Anthropology, Polanyi, and Afropentecostal Ritual: Toward A Scientific, Personal and Social Epistemology of Participation

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The 1903 World’s Fair in St. Louis sponsored both an International Congress of Arts and Sciences aimed at unity of knowledge and an anthropology exhibit of diverse peoples. Jointly these represent a quest for unifying knowledge in a diverse world which was fractured by isolated specializations and peoples. In historical perspective the congress’s quest for knowledge is overshadowed by Ota Benga who was kept in a cage as part of the anthropology exhibit. The 1903 World’s Fair in St. Louis can be viewed as a Euro-American ritual, a global pilgrimage, that sought to celebrate the advances and resolve the challenges of modernity and human diversity. Three years later Afropentecostalism dealt with these same issues but with a very different ritual system initiated on Azusa Street in Los Angeles. That postmodern ritual system became the fastest growing and most culturally diverse religious movement of the twentieth century. This article suggests that the anthropological method of Frank Hamilton Cushing, the Post-critical Epistemology of Michael Polanyi, and the Pentecostal ritual movement initiated by William J. Seymour are all attempts to develop postmodern epistemologies broad enough to allow for human consciousness and diverse human communities. From these three the following thesis is explored: persons know and are known by participating in and reflecting on reality which is: material (comprehendible-regular-aesthetic), social (communal-political-jural), and spiritual (relational-universal-moral). The pursuit of such a thesis might diminish inclinations to cage people and objectify reality.