FROM ANALOGIES TO NARRATIVE ENTANGLEMENT: INVOKING SCIENTIFIC AUTHORITY IN INDIAN NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY

Kathinka Frøystad

It is late afternoon in the tiny library room, and together with a handful of elderly people I sit quietly by a large table, leafing through spiritual magazines and newspapers. Suddenly a voice interrupts the buzz of the ceiling fan: “Do you have Osho Times?” The voice belongs to a retired medical doctor in his late 50s who just dropped by to borrow the latest issues of the Hindi edition of this magazine. His question astonishes me since he has never mentioned Osho—the controversial guru who amalgamated Eastern religion with Western psychoanalysis and sexual freedom—in any of the conversations we have had about religion and spirituality on earlier occasions. When the old widow who volunteers as a librarian registers his loan, I take the opportunity to ask him what he thinks about Osho. He pauses. With a serene look he ultimately replies, “Osho is very scientific”, collects his magazines and leaves.

This minor incident, which occurred in a spiritual centre, Jyoti Ashram, in the North-Indian pilgrim town of Haridwar, was one of numerous instances I witnessed during my ethnographic fieldwork in 2003–2005 in which science was invoked to lend authority to spiritual practices, interests and beliefs. In this chapter I discuss some of the ways in which this occurred in a cross-section of middle-class spiritual and self-development settings in New Delhi and Haridwar in the mid-2000s. I devote particular attention to the forms of legitimacy construction I encountered most frequently: analogies, references to scientific experiments, terminological loans and the use of doctoral titles, the last bordering on a source of legitimacy that is more academic than scientific. I also look into narrative entanglement, which was a more unusual and idiosyncratic way of seeking scientific authority. By prioritizing

1 Joyti Ashram is a pseudonym for one of Haridwar’s first non-congregational ashrams, which I anonymize in this and other texts to prevent the residents from identification.
real-life instances of more or less spontaneous claims to scientificity in an Indian setting, I aim to make an anthropological contribution to a multi-disciplinary field of research that up till now has been dominated by textual analysis and case material from the Western hemisphere. Further, by distinguishing the different ways in which scientific legitimacy can be invoked and by theorizing them one by one, I also aim to contribute to my own discipline, social anthropology, where the scant but emerging interest in such matters has tended to produce studies that conflate this manifold phenomenon into a uniform process that allows for analysis within a single analytical framework. The point I want to make is that, unless we become more attentive to the diverse ways in which scientific authority is appealed to in everyday religious contexts, it will be impossible both to trace different cultural and religious ‘styles’ of scientific legitimacy construction and to identify commonalities in such processes across cultural and religious differences. By outlining the rudiments of a middle-class Hindu style of invocation, this chapter provides a step towards enabling such comparisons.

1. The Interface of Religion and Science in Anthropological Thought

In a recent outline of how anthropologists have treated the relationship between science and religion, Michael Lambek (2006) identifies three main phases of anthropological thinking. In the evolutionist phase in the late 19th century, religion was seen as a rational but erroneous mode of reasoning that would be replaced by science once a society advanced to a more civilized stage (cf. Tylor 2002; Tambiah 1990; Frazer 1996:824). In the modernist phase, which peaked between 1940 and 1960, anthropologists aimed to demonstrate the order, logic, beauty and morality in religious practices which the average Euro-American held to be primitive and backward. This aim united anthropologists as disparate as functionalists, structuralists and cultural particularists. In the present phase, which grew forth in the 1980s, the relation between science and religion has become increasingly blurred. Not only did anthropologists acquire considerable postmodern self-doubt as scientists, others have problematized science as a system of beliefs and authority claims of its own (cf. Latour and Woolgar 1979; Shapin 1994; Cetina 1999). Moreover, the religious convictions subjected to anthropological scrutiny increasingly have come to include those adhered to in industrialized societies and practised by people much like the anthropologists themselves. From the perspective of