

Expanding Humanity's Vision of God

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There is a black hole at the heart of Western civilisation. Our technology has made the vast proportion of mankind wealthier, healthier and longer living than ever before. Science has given us powers beyond the dreams of ancient legend, yet we are haunted by spectres of uncertainty and self-doubt. We seem to be united by no greater purpose than the annual increase of the gross national product. Our high arts are the vehicles of narcissistic nihilism, the popular arts are shallow, hedonistic, and some times pornographic. The underclass in our inner cities live at a level of savagery which would dismay any self-respecting Neolithic tribesman.

The reason for our problem is the triumphant rise of science and the conflict between science and religion. Science has undermined and discredited formal religion and with it our traditional values, and the very idea of value at all. We need a new vision of God, but that vision can only be found by pursuing the conflict between religion and science to the uttermost. The result will be a new perspective on what religion is, and what science is. We can then pursue a vision of God which is a vision, and not an image or an idol.

Science has undermined religion because the contrast between scientific knowledge and religious belief has discredited religion as a way of understanding. In the last 500 years our scientific knowledge has advanced to the boundaries of the universe, the innermost recesses of the atom, and the secret of life within DNA. In the past 2000 years religion has remained rooted in the same conflicting doctrines and teachings. Science is universal. The same understanding of atomic structure operates in Tokyo, Teheran and Toronto. In contrast religion is locally rooted. What religious faith a person has depends crucially on whether they are born in Cairo, Calcutta or Chicago.. Ultimate authority in religion is based on some ancient writings deemed to be a revelation from God, or the words of some great teacher, or the opinions of some person deemed to be a guru or God's vice-regent on Earth, or to have some other position which raises them beyond question. There is no supreme authority in science. Science is an open self-critical system in which all theories and paradigms are subject to review. The dramatic advances in science - Galilean-Newtonian mechanics, Biological Evolution, Relativity, Quantum theory - all illustrate this capacity to abandon deeply rooted positions in the pursuit of truth. Science seeks consensus through the quest for that description which is true for all possible observers. Religion proclaims the eternal truth and defends that truth through the oppression of unbelievers, the persecution of heretics, crusades, and jihads. Science is universal and consensual. Religion is divisive, and divided with quarrels and ever proliferating sects, and sub-sects. This does not mean that theologians are inherently nastier than scientists. It is just that they are trapped into a system of thought with these appalling consequences.

Yet the theologians are trying to witness to a supreme insight which science systematically ignores. The elimination of the personal equation is a basic essential of correct scientific procedure. But science is the product of the human consciousness of scientists. The doctrines of systematic materialism and reductionism depend on the fact that some scientists deliberately avert their eyes from this question. There are two dimensions of reality which intersect in ourselves. We are mind and body, inner and outer, and the

dimensions of mind, or consciousness, taken to its limits is what we might call the "spiritual". Scientific materialism taken as a dogma means that all thought and inner human experience can be reduced to a set of scientific concepts, chemical reactions, electrical circuits, or quantum states depending on what ever is the current scientific fashion.

Not only does such reductionism deny the dignity and richness of our own inner experience of ourselves. Also in the strictest sense it is unscientific. Science seeks the fullest understanding it can reach. On a purely descriptive material level a CD of Beethoven's 9th symphony is just some scratches on a metal disc. Deciphered it is a series of 1's and 0's in a complex pattern. Properly understood and appreciated it is a superbly moving piece of music. Deciphering, understanding and appreciating are activities that can only be themselves understood in terms of our own inner experience of our own consciousness. Reductionism is therefore sawing off the branch on which it is sitting. Chemical reactions, electrical circuits, quantum states are all creations of the mind to be understood by the mind. Consciousness is attempting to explain its own totality in terms of fragments of itself. Reductionism is logically contradictory.

Either the argument above is a philosophers' three card trick, or it is a key issue. Any attempt to separate mind from matter brings the accusation of dualism. Time and space appear totally separate. In ordinary experience they are. However in the "big bang" at the beginning of the universe, and the "big crunch" at the end, they are united, and Relativity theory shows that time and space interconnect at all times. and at all positions in space. Might it not be the same with mind and matter?

Any talk of a dimension of mind, or consciousness, reminds us that this dimension exists within other men and women, and pretty obviously within the higher animals as well. Is our everyday consciousness the upper limit of this dimension ? Religion says it is not. Christianity says that man is body, mind and spirit. Hindu yoga and Buddhist philosophy talk of planes and levels of energy. Jungian psychology suggests that beyond the integration of the ego, there is a deeper integration of the psyche with the soul. Religion not only witnesses to this dimension, but gives it an arrow point towards a greater intensification of consciousness which we can call "God".

The solution to the conflict between science and religion is that each is right in what they assert about themselves, and each is right about what they assert about the other. If the process of self critical open scientific inquiry is the royal way to truth, then science must turn on itself and ask questions which lead beyond science. It follows that material science itself is but the ground state in a sequence of knowledge which includes inner knowledge of ourselves and ultimate knowledge of the origin of all being. If the insights of religion are true, then by the standards of science some religions are false, and all are inadequate.

The solution to the conflict between science and religion is that the vision of God is to be found through the pursuit of insight in the vertical "spiritual " dimension through the horizontal methods of science. The pursuit of insight in religion through experience normally means focusing on the evidence of the mystics. And so perhaps it does, but there are problems. The spiritual achievements of a Siberian Shaman seem to be very different to those of a Sufi. It could be that all great mystics converge, but the categories "great" and "converge" imply that a sophisticated structure of analysis has been applied. Human beings may have been experiencing the same world through their five senses for several million years, but the self-critical open system of science with its elaborate classification and

calibration of experience has only existed for the last 400 years., or just a little longer if false starts in China and Classical Greece are included.

Just as outer sense experience has to be handled within a sophisticated framework in order to get science, in the same way the inner experience of our own conscious being has to be put into a framework, and we call that framework religion. The open system of scientific inquiry has certain regulative principles - fidelity to experience, and the search for that description which is true for all possible observers. An open system of religious inquiry must also have regulative principles. It could be that these are coherence, compassion, awe, and humility.

Coherence means that a religious vision fits everything together. It gives meaning and purpose to our desires and feelings, our thoughts, and our sense of self. It also fits all that together in turn with our immediate experience of the outer world, and our scientific knowledge. Science is based on the evidence of our five senses, but this evidence is coordinated and corrected by the operations of impartial rationality so that we seek for truth in that description which is true for all. We have a vivid sense of our own inward self. Impartiality tells us that others have the same sense, and it is equally valuable to them, and even that other forms of life may have the same inward sense to some degree. We are all one of another, and compassionate love and harmlessness to all beings follows. If it is correct that there is a dimension of mind, or spirit which is somehow at right angles to the dimension of materiality, then it is necessary to reflect on what we are trying to talk about. There is a something which transcends all the vast dimensions of the known universe and any further universes there might be in parallel or sequence. There is a something which is immanent in the inner most energies of the most fleeting virtual particle within the atom. That something is also inside us. The only possible reaction to this thought is awe.

Religion does this, or rather particular religions attempt to do it. However this is not to advocate a relativism in which any religion will do provided you really believe in it.. These regulative principles are sternly exacting. Aztec blood sacrifice gave meaning to the lives of its worshippers, symbolic unity to Aztec society, and it certainly aroused feelings of awe. However it does not cohere very well with our scientific understanding of the causes of thunderstorms, and it is somewhat deficient in compassion. Christianity scores more highly on these parameters, and it can give a meaning to our lives and a purpose to our civilisation which abstract philosophy is unwise to ignore. Yet there are still problems of coherence. We see the life of Jesus of Nazareth through the lens provided by St. Paul. Paul's picture of mankind's troubles stemming from an act of disobedience by our primal parents in the Garden of Eden coheres ill with modern geology and biology. The idea of a vengeful God being appeased by a blood sacrifice fits equally badly with modern moral sensitivity.

It is necessary to remember the last regulative principle of humility. We just do not know. Religion forces us to ask the deepest and most fundamental questions, and honesty forces us to acknowledge that no answer we can give is adequate.

If there are these two dimensions of matter and mind and spirit, put in whatever words we may choose to use, then how do they fit together? The attempts of the reductionist materialists to explain the problem away transparently fail. What is the answer? We do not know. If there is this dimension of mind and spirit, then moral value lies along this dimensions. Its ultimate summation is something we might as well call "God". It follows that God is good. In that case why is there evil and suffering in the world.? It would be extremely

arrogant to claim that any theologian or philosopher has ever answered this question satisfactorily. We just do not know.

God, if there is a God, extends beyond the limits of the universe, and is found within a central spark in the human heart. How is this transcendence and immanence to be reconciled.? We do not know.

Within this dimension of consciousness does human individual self awareness extend after death, and before birth? Is there life after death? Religions give different answers. Christianity gives at least two contradictory ones, the immortality of the soul, and the resurrection of the body, as well as retaining a lingering liking for the heretical doctrine of reincarnation. There is the evidence of psychical research, but it is uncertain and rather pessimistic. If survival after death is only rapping tables or conveying banal messages through simple old ladies, then many of us might choose annihilation. The truth is that we do not know.

The vision of God for the 21st century is not a vision but a direction. Visions become icons, and icons degenerate into idols. God lies at the end of a long journey. It begins in the zeal for knowledge and the need for meaning. It is guided by love and awe, and checked by humility. It leads equally to the limits of the universe and the depths of our own hearts. There is no conflict between science and religion in this. At the beginning of this century there is no other starting place.

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