



The Contribution of John Pilch to the Critical Interpretation of “the Extraordinary” in the Bible

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Abstract

This article assesses John Pilch’s contribution to the exegesis of biblical texts dealing with extraordinary experiences and phenomena such as visions, flights of the soul, healings and the like. It focuses on Pilch’s methodology for reconstructing the interpretations that the original audiences had most probably given to such texts. This methodology, which combines an emic approach with the use of different models drawn from medical anthropology, cultural and cognitive psychology and neurobiology, shows that ancient Mediterranean people would have considered those apparently fantastic stories of healings and visions plausible, because many among them had lived through similar experiences. The article contrasts the contextualized and scientifically informed realism that Pilch’s interpretations ascribe to many of these texts with that pertaining to naïve and fundamentalist readings of the Bible.

Key words: Pilch, methodology, healing, vision, ASC

Among the many contributions of John J. Pilch to the critical exegesis of the Bible, those that deal with passages referring to healings, visions, and other non-ordinary phenomena deserve special attention.

First of all, they are numerous. A big portion of Pilch’s biblical research was devoted to this topic. Second, he was one of the first biblical scholars that applied socio-scientific models to it. And third, he was able to combine in a successful way anthropological models emphasizing the role of culture in this type of phenomenon (latent cultural discourse), with cognitive and neurobiological approaches that focus on properties and capacities of the human species.

This last achievement is very important, because some evolutionary and cognitive psychologists have overemphasized the discrepancy between cultural approaches and their own to the study of knowledge acquisition in humans. The main question in debate is the role of culture in the way human cognitive capacities interact with the world (Boyer: 3–28).

In other words: To what extent does culture determine the interpretation with which we humans shape our experience?

As a socio-scientific exegete, Pilch assumed that the meanings communicated in human oral or written language are always shaped by the culture and the social system in which

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the process of communication is supposed to take place.

As a founding member of the Context Group, he was also very conscious of the great cultural gap that the industrial revolution has introduced between our modern Western societies and those in which the different books of the Bible were composed and of the exegetical difficulties that such situation generates (Malina: 3–31). Indeed, modern readers of the Bible cannot rely on their culturally conditioned knowledge to interpret texts that have been written with very different cultural presuppositions. To understand what those texts intended to communicate, he or she has to learn the ways in which ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean societies functioned, and the cultural knowledge and values which went with them.

This is why, along his whole career as a biblical exegete, Pilch put his main effort into the reconstruction of the cultural backgrounds that those ancient texts presuppose. Using different models provided by the social sciences, he showed the meaning and coherence of many biblical scenes and messages that seem outlandish or senseless to modern readers.

Healings

From his earliest years as a biblical exegete Pilch specialized in applying the insights and models of medical anthropology to New Testament healing stories, a topic that seems utterly bizarre to the majority of European and North-American readers. Its greatest difficulty comes from the fact that most modern Westerners firmly believe that health and sickness refer to objective physiological states of the human body, which are felt and conceptualized in the same manner by all human beings. Contrary to other concepts, like "honor," "courtship," or "family," that because their obvious connection with values, customs and social structures are easily understood to be culture-dependent, health and sickness are usually thought to relate exclusively to the shared experience of existing as an incorporated being in a human body.

Although it is widely admitted that many societies might not have the scientific means to determine the cause of certain diseases, our body is such a concrete material entity that most modern Westerners cannot help thinking that the human experience of suffering in the body is the same all over the world. With such premises in mind, the reports and descriptions they read in the New Testament healing stories are thought to be flatly false or truly miraculous.

But, as Pilch and many others have argued, the notion

of the miraculous as something that goes against the laws of nature is utterly ethnocentric, because in premodern societies nature is not conceived as subjected to universal timeless laws. Thus, the only conclusion that seems available to many modern Americans and Europeans after reading those stories is that they reflect an utterly superstitious culture, in which people were very ignorant and easily teased or mistaken.

With the aid of the medical anthropology in Kleinman's *Patients and Healers* . . ., Pilch showed modern readers of the New Testament that the concepts of health and sickness used in the Western biomedical approach to body-related suffering is, not only unique to Western industrial societies, but extremely narrow in comparison with that of other cultures. In Israel's culture, for example, people were mostly concerned with culturally devalued states of the body, even in cases where those states involved little pain, did not impair functioning, and were not contagious. Conditions of the skin such as those referred to in Leviticus 13–14, which scholars used to call "biblical leprosy," were lived as a misfortune mainly because of the social exclusion and isolation suffered by people afflicted by them. The reason for this social rejection was concern, not with contagion, but with impurity, a devalued condition of the body that rendered its owner unfit for participating in the cultic activities that defined the social identity and value of the Israelite people.

Medical anthropology provided Pilch with a conceptual framework that is detached and equidistant from the cultural units or human groups involved in ethnomedical research, and which can be applied also to the exegesis of New Testament healing stories (Pilch 2000: 35–36). The core concepts in this framework are the broad notions of "good fortune" and "misfortune," which apply to every human group, but whose specific contours depend on the values, knowledge, shared presuppositions, and social organization of each one (Worsley: 327). Here, the concept of "health" is understood as that aspect of good fortune which depends mostly on the state of the body, and the concept of sickness includes any misfortune that destroys health; but both health and sickness embrace everything that contribute to the fortune or the misfortune of the person whose bodily state is so assessed. They embrace all the consequences of the ways in which other members of society judge, value and deal with particular healthy or sick bodies.

In the case of people affected with "biblical leprosy," the worst aspect of the misfortune they suffered because of the state of their bodies was social rejection. Therefore, their reincorporation to society was equivalent to their healing. Accord-

ing to Pilch's analysis, this is probably what the gospel stories of Jesus healing lepers are about. By declaring them pure, Jesus used his authority to reintegrate these people in their communities, thus eliminating the main cause of their suffering. Jesus would not have changed the physiological state of their skin, but the social evaluation of their body by their kin and neighbors (Pilch 2000: 45–54).

Seen from this perspective, the biomedical approach to health and sickness that characterizes Western medicine is but one among many possible others. Its selective focus on the biological causes of bodily misfortunes restricts the notion of sickness to that of disease, which is defined as a state of bodily malfunctioning due to biological causes. This leaves out of medical concern much of the human suffering that other societies' health systems take seriously into account (Kleinman). The only concern of the biomedical health system is to "cure" or take effective control of the disordered biological processes that might be going on in a human body (Pilch 2000: 13). But such a goal was utterly unthinkable in ancient Mediterranean societies, whose health systems not only lacked the required scientific knowledge, but were primarily concerned with restoring meaning to the lives of the sick. In the etic vocabulary of medical anthropology, the practice of restoring meaning to those stricken by body-related misfortunes is termed "healing."

As Pilch never ceased to emphasize, healing and curing are very different practices, though in certain situations they can overlap. Modern Western medicine might cure a diseased body without restoring meaning to the life of its owner, while ancient Mediterranean healers like Jesus might heal, that is, restore meaning to a disabled person's life, without curing her.

Pilch's analysis of biblical healing stories within the conceptual framework of medical anthropology have greatly contributed to our critical understanding of their original meaning, but most crucially, they have shown how strong and decisive the influence of culture is in the way humans know, feel and experience everything. Even those experiences that originate in the shared bare materiality of the human body are shaped differently by different cultures, and the webs of meanings that become related with them can vary greatly from one society to another.

Alternate States of Consciousness

The acknowledgement of the role of culture in shaping and

differentiating human experiential worlds is an appropriate starting point for assessing Pilch's research on the topic of visions and other extraordinary experiences in the Bible.

Pilch's interest in the topic was fueled by the anthropological research of Erika Bourguignon and Felicitas Goodman (Bourguignon 1973) on spiritual possession, dissociation and altered states of consciousness. As the dedication in his book *Visions and healing in the Acts of the Apostles* suggests, Pilch found that Goodman's concept of alternate states of consciousness (ASC) and her techniques for attaining them (Goodman: 35–43) opened a path to explore the type of experiences that ancient Judeans and Christians described as spiritual visions or journeys to the realm of God.

The etic concept of alternate states of consciousness that has been adopted by most psychological anthropologists and cognitive neuroscientists doing research on religious experience, is central to Goodman's work and Pilch's application of it to the Judean and Christian traditions. The research contexts in which this concept has emerged acknowledge that the human mind is naturally prepared to switch from the fully awake and practical oriented state of consciousness that presides over most of our social lives, to other states of consciousness where the form and content of both inner and exterior perception, and the sense of time, space and identity might vary in substantial ways (Pilch 2011: 148). Moreover, these changes can account for many of the testimonies about unusual or extraordinary experiences that anthropologists and historians encounter in so many spiritual and religious traditions around the world.

In the context of biblical exegesis, this involves considering that many texts dealing with prophecies, visions, encounters with heavenly beings, soul journeys to the realm of the divine, and other like phenomena may refer to types of experiences known to the human groups where these texts originated. In fact, much of Pilch's work was devoted to support the plausibility of that being so for particular texts of that sort (Pilch 2004 and 2011).

Although he never engaged in proving the historicity of any particular passage, he fought the idea that labelling an apparently fantastic text according to its literary genre or form is a sufficient explanation of its origin. The fact that Paul's experience on the way to Damascus as told by the author of Acts has the literary form known by form-critics as "dialogue with apparition" does not explain why this form was used at that point in the narrative nor why it existed in the first place (Pilch 2004: 74–76). As Bruce Malina repeatedly pointed out, literary forms and genres are not products of language systems, but

derive from the social system. They are culturally specific wording patterns that reflect social practices (Pilch 2004: 75–76). Therefore, that literary form must have had its origin in the expected pattern of interaction between a heavenly figure and a human that has an encounter with the divine. Luke used it to describe Paul's divine call because he knew a tradition to the effect that Paul had become a Christ follower after having had an ecstatic experience of the resurrected Jesus. The details that fill the expected pattern might be Luke's creation. In fact, although he tells the story no fewer than three times (Acts 9:4–15; 22:7–14; 26:14–16), he does not bother to make the corresponding descriptions match in every aspect.

By appealing to the universal human capacity to experience alternative consciousness, Pilch liberated critical exegetes of the need to explain in strictly literary or symbolic terms whatever seems fantastically impossible to the Enlightenment's paradigm of scientific knowledge.

Pilch's arguments for the plausibility of these difficult passages are of two different types and work at two different levels. First, there is the etic argument about the human mind's capacity of switching to alternative states of consciousness or alternative ways of functioning and interacting with the world. This capacity allows us to explain Bourguignon's significant finding that most cultures (92% of a 1963 survey) have institutionalized behaviors aimed at attaining ASC.

An important part of those institutionalized ASC can be labelled as religious trance, because they promote experiences of contact with what Pilch, following Goodman (Goodman: 43–47], calls "alternate reality." Alternate reality is an etic concept that refers to a realm or dimension of reality which is conceived as existent, but different from the ordinary reality experienced in everyday life. According to the information anthropologists and historians have gathered from cultures present and past, almost all human societies acknowledge or have acknowledged the existence of some such type of reality.

Many of the features that shape alternate reality and the beings that inhabit it are culture dependent. That is, each society conceives alternate reality in a different way. For ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies it was the realm of divine and spiritual beings. For Judeans, in particular, alternate reality was Heaven, the realm of Israel's God (YHWH).

The important point of Pilch's exegetical approach to the notion of a heavenly reality is that he considered it to be, not just a Judean belief, but the object of many Judean's experience. Judeans believed in Heaven and heavenly beings be-

cause many of them had experienced them.

Of course, those experiences had to be experienced in ASC. This is the reason why, whenever he analyzed one of those apparently fantastic stories, he always searched for features that could signal a switch of the character's mind to an alternate state of consciousness.

For this task, Pilch relied on the results of many anthropological, psychological and neurological studies on experiences in ASC which showed that, though the phenomenological content of concrete experiences in these states is culturally and personally idiosyncratic, it is possible to detect some common features pertaining to the structure of their main types, the dynamics of their onset, and their ways of induction.

Consequently, Pilch could use the identification of some of these features in a text to support the hypothesis that it dealt with an experience in alternate consciousness. For example, Peter's hunger during his prayer in Simon's house (Acts 10:3), the intense concentration of the paralytic's gaze on Peter and John just before his healing (Acts 3:4) and Mary Magdalene's intense feeling of loss at Jesus' death . . . are counted as physiological or psychological triggers of the ASC that would explain the vision or the healing that followed. Similarly, the bright colors that characterize most of John's visions in *Revelation*, the bright light seen by Paul in his way to Damascus (Acts 9:3), Paul's confusion about the connection between his soul and his body while journeying to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:1–4) . . . can be taken to denote that the scene described occurs in an ASC.

But Pilch's exegetical procedure also took advantage of the idiosyncratic aspects of ASC experiences. As previously indicated, most cross-cultural studies carried on till now on this topic acknowledge that the contents of experiences in ASC are very much shaped by local cultural patterns and socially transmitted beliefs—the "latent discourse" of the subject's society (Pilch 2004: 4–5). This explains why Judean visionaries experienced the realm of Israel's God and not, for example, Olympus, the abode of the Greek divinities.

In Walsh's words: "There is a complementarity between a tradition's worldview and its technology of transcendence such that an effective technology (set of practices) elicits experiences consistent with and supportive of the worldview" (Walsh: 758).

Therefore, for Pilch's scientifically informed exegesis, the fact that many extraordinary stories and descriptions in the Biblical text fulfill the cultural expectations of ancient Judeans in relation to Heaven and heavenly beings' interactions with

humans is not a reason for suspecting deception, but a good argument in favor of their plausibility.

Moreover, according to those same studies, the personal situation of the subject, his or her preoccupations and emotional state can promote a switch to an ASC and can also contribute to the configuration of its experiential content. The collected data show that shamans and other types of holy men and women refer regularly to self-induced trances in order to look for knowledge relevant to their communities or to find solutions to serious dilemmas affecting them (Goodman: 42). It is also known that many spontaneous ASC are triggered by personal crisis or hard conflicts, and that the non-ordinary experiences thereby produced might promote their resolution. It seems as if, in most cultures, our human capacity of switching our conscience to those states had been put to the use of dealing with many extreme situations and complex problems that our ordinary thinking faculty is unable to handle. Thus, the more consistent the outcomes of the extraordinary experiences found in the biblical texts are with the plights and personal situations of their characters, the more plausible they are.

For example, the fact that the content of Ezekiel's soul flight to Jerusalem reflects the conflict between the exiled community in Babylon and the people left in Judaea, and that it helped the prophet accept God's rejection of the Temple, increases the probability of Ezekiel's having had a similar experience.

Likewise, the fact that the content of Peter's vision in Acts 10:9–23 reflects the dilemma posed to the Jerusalem church by gentile followers of Christ, and that it helped Peter overcome his cultural resistance at the idea of socializing with non-Jews, increases the probability of a leader of the primitive church having had a similar ecstatic experience.

In sum, Pilch's use of cross-cultural psychology and cognitive neuroscience in his analysis of many apparently fantastic biblical stories and testimonies leads him to apparently more realistic and literal interpretations than those to which redactional and form critical exegesis had accustomed us. The possibility of that being the case may have alerted some critical students and scholars who would fear that all that ASC stuff could strengthen fundamentalist positions regarding the interpretation of the biblical text. To clarify this issue, I think we need to reflect on the different meanings the term "realism" might have as applied to Pilch's work.

First of all, Pilch's interpretation of any text was always reached after a thorough process of cultural contextualization. His main exegetical goal was to imagine and explain how the

original intended audience of a text would have understood it. This attitude has nothing to do with naïve and fundamentalist literal interpretations of the Bible, which are based on the erroneous assumption that words and sentences have absolute meanings any reader from any culture can properly understand.

In relation to this issue of contextualization, the alleged realism of Pilch's exegesis boils down to the well-grounded conclusion that many biblical stories and testimonies that sound fantastic to modern Western ears would have been interpreted by their original audiences in a realistic way (Pilch 2011: 25). For instance, Stephen's vision of the glorified Jesus in Acts 7:55 would have been taken by Luke himself and by his original audience as a realistically plausible experience for a martyr to have. Therefore, in such cases, modern biblical interpreters would not need to look for elaborate symbolism and literary conventions in order to discover what the text was originally supposed to communicate, because its culturally contextualized meaning would be much more straightforward than past literary criticism used to think.

In addition to this emic understanding of the reality of visions, soul journeys, and other extraordinary experiences referred to in the Bible, Pilch also advocated for the historical plausibility of many ancient Mediterranean people having such types of experience. More concretely, he claimed that many Hebrew prophets, many followers of Jesus, and Jesus himself had the type of extraordinary experiences that the biblical texts ascribe to them. He grounded this claim in the scientifically proven fact that all human beings can have analogous experiences by switching to certain types of ASC. If these experiences seem fantastic to many modern Western readers, it is because the rationalism we have inherited from the Enlightenment period, which continues to shape our educational and academic institutions, rejects them as faked or pathological. Such rejection inhibits in most of us what cross-cultural psychology considers a spontaneous human attraction to experiment with ASC.

In agreement with an already fair number of psychologists and anthropologists, Pilch thought that the above mentioned inhibition is not a sign of superior intelligence but of a diminished capacity for experiencing the full range of conscious interactions humans are physiologically prepared to have with whatever exists around and beyond us.

This train of thought can introduce us to the third sense in which Pilch's interpretation of many apparently fantastic biblical testimonies may be considered "realistic." Contrary to

the other two, which follow from his socio-scientific approach to the exegesis of ancient texts, this one amounts to nothing less than an ontological choice: He assumed that experiences in ASC can make their subjects enter or contact "alternate reality," which he took to be a dimension of reality that differs from the reality experienced in ordinary everyday life. According to these ontological hypothesis and terminology, the heavenly beings seen by visionaries and the journeys through heavenly spheres made by soul travelers can be considered real.

Although many critical exegetes may find it surprising, Pilch's position on this issue was not philosophically naïve. As a close examination of his writings shows, his most precise assessments about types of reality make them always dependent on experience. See, for example, Pilch 2004: 16–18: "Ordinary or culturally normal reality includes those aspects or dimensions of reality of which persons are most commonly aware most of the time."

"Reality has many dimensions beyond that of which human beings are routinely aware."

As "awareness" pertains to "experience," this means that, even though Pilch never questioned the existence of reality, he knew too well that humans can only acknowledge it through experience. But as experience depends, among other things, on the subject's state of consciousness, it is perfectly rational to divide reality according to the main types of conscious modes of accessing it. Hence the gross division he maintained between the reality perceived in ordinary awake consciousness (common reality), and that perceived in ASC (alternate reality), both constituting the totality of reality.

Pilch's way of conceiving and dividing reality is not a necessary consequence of contemporary science, but it seems compatible with it (d'Aquili & Newberg: 177–93). It fits what Pilch himself called a post-Enlightenment scientific world view. But any post-Enlightenment world view must embrace the idea that, in physics as well as in evolutionary biology, in history and in the social sciences, the subject of any experiment or inquiry has to be counted as an interacting element or part of the system itself that is being tested. It must also acknowledge the far-reaching epistemological consequences of the well established neurobiological fact that the human nervous system is incessantly being modified by experience, and that it plays an active role in the configuration of whatever the mind perceives, feels or remembers (Mason 2011: 15).

For such a world view, the contention that the culture and personal circumstances of the subject of an experience shape

the content of the experience itself is totally unproblematic. Hence, the idea that any reality known as content of experience is shaped by personal and cultural parameters, must also be true. Note that this applies, not only to alternate reality known in ASC, but also to the reality known in ordinary waking states of consciousness. It is true that the experience of everyday life, with its pronounced practical orientation, is more easily shared by the members of a human group than experiences in ASC. This is why ordinary reality generally invites more social consensus than alternate reality. Nevertheless, both are mediated by experience, and both are subjected to the shaping or interpreting influence of latent cultural discourses through conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious interpretations.

In this context, Pilch's ontological option for the reality of heavenly beings and the like not only is sound and consistent, but it can also be distinguished from the naïve realism that characterizes uncritical and fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible.

For naïve realism, an angel exists by itself, with all its features and capacities untouched by human needs and anticipations. For Pilch, an angel is the result of a specific culture's engagement with alternate reality through a tradition of experiences in institutionalized ASC.

True, the "reality" of Pilch's alternate reality is a philosophical choice that anyone is free to reject. Nevertheless, it offers a non-contradictory ontological hypothesis for explaining the almost universal human inclination to engage with the transcendent.

Conclusion

Pilch's contribution to critical exegesis of the Bible is most noteworthy for his analysis of precisely those texts that seem most outlandish and bizarre to the modern Western reader, that is, those dealing with healings, visions and analogous extraordinary phenomena and experiences. In these analyses he always succeeded in combining emic and etic approaches in meaningful ways.

The emic reconstructions of the sociocultural scenarios with which Pilch showed the meaning and internal coherence of ancient texts were always supported by broader etic conceptual frames in which the culture presupposed by the text and our modern Western culture could be observed from an equidistant and detached point of view. This method helps the reader adopt a transcultural stance and become aware of any logical relation that might link comparable terms from

each culture.

For the topic of biblical healings he used several conceptual frameworks from medical anthropology, with which he was able to show, for example, that the biomedical concepts of “disease” and “cure” have no equivalents in most preindustrial societies, and that the body-related misfortunes that ancient holy men and women healed had much more to do with negative cultural evaluations and social discrimination than with the physiological or organic malfunctions or abnormalities that might have gone with them. Therefore, the concepts that we can apply to both ancient Judean culture and modern Western culture in order to understand biblical healings are not those of our modern Western medicine, but the broader ones of “misfortune,” “devalued personal state,” “negative discrimination,” “loss of meaning,” and “healing,” in the sense of restoring meaning to the patient’s personal and social life (Kleinman: 7–8).

For the analysis of extraordinary experiences or religious trances Pilch used the concept of altered state of consciousness as defined and developed by cross-cultural psychology and cognitive neuroscience. In this case, the etic point of view is supported by the physiology and the functioning of the human brain, which make experiences in ASC potentially accessible to all human beings.

This method and the concrete conceptual frameworks that Pilch chose allow modern readers of the Bible to see the plausibility of what previous critical interpretations had considered fantastic stories and testimonies that could be read only from an entirely literary and symbolic perspective.

Moreover, Pilch’s analysis and reconstructions also facilitate respectful actualizations of some of the most difficult biblical texts for the use of those modern readers and communities who are engaged in a religious or wisdom-seeking dialogue with them.

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