

Science and Wisdom-Compassion

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It has surprised me that so many people who are convinced of the universal and objective nature of scientific knowledge work so diligently to find in the latest discoveries of the sciences an exclusive vindication of statements in the Vedas or in the Qur'an or of dogmas accepted by the Church Councils at some stage in history. That we are Hindus or Jews or Christians largely depends on where we happened to have been born. It is extremely difficult to believe that truth suddenly changes across a border defined by a river or a mountain range which correspond to political boundaries of past or present empires. I do not have any rigorous data about this, but I imagine that easily 95% or even more people in the world sooner or later--especially at the time of marriages or funerals--revert to the religion which they inherited from their forefathers, with minor variations on the theme. This is quite understandable for, just like the ordinary languages, much of our emotional-religious language is acquired in early childhood and we make sense of the deeper religious aspirations with the aid of these acquired categories of feeling and thought. It is very likely that people who vehemently adhere to one creed or dogma would equally vehemently adhere to another if they had been born in another religious context. The recognition that others exist, as thinking, feeling and autonomous beings sometimes engaged with ultimate concerns, is a step towards freedom from self-occupation and self-importance, a step of crucial import in spiritual awakening.

Attunement to the spiritual dimension surely is an attunement to a quality of vibration, not exclusively to a particular form of the instrument producing the vibration. It has not been easy for some to accept that one can have a transfusion of blood from those whose skin colour is different from their own. It is much harder to allow the possibility of spiritual nourishment underneath religious and racial skins. In my own case, I was born a Hindu. There is much that is good and wise in the Hindu Tradition. I am certain I could have been dealt a worse heritage. But the Hindus do not have and cannot have a monopoly on Truth or Wisdom or Insight. One wishes to and strives to grow up, a part of which is to develop a connection with a level of consciousness in which, as the great twentieth-century Indian sage Maharishi Ramana said, "There are no others." This is not an elimination of others in self-occupation, but seeing through the otherness in a unitive perception. It will sadden me if I am merely a Hindu at my death, restricted to my own selfhood defined by contingencies of history or geography. The past is always with us and in us, but future vision needs to be based on some ability to fly with freedom from the past.

"Sir," answered the woman, "I can see you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you people claim that Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship God." Jesus told her, "Believe me, woman, an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... Yet an hour is coming, and is already here, when those who are real worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth. Indeed, it is just such worshippers the Father seeks. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and truth." (John 4:19-24).

In spiritual matters what is most relevant is how the quality of the person is affected by whatever theology or philosophy or ritual one finds helpful. The person cannot be left out of

these concerns, neither oneself nor others. Inter-faith dialogues are good and possibly helpful, inter-pilgrim dialogues are likely to be much more fruitful. We need to be careful not to fix these faiths and the faithful in them. Surely the important thing is to see and to relate with the person behind the faith. It is not they are Jews and we are Jains, it is more that some of us have a Jewish background and heritage and some others of us have a Jain formation. At our best, we would wish to be related to the Ultimate or to God who all our sages say is neither Jewish nor Jain. If we are permanently restricted to relate to each other only as a Hindu to a Christian, and not as a person to a person, I wonder if we can ever relate as a person to the Person.

As and when religions do their job of insisting on the primacy of the person over any system--theological, metaphysical, economic or political--they are naturally occupied with cultivation of wise and compassionate people. When such people engage in science, or any other activity, they are naturally concerned for the welfare of all beings, including the earth--not only as generalizations, but also in concrete relationships. As we draw inspiration and instruction from the wise sages and prophets of the past, we shall not be occupied with only our personal salvation, but also for the enlightenment of those who will welcome the dawn with song when we are no longer here. The development of a comprehensive person, one who is closer and closer to the First Person Universal, less 'I am this' or 'I am that' and more as 'I AM,' is a calling of all religions, so that we can awaken from the dead, as St. Paul beautifully said (Ephesians 4:13), to "mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ."

As between different religions, so between religion and science. We need to search for the best aspirations and the most universal truths of both. There is a remark of Einstein that "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." (In his essay called "Science and Religion" in *Ideas and Opinions*, Crown Publishers, New York, 1954, p. 46). This sounds so congenial and heart-warming that one is inclined to accept it with enthusiasm. But a look at this and a parallel remark of Ishvarakrishna in the *Samkhyakarika* from the second century BCE reveals some quite interesting contrasts between the Eastern and Western perspectives on knowledge and science. In speaking about Purusha and Prakriti--which we may translate as Spirit and Nature--Ishvarakrishna says, "Purusha without Prakriti is lame, Prakriti without Purusha is blind."

The two statements are so widely separated in time, space and cultures--and so clearly from independent and seminal minds--that we should celebrate the happy similarity, but if we look at the two statements closely, we shall discover a whole world of difference. Whatever else we understand by the metaphors of 'blind' and 'lame', we certainly associate insight, clarity, light, illumination with the opposite of being blind. All the great teachers say in one way or another that we have eyes but we do not see, and that we have ears but we do not hear. To see clearly is a mark of wisdom. Being lame, on the other hand, implies inability to act, lack of will, incapacity, lack of movement and of involvement.

Therefore we can understand Einstein to say that vision--insight, wisdom, clarity, illumination--comes from science, but motivation, action, will and emotion come from religion. For Ishvarakrishna, on the other hand, insight (*prajña*), knowledge (*jñāna*), wisdom and enlightenment (*bodhi*) belong to Purusha. Action, movement and emotion, the whole realm of gross and subtle nature, belong to Prakriti.

We would all agree, including Einstein if he were here and willing to engage with us using the same language, that the whole realm of science has to do with Prakriti which literally means 'Nature,' which is what the natural sciences try to study. Religion on the other hand is understood to deal with the Spirit and with what is super-natural. This raises some interesting questions about what we understand by science and by religion and of our expectations of these two, and about the contrasts in the views of the East and of the West.

How do we reconcile these two similar sounding statements from two very great minds? A paradox can lead us to conclude that only one side must be right and the other wrong. This kind of conclusion may be warranted in matters involving ordinary contradictions, but a profound paradox does not provide a contradiction to be removed by choosing one side or the other. Such paradoxes often remind us about the limitations of language, logic and thought when it concerns really important things. Niels Bohr used to say that the opposite of a great truth is another very great truth.

In the East, the basic diagnosis of the human situation is that our whole predicament arises from ignorance (avidya). The root cause of all our difficulties is ignorance. From that arises, according to Vedanta, the confusion between the Self and the non-Self, or between nitya (eternal) and anitya (transient) and a clinging to the world of anitya. Thus arise fear and fantasy and dukkha (suffering), maya (illusion), asmita (egoism). Gautama Buddha, Shankara, Patañjali and all other great teachers of India have regarded the root of all our problems to be ignorance. If we know rightly, right action will naturally follow. If insight leads to and controls action and guides it, then there is right order--both internally and externally. In other words, when Purusha--consciousness, spirit, seeing (which is the sole function of Purusha the Seer, according to Patañjali)--sees and leads Prakriti, there is awakening, enlightenment, freedom, moksha, nirvana, and the like. Otherwise, a person is bound by dukkha, maya, asmita and kleshas (obstacles). In the Western Biblical religions, the situation is quite different. The basic human problem is not regarded to be ignorance, but rather self-will. In general, from the Biblical point of view, to say that we are waiting to engage in right action until we know rightly is mere self-justification. God has revealed what needs to be known; we know what the right action is. Our problem is that we do not want to obey the commandments and undertake right action. We want to follow and act according to our own self-will, rather than God's will. "Nothing burneth in hell except self-will," says Theologia Germanica (chapt. 34). The whole choiceless agony of the cross--the way of the Christ--is in his last words in the Garden of Gethsamane: "If it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Yet, not my will, but thine be done" (Mark 14:36).

In the East, in order to remedy the general human situation the need is for true knowledge because right knowledge leads to right action. In the West, the need is for right action--in obedience to the will of God; that is the definition of faith according to St. Paul--for right action leads to right knowledge. When Vivekananda speaks of bringing science and religion together, for him, unlike for Einstein, science has to do with the dimension of action, and yoga with that of true perception and insight.

At least on this score Einstein very much belongs to the Biblical Tradition and it is not surprising that he should place religion on the side of action, movement, motivation and the like. Insight for him belongs on the side of science, a study of the dance of Prakriti, and itself is a part of Prakriti. For Ishvarakrishna, insight is obtained through the practical spiritual discipline of yoga. Following the usual practice, we can extend the usage of yoga to include any spiritual path. which can happily include science as a spiritual path for those who

undertake it with that motivation. Then one would say that in science and spirituality we have two different kinds of knowledge or insight, not knowledge on one side and faith on the other, except in quite esoteric sense of faith which is subtle and worthy. There is one kind of knowledge in the sciences and another kind in spiritual disciplines such as Yoga, Sufism, Zen, or Prayer of the Heart. However, the nature of in-sight, of knowledge, and of the related perceptions, in the domain of sci-ence is quite different from that in the realm of spirituality. One can take examples from the actual prac-tice of science and the practice of spirituality; but these cannot be pursued here in detail. [Some of these issues are discussed in more detail in my Science and the Sacred, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai, India, and Wheaton, Illinois, 2000]

The purpose of all spiritual disciplines--which are not the same as religions--is to relate us with the spiritual (which is to say non-prakriti, non-material, including subtle material) dimensions. This tuning into the subtler dimensions is possible only by cleansing our ordinary perceptions, and by quieting the mind. The requirement of meditation as well as of any serious prayer is to be present with stillness and a silence of the body, mind and the emotions, so that one might hear a rose petal fall, the sound of the thoughts arising, and the silence between thoughts. The arising of thoughts and emotions is a part of the play of Prakriti, and watching this play with complete equanimity, without being disturbed, belongs to Purusha. Without the presence of the seeing Purusha, Prakriti is blind, lost in agitated movement and action; but Purusha needs Prakriti for purposive activity. Alert without agitation, a centred-self without being self-centred, a sage does nothing, nothing of his own or for himself, but everything is accomplished. As Christ said, "I am not myself the source of the words I speak: it is the Father who dwells in me doing His own work" (John 14:10). Elsewhere, the scripture says, "The Lord shall fight for you; what you need is to be still" (Exodus 14:14).

The core of all spiritual practice is freedom from the selfish, isolated and isolating ego so that one can see more and more clearly and be related with all more and more lovingly and selflessly. There can be no significance to insight, wisdom or truth unless it expresses itself in love and compassion. The sages in all the great traditions have said, in myriad ways, that Love is a fundamental quality of the cosmos. Not only a quality but a basic constituent of Ultimate Reality. The Rig Veda (X,129.4) says, "In the Beginning arose Love." And the New Testament affirms: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." (1 John 4:16) . The search for this great Love at the very heart of the cosmos is both the beginning and the end of the spiritual paths, expressed as service, mercy, compassion and ultimately as oneness with all other beings. In the very last canto of the Paradiso in the Divine Comedy Dante expresses his vision of the highest heaven:

There my will and desire Were one with Love; The love that moves The sun and the other stars.

The great traditions, in wondrously different ways, have maintained that the Highest Reality- variously labeled 'God,' 'First principle,' 'Original Mind,' Brahman (literally, The Vastness) or simply 'That'-is Truth and is Love. In our own days, Mahatma Gandhi maintained, almost like a practical spiritual equation, less to be preached and more to be lived, that God = Truth = Love. Theologia Germanica (chapter 31) says, "As God is simple goodness, inner knowledge and light, he is at the same time also our will, love, righteousness and truth, the innermost of all virtues."

The realization of this truth, vouchsafed to the most insightful sages in all lands and cultures, is not something that can be abstracted, bracketed or packaged. This insight needs to be continually regained, lived and celebrated. Only when and wherever this realization is made concrete, is there an abundant life of the Spirit. Spiritual disciplines are all concerned with integration and wholeness; above all with the integration of Truth and Love. Love is required to know Truth, and knowledge of Truth is expressed by love. "The knower of truth loves me ardently," says Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita (7:17) but also, "Only through constant love can I be known and seen as I really am, and entered into" (11:54). I believe it was Meister Eckhart who said, "What we receive in contemplation, we give out in love." A more contemporary remark is by Archimandrite Vasileios of Mount Athos: "For if our truth is not revealed in love, then it is false. And if our love does not flow from the truth, then it is not lasting" (Hymn of Entry ; trans. Elizabeth Briere; St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1984, p. 26).

Of course, the search for Love can become merely a personal wish for comfort and security, just as the search for Truth can become largely a technological manipulation of nature in the service of the military or of industry--of fear and greed. Whenever truth and love are separated from each other, the result is sentimentality or dry intellectualism in which power is divorced from compassion. Partiality always carries seeds of violence and fear in it. Thus in the name of 'our loving God' many people have been killed, and many destructive weapons have been developed by a commitment to 'pure knowledge.' But such is not the best of humanity --in the science or in religion. Integrated human beings in every culture and in every age have searched for both Truth and Love, insight and responsibility, wisdom and compassion. Above the mind, the soul seeks the whole, and is thus able to connect with wisdom and compassion.

How should we now recast the statement of Einstein or of Ishvarakrishna? Should we say, for example, that 'Insight without compassionate action is lame, and that compassion without wisdom is blind?' After all, all the sages have said that true insight naturally flowers into compassion and love, like the fragrance of a rose. To say that a Buddha--one who is discerning--is without compassion is an oxymoron.

Any true reconciliation of science and spirituality is not found in a co-existence of abstractions. Spiritual truth--unlike the scientific one--is always a matter of direct perception which is whole and precisely because of that reveals 'Minute Particulars' in the sense of William Blake or Patañjali who says in Yoga Sutras (1:49), "The knowledge based on inference and testimony is different from direct knowledge [obtained in the higher states of consciousness] because it pertains to a particular object." This is why, the Biblical traditions have tenaciously held to the experience of God who is a Unique Person-or Purusha Vishesha in the language of Yoga Sutras (1: 24). It may even be that in still higher states of consciousness, perception shifts from that of minute particulars embedded in wholeness to that of Undifferentiated Oneness so that what remains is Pure Seeing without any thing seen apart from it. Whatever be the experience in these exalted states on the mountain top as it were, spiritual vision always re-mains a matter of direct perception.

Einstein's own view of God is not based on an I-Thou encounter of concrete and minute particulars. He finds it impossible to reconcile science and faith in a personal God. He says, for example,

The main source of the present-day conflicts between the spheres of religion and of science lies in this concept of a personal God.... In their struggle for the 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 a vast power in the hands of priests. In their labours they will have to avail themselves of those forces which are capable of cultivating the Good, the True and the Beautiful in humanity it-self. This is, to be sure, a more difficult but an incomparably more worthy task. ("Science and Religion," op. cit.)

Whatever difficulties Einstein may find with the notion of a personal God, spiritual perception is not of the same kind as a philosophic or scientific generalization or abstraction. Pascal is truer to the Biblical understanding of God whose experience led him to forever keep on his person the declaration 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob--not of the philosophers and scholars' because for him God is a matter of experience, not an inference from a philosophical proposition or a scientific hypothesis.

Both the direct spiritual super-sensuous perceptions and reasoned scientific theorizing and experimentation, and corresponding philosophic abstractions, can in principle reside in the same person--however rare the actual instances of this may be. It is in the soul of the same whole person that a reconciliation needs to take place--so that there can be purposive action without self-centredness, individuality without egoism, and oneness with the all without loss of uniqueness.

Coming back to our paradox, could we say that 'Religion without scientific knowledge is ineffective, but science without spiritual perception is insignificant'?

Above all, more than to any form whatsoever, scientific or religious, we must turn or return to the presence of the Mystery. Let me end by again quoting from Einstein (Ideas and Opinions, op. cit.):

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science... To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms--this knowledge, this feeling, is at the centre of true religiousness.

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