world under its purview [...] Anything that cannot be observed or measured [...] is not amenable to scientific investigation (p. 1). Since Santeria is a religious code that is built on ancestral worship and animist

tradition, it has no place in the world of empirical scientific inquiry. This is because science is wont to query many of the practices, concepts, beliefs, and methods employed by both *santera*⁹ and *santero*¹⁰ to make their claims and confirm mostly their revealed knowledge. It is considered a mere “falsability” (McLelland, 2006, p. 1) and absolutely preposterous to claim that a terminal disease can be cured by carrying *ẹbọ*¹¹ (*ebbo*) to appease spiritual beings whom Santeria devotees and the Yorùbá believe hold the key to their existence, wellbeing, and have powers to heal the sick, cure sicknesses, and provide good health as well as material wealth (Awolalu, 1973, p. 81). Irete Lazo’s *The Accidental Santera* throws up the debate through her autobiographical narrative of how spirituality proves efficacious in the face of daunting opposition against its lack of scientific empiricism, while science seems to prove ineffectual despite its vaunted empirical values. Told through Gabrielle Segovia, an ichthyologist and professor of Biology at San Francisco State University, the novel reinforces the primality of spirituality over science. It opens the reader to the exciting and mystical world of Santeria, and the powers of preternatural beings who perform certain feats that defy scientific logic and query empirical knowledge. Through her protagonist narrator, Lazo does not leave the reader in doubt with regard to her motivation for writing the autobiography. Her intention is to advance her conviction that science and religion are part of modern society, and that it is imperative to reconcile the two if human society is going to make any appreciable progress (Lazo, 2008, p. 191). She believes in the idea that science and spirituality should mix, because science is an intellectual practice and religion a cultural domain possessing an interactive force that “provides cohesion in social order” (Akinfenwa et al., 2014, p. 9). By implication, she believes both disciplines complement each other, maintaining that to detach one from the other is inimical to social health of any

⁹Female devotee of Santeria

¹⁰Male devotee of Santeria

¹¹The Yorùbá word for sacrifice. It is called *ebbo* in Santeria to reflect Spanish orthography.

human community in view of the fact that the severance can damage inter-connectivity that should exist amongst different social elements. Speaking through Carol and Alex Littlefield (Gabrielle's colleagues), Lazo claims that "Science has done itself a disservice by dismissing religion, paranormal phenomena, and the like" (p. 190). Gabrielle expresses her concern about science and scientists whose duplicity and hatred for fideistic beliefs she finds disheartening:

The thing about scientists [...] is that they think that they make no assumptions. It's what we tell our students when we teach them the scientific method. Often scientists don't realize they carry around culturally and socially determined assumptions, a worldview that is mostly male, often white, and sometimes anti-religion. They don't see how they look at the white students differently than they look at the students of color. They assume some kids will do well in their classes and others will struggle. (Lazo, 2008, pp. 289-290)

If science or scientists make assumptions, it definitely removes from the objectivity, verifiability, and reliability principles that define the knowledge field. Gabrielle's bias is an imputation on the estimable image of science as a clinical discipline that arrives at conclusions through deductive and dispassionate logicity. This must have informed her declaration: "scientists have lost credibility in my eyes. For the majority of them, religion and science are mutually exclusive" (Lazo, 2008, p. 306). To further underscore the pre-eminence of science-spirituality antipodal debate in *The Accidental Santera*, Lazo uses the character of Lila Wong, Gabrielle's Chinese student, to typify the centrality of the dialectics in the text and, most importantly, the importance of ancestral worship, which she confirms to be an archetype in the collective unconscious of races across the globe: "In my culture, we worship our ancestors just as you do. We feed them and make altars and light candles. We also have many lesser gods, just like your saints. Every

New Year, we give thanks and sacrifices to the kitchen god. It's kind of the same with your people, my grandfather says" (Lazo, 2008, p. 227). In her dialogue with Gabrielle, Robin – a professor of African Studies and *santera* – avers that spirituality does not need to have scientific basis before proving its possibility, since science describes “life and the path of orisha as living it. It's only one path, like Buddhism and Christianity are paths. We're all going to the same place. We've just chosen different ways to get there” (Lazo, 2008, p. 290), and as such there should be no rivalry between the two modes of knowledge, since they appear complementary.

The leitmotif of mutual antagonism between science and spirituality and pain of contemptuousness likely to be suffered by whoever trapped in the crossfire thrown by the antipodes possibly inform Patricia's warning to Gabrielle, albeit jokingly: “Seriously Gabi. You better watch yourself. You know how the game of science is played. Your reputation is everything. If anyone finds out you're into the Religion, you'll never find another collaborator or get another grant” (Lazo, 2008, p. 202). Matt Flueger – Benito's¹² and Gabrielle's guileful and knavish colleague – later confirms Patricia's concern about science and scientists' snobbishness, more so when the religion in question is steeped in polytheistic *paganity*. In his characteristic wily manner, Flueger says:

“One of my students said that one of your students saw you buying live birds in Chinatown. Apparently, this student thinks you use them for religious purposes. “They were for an inner-city farming project,” I lied quickly. “Oh, I see. Well, you'd better set your student straight. It's bad enough we have animal rights people breathing down our necks about *research!*” (Lazo, 2008, p. 236)

The disclosure of Gabrielle's secret by Lila Wong, whom Gabrielle has earlier begged not to tell anyone for seeing her in Chinatown buying live

¹²Gabrielle's husband

birds for her *entracha*,¹³ leaves Benito confused. He does not understand why his wife's great dreams of becoming a top-notch scientist will suddenly vanish upon her chance encounter with a pagan religion: "I sure would like to know what happened to the hot-shit scientist I married, the one that was going to cure skin cancer and change the face of academia" (Lazo, 2008, p. 238). His predicament is further deepened considering the near hatred of their colleagues and university for religion, let alone an Afro-Cuban spirituality that promotes ancestor worship and séances. In his conversation with Gabrielle, Benito believes that no one will work with his wife anymore should "Flueger [tell] the rest of the [their] committee, they may not want you in the department at all. I don't need this shit right now, Gabi. We've worked our whole adult lives on this. Your so-called curiosity could cost us both our jobs" (Lazo, 2008, p. 237).

To situate the debate properly within literary discourse, the conflicting intercourse between the domains of science and spirituality is given postcolonial reading. Science is seen as the language or weapon of Western hegemony that seeks to explain the world through its intrinsic logic. Besides, it seeks to browbeat and cow whatever violates its grammar of operations. Religion or spirituality,¹⁴ on the other hand, is interpreted as a (psychic) platform of penetration into the metaphysical to connect or commune with the ancients in order to obtain information or ideas needed for solving human problems. Since Santeria is a religion that is in conflict with science in Lazo's text; the Afro-Cuban faith, with its conspicuous Yorùbá cultural and religious features, takes the center stage of my discussion. Seen from the prism of science as the *exotic Other* lacking canonization, recognition and materialist grounding; Santeria and its practitioners suffer stereotypes for encroaching on the domain of science. Worse still, it operates on the basis of faith and invocation of ancestral spirits, rituals, animal sacrifices, séances and other fetish practices promoting ancestor worship.

¹³It is a religious performance for spiritual cleansing in Santeria.

¹⁴The religion or spirituality referred to in the text and in this article is Santeria, or better still the Yorùbá religion in the Americas.

Rather than manifesting Barbour's modes of dialogue and integrations to facilitate mutuality and complementariness, the domains have been at variance with each other. There is politics of resistance, opposition and inferiorization of religious (Santeria) practices by science and scientists. At the center of postcolonial thought, for instance, is the project of creating what Peter Barry (1995) calls "an awareness of representations of the non-European as exotic or immoral 'Other'" (p. 193). Science, being the logic of Western hegemony to *otherize*, inferiorize non-scientific or non-European religious practices, assumes the role of the colonialist or becomes a parallel and metaphor of colonialist ideology seeking to objectify any view lacking empirical validity or material existence. The depth of the clash between science and religion is even worsened by the perceived crudity or absurdly primitiveness of Santeria as a mediumistic religion that uses blood sacrifice akin to the Old Testament practice in the Judeo-Christian religion. However, science has proved incapable of solving certain human problems. Instead of seeking collaboration with religion or spirituality to come up with solutions, it has insulated itself and maintained a snobbish attitude by looking down on any domain of knowledge that operates without a proven empiricism. Irete Lazo further engages this debate and extends its frontiers to validate the potency of her newfound religion (Santeria) that not only surpasses science in solving some seemingly intractable medical problems, but also engenders self-discovery through communion with one's ancestors. She, nonetheless, believes that what could end the impasse is not the insularity and illiberality of science, but a syncretic condition that engenders a symbiosis between it and spirituality (Santeria), since none of the two can claim exclusiveness.

Irete Lazo deflates the overweening influence of science over spirituality by giving primality to Santeria (spirituality) in her novel. This primal influence is foregrounded through the incidents that happen at Marie Laveau's Voodoo Shop in New Orleans during Mr. John's life reading for Gabrielle Segovia who is unable to give birth to a child after years of marriage and

three miscarriages: “Spirits say, you need help, but not from a doctor. You need to find your true path in life. Then the babies will come” (Lazo, 2008, p. 43). In her argument with Benito on the plan to stop receiving medical treatments over her miscarriages and other gynecological problems, Gabrielle restates what Mr. John tells her earlier as a confirmation of the helplessness of modern science in solving her medical conditions:

Then there was our follow-up visit with the fertility specialist. She wanted us to consider IUI, intrauterine insemination – the turkey baster method. Benito agreed that we were under too much pressure to start the process until after our tenure packets were in. It was a relief that he had agreed to put it off. Still, I couldn’t help but worry about the day I would have to tell him I didn’t want to go through with the treatments. Mr. John had told me in New Orleans that medical science wasn’t the way to go. I had gotten confirmation on that from Orula since then. I was more than happy to avoid medical intervention. However, my doubts had grown after my diagnosis. (Lazo, 2008, p. 231)

As a matter of fact, medical science finds it difficult to establish the cause of her miscarriages, until after her initiation and several life readings where it is revealed that she has *unicornuate uterus* and a missing ovary (Lazo, 2008, p. 208). After her initiation, the cause of her miscarriages is also revealed in her dream by *òrìṣà*¹⁵ in her cousin’s (Sofi Segovia’s) house in Miami, as “a kidney with its artery sticking out” (Lazo, 2008, p. 206). Her fertility doctor only diagnoses the cause of her barrenness much later in California. Before keeping her appointment with the fertility expert whom she and Benito go to see, and later orders for histosalpingogram, a live X-ray of Gabrielle’s uterus and fallopian tubes (Lazo, 2008, p. 203), she has cleaned herself with raw meat (Lazo, 2008, p. 203) as advised by

¹⁵Deities

José (a *babalawo* and Sofi Segovia's husband) in Miami for good luck. Besides, she wears one of her *collares*¹⁶ believing that all these rituals and cleansings work out in her favor, as they prepare the road for *òrìṣà* (Osun) to do "her job by allowing the doctors to see the truth" (Lazo, 2008, p. 209) about her fertility problem.

With Gabrielle's revelation, Lazo presents before the reader both ontological and epistemological conflicts. These conflicts reify the rivalry between science and spirituality. The reader is thrust into confusion as to how to validate the truth of life reading (divination) as a way of naming reality and its theory of problem-solving methodology. Considering the initiation of Lazo's protagonist into Santeria and how her problems receive supernatural solutions from *òrìṣà*, the ontology of life reading and its epistemology are called to question by science in its clinical approach of verifying and establishing empirical evidence or deductive logicity behind the accurate diagnosis and cure of a serious gynecological problem. Spirituality, similarly, wonders at the inability of medical science to solve the same problem. The total transformation that comes upon Gabrielle can be recapitulated as the corollary of the conflicts. These conflicts are externalities that produce psychic conflicts in her, as she begins to doubt the empirical values of science, just as her mind increasingly unlocks her ancestral powers to address existential puzzles. In the process, she ends up wrapping her mind around these spiritualities because of their provable efficacies which remain a mystery to science. Gabrielle's apprehension and dubiety of (medical) science is anchored in the transcendental knowledge of (her) self which is beyond the reach of science or empirical medical diagnosis. Her gynecological problem and other existential challenges are the upshot of her ignorance of her *òrìṣà* ancestral roots. This is revealed to her by Mr. John during (her) life reading and corroborated by *orula*¹⁷ during her Santeria initiation. Gabrielle Segovia's disenchantment with science (medical), despite being

¹⁶Beaded necklace sacred to an *òrìṣà*

¹⁷Òrúnmìlà is the *òrìṣà* of divination.

a scientist of note, is perhaps heightened by Robin. Her (Robin's) view further underpins the project of stripping science of its superior myth. At Gabrielle's *ocha*, she claims to have successfully disabused the minds of her students as far as old/new or science/spirituality debate is concerned.

While pondering on what will be her fate should her scientist-colleagues find out about her new religious convictions, she gets uptight and notes that: "they would assume that I am crazy to believe in something that has no scientific basis, and that, in turn, will mean that my science is flawed, as well" (Lazo, 2008, p. 290). This motif of uncertainty runs through the *faction* revealing the troubled interiority of a character whose consciousness is torn between self-esteem and public image. Her mind is buffeted by the images of public shaming and social isolation once the information passes around that she (a scientist) now "communicates with dead relatives through psychics in her spare time" (Lazo, 2008, p. 54). This reads much like the effect of *culture shock* and the mental confusion it imposes on the sufferer. Gabrielle is in dire straits as her training as a scientist is in conflict with her newfound spirituality. She finds herself battling with an issue that calls her career to question, and yet leaves her wondering as to how to accentuate her new conviction of science-spirituality hybridity. This confused mental state underlies her statement: "A whole new world had opened up for me – one that both intrigued and terrified me. I was, however, consumed with worry about the consequences of going any further into that world" (Lazo, 2008, p. 170).

In spirituality, inductive logic/reasoning is employed contrary to the scientific deductive methodology of arriving at conclusion and describing reality. Commenting on this with regard to Christianity, Geran Dodson (2016) argues that the basis of inductive reasoning is insights and spiritual experiences, because it uses finiteness to describe infiniteness, even though it cannot prove infiniteness using finite categories (p. 130). Dodson also submits that inductive logic expresses the "possibility and necessity of truth

that is based on insight and spiritual experiences that are formulated in propositions believed to be true. Theology builds its foundation on an interpretation of God, the world, the condition of humanity, and accepts without question the celestial rules by which everything operates” (Dodson, 2016, p. 130). Lazo foregrounds the inductive reasoning that undergirds Santeria when Gabrielle soliloquizes telling herself that she “was operating faith, not facts” (Lazo, 2008, p. 256). Fact and faith dichotomy is, therefore, central to science and spirituality debate. Her statement is surely a reflection of the awareness that her aspirations and conditions may be beyond the grasp of (medical) science, hence her desperate acceptance of Santeria, albeit with doubts and concerns about its arcane rituals and cryptic codes. During her initiation rituals, she unfurls her mind:

I imagined purging my doubts as I vomited. I realized I wanted all of the good things the Religion had to offer: a connection to my family, protection from my enemies, guidance to ease the journey of life, a chance to feed my spiritual hunger – and, of course, I wanted to become a mother. I wanted these things without the embarrassment the ancient rituals would bring to my modern life. (Lazo, 2008, p. 271)

Drawing from the above quote, it is important to note that the thread of Lazo’s narrative has narrowed down to her belief in the victory of spirituality (Santeria) over science. It is probably her attempt to use the narrative to address the asymmetric relations between the duo. Since Gabrielle has had several medical tests and treatments over her miscarriages all to no avail and psychics’ predictions seem to be having the coloration of truth, what appears ineffectual has to give way for a seemingly effectual but stereotyped phenomenon, whether it has or lacks materialist candor. The miracle of Sofi Segovia’s daughter (Bella) overcoming her nephrological disorder after her initiation into Santeria further sustains Gabrielle’s interest in the religion, and clears her doubt about the possible victory spirituality can record where medical science fails. According to Sofi:

She was five. We found out she had bad kidneys. We were still in New York. Angie and Jose were already here. He had just become *babalawo*. He consulted Orula, who said Bella had to be initiated as soon as possible. We even told the doctors in New York what we were doing so they would teach us how to bathe her with all the tubes sticking out. [...] Even during the ceremony, she never cried – not even when they cut her hair. She had already been through worse with all the tests. After we got back, her kidneys began to respond to the treatment that hadn't been working before. The doctors couldn't believe it. (Lazo, 2008, p. 116)

Bella's miraculous recovery from chronic kidney disease (CKD) reiterates the importance of shared knowledge and complementariness between science and spirituality as well as the potency of spirituality to work out solutions to even the most dreaded illnesses, such as kidney failure. It is not impossible that Bella might have lost her life if her parents had insisted on medical science to treat her. Her speedy recovery from CKD says a lot about the possible primacy of spirituality over science in certain dire instances. As a matter of fact, the result is astounding because Bella's doctors find it difficult believing her miraculous recovery from the disease. The foregoing recapitulates Lazo's concern in *The Accidental Santera*, as she calls for an alternative means of naming reality and solving human problems.

Lazo's Three-World Orders

In *The Accidental Santera*, Lazo suggests a three-world order. The orders: old (Santeria or ancestral religious worship); new (science); and the hybrid or syncretic order. While characters such as ancestral spirits, Grandma Segovia and her husband, *tia* Mayte, pantheon of Yorùbá gods, and devotees of Santeria typify old (religious) order; the new order comprises American university system, world of science, Benito, Matt Flueger, White

Americans, and the heavily gendered or racialized American space. The third order is a coalescence of the old and new orders, the conflation or a creation of dialogue between science and spirituality, which Santeria also metaphorises in the text. This is probably the thrust of Lazo's concern, calling for an understanding between old and new, ancient and modern, as well as between spirituality and science. The syncretic project that Lazo uses the novel to advocate also serves as a metaphor of the fusion of Yorùbá cultural traits with Catholicism in the Americas.

The syncretism negotiates harmony between two erstwhile mutually exclusive belief systems (Yorùbá *òrìṣà* worship and Catholic Christian faith), thus creating a religious unison in which one represents the other using religious ethos of the other, and vice versa, in the Americas, especially Cuba (see Adeniyi, 2010). Lazo's call for syncretism between science and spirituality is reinforced in defense of her newfound religion and decision to be initiated into Santeria. According to her, there is nothing bizarre in her becoming a *santera*, because some of her colleagues pursue their religious convictions without any fear. According to her, if "Alex Littlefield goes to powwows [and] no one shies away from his lab [...] Carol Wright goes to the Unitarian church in Oakland [and] nobody questions her science because of it" (Lazo, 2008, p. 238), no one has the right to query her Afro-Cuban religious convictions. The comments of Lila's Chinese grandparents, as related by Lila, is suggestive of syncretic motif that runs through the *faction*. While narrating what her grandfather tells her about Santeria and its adherents who patronize their store, Lila reveals that:

The people in your religion are the only ones who are not Chinese who go there [...] They told me that, years ago, one of their customers, this Cuban lady, invited them to a party in Oakland. They said the people danced and played drums and ate lots of good food, including some of the birds they bought in our store. There they met a Chinese man. He spoke

English, Spanish, and Cantonese. He explained a lot of things to my grandparents [...] My grandfather said that is why he loves this country. We can practice our ways. You can practice yours. He also said we are more the same than different. (Lazo, 2008, pp. 227-228)

Lazo's quote: "Spiritism, having taken the proportions of a science, requires a scientific language" (Lazo, 2008, p. 245)¹⁸ is suggestive of the motif of syncretism that abounds in the text. Syncretism is further demonstrated in the text when an *oriate*¹⁹ during Gabrielle's *ita*²⁰ delivers the message of Obatala to her concerning what will be the state of her health in future:

"*Si siente algo en el seno que vaya al medico a tiempo,*" the *oriate* said. I was being ordered to go to the doctor immediately if I ever felt something in my breast. Great. My mother made a funny choking sound. I gave her a brave smile and nodded my head yes. I thought about the advice, trying to imagine a diagnosis of breast cancer in my future. I might get it, but I would not die from it. (Lazo, 2008, p. 296)

Considering the above quote, Lazo seems to stress the importance of having spirituality work hand-in-hand with (medical) science. She seems to suggest that before any diagnosis of any disease is made; a *santera/santero*, through divination or revelation from the ancestors, would have had foreknowledge and prepared adequately for it either through (medical) science or revelation/*ebbo* and spiritual cleansing. However, the effectiveness of this method is problematic, because science will never approve of faith healing. This does not mean it is impossible as well. For example, Gabrielle

¹⁸The quote is taken from Allan Kardec's (1978) book, *The Book on Mediums: Guide for Mediums and Invocators*, and quoted in *The Accidental Santera*.

¹⁹It is "a Santero who delivers the *ita* during the initiation of a *iyawo*" (Lazo, 2008, p. 313).

²⁰It is "a spiritual consultation or reading using divination systems of either Santeria or Ifa" (Lazo, 2008, p. 312). It also describes life reading performed for a *santero* or *santera* during which sterling revelations about their lives are made known to them.

informs Benito what *tia* Mayte tells her earlier about the powers of Òṣun²¹ to cure any form of diseases and her power to give children to the needy, because Òṣun rules over fertility or infertility and she is the “patron of all things abdominal and medical” (Lazo, 2008, p. 205). Though an *othered* domain, Santeria still provides an avenue for Gabrielle and other *santeras* or *santeros* in the text to define her/their selfhood and social relations in a heavily gendered and racialized American space. With this revelation, Santeria becomes a weapon of negotiation, identification, and interrogation of Western hegemony as symbolized by modern science in the text. Through Gabrielle’s autobiographical narrative voice, it is clear that Santeria eventually affords her the opportunity to find a true path and destiny in life. Spirituality seems to take the place of science in her life. Even though a foremost scientist, she begins to realize the enormous opportunities that spirituality offers which are out of reach of scientific procedures. Though she does not reject science in its entirety, Gabrielle also contends that spirituality (Santeria) cannot be rejected due to its lack of scientific validity. She believes there are realities which defy scientific explanations, while science can also complement spirituality, hence the imperativeness of synthesizing the two domains for effective health care delivery and betterment of humanity. Gabrielle, however, struggles with herself for a long time before discovering this.

Benito embodies an uncompromising materialist-scientist. His background in science continues to blind him to realities of syncretism, even when confronted with the truth of powers that Yorùbá *òrìṣà* wield over nature and cosmos. Gabrielle describes his countenance during her *ita*, after Òṣun reveals that she will give birth to twins – a boy and a girl:

Now that fear in my eyes turned to panic as my head whipped around and I locked eyes with Benito. At first, his eyes held a look of shock. He believed in the prediction – for a split

²¹The Yorùbá river goddess highly revered in Santeria.

second. Then, I saw him “come to his senses,” his rational mind visibly taking charge. He shrugged his shoulders and arched an eyebrow, silently saying to me, “We’ll just have to wait and see.” Ever the skeptic and scientist, he would keep an open, detached mind. (Lazo, 2008, p. 298)

Gabrielle’s doctor, too, fits into this character typology. Apparently for having her diagnosis proved wrong, she gets upset. She has earlier diagnosed Gabrielle with a half uterus, noting that that is the cause of Gabrielle’s inability to conceive. When it is later discovered that Gabrielle has two fetuses in her, she wonders its realness, considering the fact that it is medically impossible, hence the reason she is upset. Gabrielle notes that: “My doctor tried not to show that she was upset that a woman with half a uterus was carrying two fetuses” (Lazo, 2008, p. 305). Either angry or not at having her professional expertise proved wrong by the revelation of her patient having two fetuses in her, Gabrielle has got what she wants, and for the first time in her life, she is not going to have a miscarriage. Through the help of Yemanya,²² her patron goddess; Ọṣun, the goddess of motherhood, and a series of spiritual cleansing she has undergone, Gabrielle’s cycle of marital woes and child-bearing frustrations is broken. This cannot be explained scientifically; these events are beyond the grasp of science.

Besides, her marriage seems to have been restored having won back the heart of her husband, who has earlier expressed reservation over Gabrielle’s initiation into Santeria. Her rival at San Francisco State University, Matt Flueger, has withdrawn his services from the university to another. Gabrielle has seen in one of her dreams how “Yemanya” kisses the wily, racist academic (Flueger), indicating that the goddess has fought on her behalf. Her “hatred” or possibly fear of science, ever since Santeria creeps into her life, appears to have compelled her to resign her appointment and

²²The Yorùbá in Africa spell it Yemoja. Yemoja is the name of the Yorùbá goddess of the ocean and patron goddess of pregnant women.

possibly take over another job. However, taking a bed rest at home due to her pregnancy and getting more involved in Santeria does not mean she has abandoned science for good, or possibly she has seen in Santeria solutions to all her medical and spiritual problems. As a matter of fact, she still sees her gynecologist. *Òriṣà*, too, has alerted her to the possibility of her getting breast cancer during her life reading with a piece of advice that she should see a doctor, and with the assurance that she will not die from it. The syncretic tenor of the text is further punctuated by the foregoing and science-spirituality synthesis that Lazo advocates. To Irete Lazo, the world will become a better place when no ideology, race, religion, belief, or a given system of knowledge (religious, political, economic, racial) hegemonizes itself or lords itself over another. This possibility explains the thrust of Santeria and other African-based religions in the New World.

Conclusion

This article has examined the possibility of conflating science and spirituality, leveraging the resultant harmony between the disciplines for the benefit of humanity. It argues that Lazo's *The Accidental Santera* sets the tone aright for a rigorous debate of the age-long antipodal science-spirituality relationship. While the debate is considered unnecessary by some historians and philosophers of science, Lazo's text helps to reinforce the relevance of the debate by giving prominence to it in her *faction*. The debate is important because it provides an opportunity to narrate the efficacy of spirituality to solve human problems that appear to be out of reach of science and narrate her chance encounter with the religion of her progenitors. It also provides her an opportunity to define her identity in a tensely racialized American society, and establish contact with her ancestral roots. Lazo succeeds in weaving together a tapestry of events punctuating her *faction*, such as her experience as a scientist of note, career trajectories, marital problems, and her exploration of Afro-Cuban religious code to overcome her existential challenges. Using authorial voice, she unfolds her interiority to accentuate her advocacy on the construction of hybridity between science and spirituality for greater efficiency to humanity. Through the

novel, Lazo reconstructs a new order of syncretism or hybridity between two knowledge fields hitherto considered mutually exclusive to each other, maintaining that rather than emphasizing the age-long conflict between the domains of science and spirituality, both can share knowledge from each other. Her major concern is that instead of science pushing spirituality to the margins because it lacks deductive materialist principles, it should rather explore those enduring features that abound in it, while they jointly name reality and solve human problems.

References

- Adeniyi, E. (2020). Relational Dialectics, Interspecific Interactions, and Religious Animus in Jorge Amado's *The War of the Saints* – A Postcolonial Critique. *Postcolonial Interventions*, 5(1), 108-138.
- Akinfenwa, O., Fagbamila, O. D., & Abdulganiyu, A. I. (2013). The Role of Religion in Modern Society: Masses Opium or Tool for Development: A Case Study of Saw-Mill Area, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 6(1), 8-17. <https://doi.org/10.5897/IJSA2013.0491>
- Albert, H. (1999). *Between Social Science, Religion and Politics: Essays in Critical Rationalism*. Rodopi.
- Awolalu, J. O. (1973). Yoruba Sacrifice Practice. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 5(2), 81-93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1594756>
- Barbour, I. (1997). *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*. HarperCollins.
- Barry, P. (1995). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester University Press.
- Benson, H. (1996). *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief*. Scribner Publishers.
- Bentley, J. H. (1993). *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*. Oxford University Press.

- Brown, M. C. (2003). The Conflict between Religion and Science in Light of the Patterns of Religious Belief among Scientists. *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 38(3), 603-632. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9744.00524>
- Coyne, J. A. (2015). *Faith Versus Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible*. Viking.
- Dawes, G. W. (2016). *Galileo and the Conflict between Religion and Science*. Routledge.
- Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God Delusion*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Dodson, G. F. (2016). *The Impact of Reason on Faith, Ethics, and Belief*. Vernon Press.
- Efori, M. F., & Fätu-Hartmann, C. (2019). *Beyond the Final Frontier: Everything for the Theory of Everything: An Epistemological Study*. Coresi Publishing.
- Evans, J. H. (2018). *Morals Not Knowledge: Recasting the Contemporary U.S. Conflict between Religion and Science*. University of California Press.
- Evans, J. H. (2011). Epistemological and Moral Conflict between Science and Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Studies of Religion*, 50(4), 707-727. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41349949>
- Ezenweke, E., & Kanu, I. (2012). Perspectives of Syncretism and its Modern Trend: A Case of Christian and African Tradition. *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 13(2), 71-84. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v13i2.4>
- Gehman, R. (2001). *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*. Baraka.
- Gyekye, K. (2009). Relationship between Religion and Science: An Overview. *Legon Journal of the Humanities*, 20, 1-22.
- Harris, S. (2004). *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. W. W. Norton and Company.
- Herndon, J. C. (2007). *Eric Voegelin and the Problem of Christian Political Order*. University of Missouri.

- Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason*. (P. Guyer & A. W. Wood, Trans. & Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published in 1781.)
- Lightman, B. (2011). Unbelief. In J. H. Brooke & R. L. Numbers (Eds.), *Science and Religion around the World* (pp. 252-277). Oxford University Press.
- Lazo, I. (2008). *The Accidental Santera*. St. Martin's Press.
- Maher, P. (2006). Reclaiming Spirituality in Nursing. In L. C. Andrist, P. K. Nicholas, & K. A. Wolf (Eds.), *A History of Nursing Ideas* (pp. 417-425). Jones and Bartlett.
- McGrath, A. (2004). *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*. Doubleday.
- McLelland, C. V. (2006). The Nature of Science and the Scientific Method. Boulder, Colorado: The Geological Society of America. www.geosociety.org/educate/NatureScience.pdf
- Mochon, D., Norton, M. I., & Ariely, D. (2011). Who Benefits from Religion? *Social Indicators Research*, 101(1), 1–15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41476416>
- Nieminen, P., Loikkanen, J., Ryökäs, E., & Mustonen, A. (2020). Nature of Evidence in Religion and Natural Science. *Theology and Science*, 18(3), 448-474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2020.1786221>
- Scott, E. (2009). *Evolutionism vs. Creationism: An Introduction*. University of California Press.
- Smith, T. (2019). *The Methods of Science and Religion: Epistemologies in Conflict*. Lexington Books.
- Stenmark, M. (2013). Typologies in Science and Religion. In A. L. C. Runehov & L. Oviedo (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8265-8_1448
- White, P. (2015). The Concept of Diseases and Health Care in African Traditional Religion in Ghana. *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 71(3), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2762>