

Report - Future Visions and the State of the World Forum

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These two meetings were held concurrently in the New York Hilton at the same time as the World Leaders Forum at the UN and shortly after the gathering of spiritual leaders for peace - it was a heady mixture! Both meetings were very inspiring, reporting significant and positive new initiatives but received next to no press coverage apart from a BBC world service broadcast. This is a sad reflection as there is no doubt that people at large would have been inspired by the content and atmosphere of the meetings. The subtitle of the Future Visions conference, sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation and the International Space Sciences Organisation (ISSO), was 'Engaging the Scientific and Spiritual Imagination'. The theme of this year's State of the World Forum, opened by a dynamic MIKHAEIL GORBACHEV was Globalisation. Some parts of the meetings were run in parallel while others - including meals - were plenary. The engagement of the meetings is reflected in the motto of the Forum - turning conversations that matter into actions that make a difference. There is thus a link between being, knowing and doing. Or, as another speaker put it, 'we are part of the mystery we are trying to solve'.

One of the principal sponsors of both meetings was JOE FIRMAGE, a young and visionary web site entrepreneur who founded the ISSO. He talked about the machinery of globalisation and the meta-programming of the process in terms of ideology, technology and economics in relation to the trajectory of evolution. In another session he explained his new Project Voyager scheme shortly to become available on OneCosmos.net. The new portal will provide an integrated experience that will demystify and humanize science with an emphasis on truth, wonder, curiosity, awe, meaning, purpose, joy, love and beauty. It aims to give the surfer a sense of connection to the universe and will include 24/7 radio channels and an e-commerce listing that will highlight the ecological footprint of products made available.

The first two keynote speakers of the Future Visions conference were Professor PAUL DAVIES and Professor HUSTON SMITH, representing science and mysticism respectively. Paul Davies asked what the human person meant in terms of the large, small and complex aspects of scientific discovery. His talk was framed within an evolutionary context and raised issues about behaviour (could evil be explained as a survival strategy?) and the possibilities of genetic engineering (was manipulation of the germ line for good an ethical procedure?). On the complexity front he anticipated the merging of nanotechnology with biotechnology and the overcoming of the distinction between life and non-life. He extended this to robotics and quantum computers, suggesting that these developments might redefine human nature - though one has to say that these debates are frequently framed as if the essence of the human being were analytical thought rather than feeling and willing. As for life elsewhere in the universe, Paul was agnostic, although he suspected that human beings might turn out to be less sophisticated than we thought if other forms of life came to light.

Huston Smith brought the depth dimension to our deliberations. He went beyond the social and economic condition of the modern world to comment on our spiritual condition with its loss of larger horizons and meaning that had led to a diminution of the stature of the human being. He pointed out that there was no notion of proof in the traditional world-view, which postulates a sharp divide between this and another better and more powerful world.

However, modern science and medicine, in his view, tell us nothing about who we are in a deep sense. In the traditional view, spirit is fundamental and the world is suffused with sentience. The phenomenal world is understood to be derived from a transcendental source - the less is derived from the more, while the scientific story is the derivation of more from less in terms of emergentism. The central question is the character of the universe: is it suffused with the sacred or is consciousness a late add-on to an essentially random process? Huston went on to ask if science had actually disproved the other world, or had we simply lost sight of it? Does the scientific view have any limits, he asked. He left us with the image of the view from a bungalow - lowering the shade obscured the view of the mountains.

Professor VV RAMAN spoke on *Physics, Metaphysics and God*. He ranged widely over issues in philosophy of science and referred to the status of scientific theories as functions of currently known or acknowledged data. His two most original thoughts were his reflections on what he called the 'hypercomplex' level of human thoughts and meanings that are based in the noosphere and have a low level of predictability. Then he distinguished between what he called exopotent truths that have an impact on the external and endopotent truths that impact on the internal. One needs to analyse the impact potential of truth in these terms: the benefit can be exo- and/or endopotent. For instance, exopotent truths relate to the manipulation of the outer world while endopotent truths modify the inner being; in this sense the Divine cannot be proved but is 'felt inside'.

Professor GEORGE ELLIS from South Africa gave a remarkable talk on *The Moral Nature of the Universe*. He distinguished various strands of reality and levels of explanation, hence different causal worlds with different kinds of data and limits of explanation. For him World 1 was that of matter and forces, World 2 of consciousness, World 3 of physiological and biological possibilities, World 4 is the Platonic world of mathematical reality where things are discovered rather than created. For George, science itself cannot provide its own metaphysic: pure chance has no explanatory power while design implies a theistic picture. Science itself cannot decide between these - it is a matter of philosophy. He defended the central importance of meaningful action and ethical choices and rejected the sociobiological option. For him morality is an intimation of transcendence. He distinguished various levels of morality, the highest being a kenotic morality of persuasion, love and self-sacrifice, implying transformation and exemplified by the commandment to love your enemy. George then came on to the Metaworld 5, the world of God that could also be causally effective through creation and revelation. While certainty is unattainable, we can develop an awareness of the integrated whole and the application of a larger vision.

Dr. BERNARD HAISCH spoke on the panel about physics and ultimate reality (we hope to print this in the next issue). He was managing editor of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* for a number of years while continuing his research work in astrophysics. He deplored the misuse of authority in science to suppress interesting new data in the parapsychological field, remarking that it was legitimate to speak about parallel universes in physics but not in parapsychology. He cited Sir Arthur Eddington as an astrophysicist who had bridged the two worlds. Professor HENRY STAPP discussed the transformation of our world-view brought about by quantum mechanics. With Von Neumann and Wigner, conscious experience becomes the basic reality and information a key concept. If the law defines probabilities, choice confers actualisation and exhibits responsibility. He felt that only science had the power to reconfigure the world and that power was shifting to the people through the Internet and new means of communication. Professor ARTHUR ZAJONC emphasised the

primacy of experience and insight, and pointed out that attributing too much reality to models represents the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. In this sense insight is a high kind of seeing deriving from the kind of direct perception advocated by Goethe. Goethe's way is one of 'delicate empiricism' whereby the perceiver is identified with the object by participation. Hence the development of the observer through spiritual disciplines is crucial and results in a corresponding epistemological evolution. Science remains the formal language for abstract description of these perceived patterns. However, it is possible within this framework to envisage a 'science within consciousness'.

In a discussion on *Reimagining Human Nature*, Dr. WILLIAM HURLBUT insisted that desire not DNA was the deepest imperative of life, so that our future is related to the character of our desires, which go in the direction of greater freedom. He saw empathy as a form of intersubjectivity, citing research on response to facial expressions - we see ourselves and respond with imitation, which also occurs in conversation. PIR VILAYAT KHAN referred to the extension of one's self-image and the outreach of consciousness in a process of co-creation. RABBI ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI spoke of logging on to the cosmic intelligence for guidance and cautioned on being too self-obsessed. Otherwise we became like floppy disks with the notice 'Not enough memory'. Unfortunately we are hard wired in atavistic physiology and this gives us sophistication in matters of war not peace. He recommended contact with what he called the Inernet so that we could develop spiritual intensity without the corresponding fanaticism.

Professor JOHN HAUGHT took us through the story of evolution, remarking that we could 'read' the universe at different levels through a variety of disciplines. Like Polanyi he doubted the adequacy of descriptions that eliminate the personal dimension of knowing and asked if mind was not an essential aspect of the universe. He then drew on Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary scheme and Whitehead's idea of aesthetic cosmological purpose moving towards beauty as order and novelty. Brother WAYNE TEASDALE spoke of 'interspirituality' and the search for a civilization with a heart while MARGARET WERTHEIM referred to the pluralism of spiritual and cognitive systems. JOHN ALBRIGHT developed his views on the Western scientific values of openness, universality, truth, realism and objectivity, but pointed out that materialism is a presupposition rather than a value. Good theories, he claimed, agreed with the data and were economical, consistent, coherent, fertile, predictive and beautiful. RAVI RAVINDRA highlighted the danger of attitudes that claimed objectivity for themselves while dismissing the views of others as subjective.

An exciting session on *Cosmology, Globalisation and Evolution of Consciousness* was packed out. Dr. DEEPAK CHOPRA urged humankind as the No. 1 predator to go beyond the fight-flight mode and characterised God as the ever present witnessing awareness. If we are essentially patterns of light, then what is it that is to be globalised? Dr. JEAN HOUSTON was on her usual brilliant and crackling form, reeling off a kaleidoscope of images: brains as biological stars with fusion and fission, defogging the mirror with the spread of self-awareness, transforming muchness into suchness...we are hemmed in by the event horizon of our imaginations and needed to realise that the essence of science is spirit measuring itself.

Dr. VANDANA SHIVA delivered a passionate address on the problems associated with agricultural biotechnology, observing that we were closing off our options by unsustainable systems and were spreading the use of Roundup (marketed by Monsanto) through plant resistance. She painted a grim picture of science being replaced by PR and monopoly control

built into the biotechnology industry. President WAHID of Indonesia came over from the UN conference to deliver a lecture on *Spirituality and Politics*. He has presided over the establishment of a peaceful Moslem society by joining 'heart and hand'. Governments, he said, were accountable to the people and leaders should make decisions based on the welfare of their people. He stressed the importance of the inner life and silence, referring to action within the context of inaction.

Professor IAN BARBOUR covered a huge amount of ground in his presentation. He commented that science can show us what is possible but it is philosophy that helps us decide if it is desirable. He spoke about the resources within different spiritual traditions for responding to technological progress and the variety of models of harmony with nature involving stewardship, celebration and a sacramental attitude. He saw problems arising from the increasing power of economic institutions as compared with political ones.

Professor PETER BERGER gave a fascinating talk on his new findings in sociology of religion, asking how religion was related to modernity. The theory equating secularisation with modernity has been abandoned as religion has not declined in the predicted fashion. There is the powerful globalising Islam movement as an alternative to the Western model and which should not be equated with fundamentalism. Then there is globalising evangelical Protestantism with a wider geographical scope than Islam - for instance in South America, South East Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa. This movement, with its emphasis on the value of individual rights and autonomy has had a profound sociological effect, especially on the status of women. Then there is the uninstitutionalised New Age movement and the power of Buddhism, with 4 million adherents in the US, of whom 800,000 are converts. Within this turbulent scene are islands of secularity that tend to be an educated group within the humanities and social sciences. The US cultural elite is secularised, as is the corresponding group in Western and Central Europe. However, the US differs from Europe since it is technologically very modern without the corresponding extent of secularisation. The big challenge is in fact pluralism rather than secularisation since this questions previously held assumptions.

A number of parallel sessions were run concurrently, which made for some difficult decisions. A discussion of biotechnology advances showed how the research and patent systems are tied into global market capitalism and asked if there was not some confusion between inventions and discoveries. Should one be able to patent a gene that was already there? Another electric session reviewed the future of enterprise. ANTHONY GIDDENS felt that the communications revolution was the main driver while WILL HUTTON advocated a compulsory non-financial audit. RUUD LUBBERS wondered if people needed to get angrier for mobilised change to happen and pointed up the role of NGOs and the Earth Charter as a normative aspiration. ANITA RODDICK felt that the power of business meant that it had to assume a degree of moral responsibility and that people in general should have a keener sense of moral outrage.

Perhaps the highlight of the meeting was the plenary speech by Dr. JANE GOODALL, who always speaks so movingly from the heart. Just prior to her address was an amazing performance of Bach's Chaconne arranged by Liszt for left hand only on the piano and accompanied by Tai Chi movements. It was an arresting combination. Jane reminded us that 100 years ago the chimpanzee population was 2 million and the human 1 billion. Now chimps are down to 200,000 while humans are over 6 billion. The web of life is looking somewhat tattered through the effects of overpopulation and pollution. We still have a

small window of time and our worst enemy is apathy. On the positive side is the role of hope, inspiration and resilience, as well as the vision of inspired young people. She received a standing ovation and many were moved to tears.

I regard the State of the World Forum as the most important meeting of its kind going on today. Having attended the 1997 meeting in San Francisco I could sense its field building up to include many of the most inspired people on the planet who are really trying to make a difference. And the exchange of inspiring information and projects creates a virtuous circle of more inspiration, energy and enthusiasm. This is so important for young people today, who are more often than not offered stones rather than bread. Then there is tremendous power in networking and the moral support system that it creates. Here is just one example of a project that came directly out of the Forum itself: palmtop receivers run on solar power and hooked up to satellites providing vital medical information to African villages. Once again, MOHAMMAD YUNNUS of the Grameen Bank showed us what is possible when one engages visionary imagination with heartfelt concern and practical application. For more information see www.worldforum.org, where you will find the full programme of the meeting.