



Science and Religion

Interview with Ravi Ravindra

The Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue, which was inaugurated a few years ago under the auspices of Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has been publishing a bilingual inter-religious journal, Religions/AdyĀn. For their issue "centred on matters pertaining to RELIGION, SCIENCE and TECHNOLOGY, in the broadest sense, with an INTER-RELIGIOUS EMPHASIS," the Editor invited Ravi Ravindra to engage in a written interview. Ravi was sent some questions to which he responded. The following interview was published in the December 2013 issue of the English/Arabic Journal Religions/AdyĀn.

Can science help us know the nature of God through his creation?

So much depends on what one thinks or imagines 'God' is. If there is some sort of a *personal* God nothing in science can show us the face of such an anthropomorphic Being. Those scientists who are not completely driven away by the very word 'God' are much more likely to be sympathetic to the God of Spinoza or Einstein in which, in the words of Einstein, there is a cosmic "intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection." (*Ideas and Opinions 11*) What science can do and is doing quite well, is to reveal such amazing Intelligence pervading the cosmos. But when it comes to 'personal God,' this is what Einstein said, "In the struggle for ethical good teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is give up the source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast powers in the hands of priests." (*Out of My Later Years 28 -9*)

It is useful to remember that all the major theologians even in the Biblical traditions, where the idea of a personal God is so predominant, would be aghast at imposing human characteristics on God. In other traditions, especially in Buddhism and in Vedanta, the Ultimate Reality transcends any notion of God in the Biblical traditions. These trans-theistic perspectives are sometimes erroneously regarded as atheistic.

What does process theology tell us about the nature of God?

Different process theologians have understandably different emphasis. As a general comment, the God of process theology rejects the omniscient God knowing and determining all future becomings. This release of the process of becoming is much more congenial to scientific activity dealing with events and the process of change in time.

How can religion help us solve scientific problems that humanity faces today like global warming?

There is no monolithic meaning of 'religion' any more than that of 'God.' For a great many people, religion amounts to a set of beliefs in some ancient scripture and codified by some councils many centuries ago. Mostly what goes on in the name of religion is close-mindedness; unfortunately far too often

resulting in fanaticism and bigotry. However, for some people a religious mind is a learning mind, willing to be surprised, and open to all reality. For such people, concern for and care of all of nature, including the planet Earth, is a part of being more and more fully human. For them any problems facing our planet or humanity in general need our attention, resources and energy. Depending on their sphere of activity, such religious people will make their contributions as voters, tax payers or as scientists in solving the relevant problems.

Can nature and beauty help bring together scientists and theologians?

Both nature and beauty help human beings towards a clearer mind and a larger heart whether they are theologians or scientists or anybody else. Then it will be easier for them to feel that there cannot in principle be any contradiction between scientific research and spiritual search. However, if the scientists in question are addicted to scientism and regard the universe wholly in materialist terms, or the theologians in question are dedicated to the defense of some dogma, it is unlikely that anything—including nature and beauty—will bring them together.

Can science explain religion?

I have an impression that much of what goes on in the name of religion, and the consequent psychological attitudes and behaviour, can be fairly well explained by increasingly subtler scientific investigations in the fields of psychology and psychiatry, largely because much of this so called religious behaviour is driven by ordinary fears of the unknown and desires for comfort and security. However, the religion pertaining to the spiritual realities experienced by the great sages and mystics in all traditions—such as the Buddha, the Christ, John of the Cross, Rumi or Ramana—is beyond all categories of interest available to science.

Is science capable of proving the reality of the transcendent dimension of life?

No, simply because the transcendent dimension transcends the very categories and aspects—such as space-time, matter-energy, causality and the like—in which scientific research operates. One can come to the Sacred only at the end of knowledge—*vedanta*. Knowledge is always not only in time and space, it is of time and space. The Sacred manifests in great vision which cannot be formulated or codified.

Would science better serve the spiritual potential of the human race by acknowledging the inherent limits of its domain?

Most if not all of the first class scientists—Einstein, Newton, Swedenborg, Darwin, Niels Bohr, Schroedinger, to name only a few—acknowledge the inherent limits of science. Here are some comments of Schroedinger, the father of Wave Mechanics: “Physics has nothing to do with religion. Physics takes its start from everyday experience, which it continues by more subtle means. It remains akin to it, does not transcend it generically, it cannot enter into another realm” (*Science, Theory and Man* 307 -8). He characterizes such attempts as “sinister.” “The territory from which previous scientific attainment is invited to retire is with admirable dexterity claimed as a playground of some religious ideology that cannot really use it profitably, because its [religion’s] true domain is far beyond anything in reach of scientific explanation” (*Nature and the Greeks* 8).

How does your interest in the various religious traditions of the world inform your practice of science?

What interests me in the various religious traditions are the various spiritual practices and disciplines and not so much their dogmas or belief systems. Even a slight awareness of any of these disciplines, and certainly a serious engagement with any one of them makes one aware of the fact that all spiritual traditions speak of various levels of reality both inside us as well as outside. Just as a human being has physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects so does the cosmos. Also, that there is a correspondence between internal and external levels. In the words of St. Paul, the eyes of the flesh can see the things of the flesh and the eyes of the spirit the things of the spirit.

Therefore, the purpose of the spiritual disciplines is to cleanse our perceptions qualitatively so that we can begin to see, feel and sense the spiritual dimensions of whatever we look at—nature, other people, other cultures and the whole universe. The more one is spiritually oriented, the more one can engage in scientific research out of wonder and joy, not necessarily out of competition.



Natalie Tobert's mysterious ceramic sculptures, which transmute spirit humans with shamanic bird forms. <http://ceramic-asymmetry.com/>
Natalie Tobert is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and a member of The Society of Designer Craftsmen.

Has being a scientist affected your spiritual evolution?

The entire enterprise of spiritual disciplines is oriented towards the enhancement of the quality of the person, ultimately resulting in a complete freedom from me-me-me. If one is not moving towards more compassion and love, a clearer understanding of one's place in the cosmos which naturally frees one from more pride and arrogance, one is not spiritual. Scientific research, on the other hand, is not especially interested in the quality of the persons practicing science. However, any serious spiritual undertaking is suffused with a scientific temper so that one relies on a clear mind and direct perceptions, not on somebody else's authority.

What is it that really motivates science? And how is that different from what motivates spiritual pursuit?

Other than survival, food and the like, there are two great human needs, needs of the soul: knowledge and meaning. Science is the quest for knowledge. The search for meaning in one's life immediately brings one towards relationship—with oneself, with other humans and with the Ultimate Reality. That is why in spiritual literature one can hardly escape the great emphasis on love, compassion, freedom from selfishness and the like—all the necessary requirements for a any meaningful relationship.

Scientific research and spiritual search both proceed from a sense of Mystery—mystery inside and mystery outside, both aspects of the Great Mystery. Scientific research has to do with trying to know the unknown, but this unknown is in principle knowable. Spiritual search, or search for the Sacred, has to do with the cultivation of a relationship with the Unknowable Mystery. Spiritual mysteries—such as God is love (1 John 4.16), or Atman is Brahman (Mandukya Upanishad 2)—cannot be solved in the sense that the solution can be articulated in rational terms and passed on to someone else. However, in a contemplative state of a quiet mind these mysteries can be dissolved. Then one no longer denies the Mystery or fears it; one celebrates the mystery. A dancer celebrates the Mystery in dance, a musician in music; and a physicist by engaging in doing physics.

Although it is not generally the case, science itself can be, and has been for some scientists, a spiritual path gradually freeing them from the ego. As Einstein said, echoing the insight of all the great spiritual sages of the world: "The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained liberation from the self." (Ideas and Opinions 12).

How can the internal process of religious and scientific thought be reconciled?

It should be clear from the answers to the previous questions, that according to my understanding there cannot in principle be any conflict between scientific research and spiritual search. No true scientist can be untouched by the grandeur of the vastness of the cosmos and the harmony of the intricate natural laws. If such feelings are not suppressed by some cultural conditioning, the resulting rapturous amazement is bound to lead one to an ardent reflection on one's place in this immensity. These feeling experiences are the intimations of the Sacred.

Similarly, anyone touched by the spiritual Truth is naturally interested in the incredible order displayed by the manifested universe. In principle, even at the most ordinary level, every human being is both potentially a scientist—interested in the external cosmos as it presents itself to our senses and mind—and a spiritual searcher—interested in the meaning of one's life and one's true place in the vastness.

What is your view of the future perspectives on the intersection of science and religion, especially as scientific discoveries and advances continue?

Treating *science* and *religion* as abstractions and trying to oppose them or to reconcile them is a wrong-headed approach. Each human being wishes to be whole—uniquely oneself but participating in the oneness of all there is. These abstractions interfere with the search for wholeness. At the end of learning, a serious person returns to himself. Then one sees that not only I know very little, but that the whole of humanity knows very little. This sense of not knowing is not a celebration of

ignorance, but a quality of innocence in the presence of the Vastness. One can be open to the Great Mystery. The more science reveals the workings of great nature, the deeper the Mystery becomes.

Two forms of awareness can reside in the same person: on the one hand, direct subtle supersensuous perceptions and, on the other, reasoned scientific theorizing and experimentation with its corresponding philosophical abstractions—however rare actual instances of this may be. The reconciliation of religion and science needs to take place in the soul of the same whole person so that there can be purposive action without self-centeredness, individuality without egoism, wholeness without loss of uniqueness. For many great scientists, the Sacred was not discovered or proved by science. The Sacred called them, pervaded their lives, and gave significance to their scientific activity, as it would have to their other activities, such as music or poetry or painting, if they had been called to celebrate the Sacred through the arts, as were Bach, Kalidasa, and El Greco.

***Ravi Ravindra** was born in India and received his early education there. He went to Canada as a graduate student and later as an immigrant. Now he is a Professor Emeritus at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he served for many years as a professor in three Departments: Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Physics. He was a Member of the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, and the Founding Director of the Threshold Award for Integrative Knowledge. He has been a member of the Board of Judges for the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. Ravindra's spiritual search has led him to the teachings of J. Krishnamurti, G. Gurdjieff, Yoga, Zen, and a deep immersion in the mystical teachings of the Indian and Christian classical traditions. His last book was *The Pilgrim Soul: A Path to the Sacred Transcending World Religions* and his new book on the *Bhagavad Gita* is in press.*

