

Religious Experience in Science

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“The cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research.”
- Albert Einstein

SCIENCE AND RELIGION REPRESENT two great systems of human thought. For the majority of people on our planet, religion is the predominant influence over the conduct of their affairs. When science impinges on their lives, it does so not at the intellectual level, but practically, through technology¹.

The British astronomer, Sir A.S. Eddington insists² that religion has become possible for a man of science because the philosophic trend of scientific thought has been startlingly re-directed by the discoveries of men like Einstein, Heisenberg and Bohr in the fields of relativity and quantum physics.

Nobel laureate Charles Townes has said³; “To me science and religion are both universal, and basically similar. In fact, to make the argument clear, I should like to adopt the rather extreme point of view that their differences are largely superficial, and that the two become almost indistinguishable when we look at the real nature of each”.

Synthesis: In religion and science, man has two of the greatest forces⁴, which influence him: one is the force of his intuition and the other is that of his impulse to accurate observation and deduction. Some of the greatest scientists have succeeded in synthesizing the two forces inwardly, on a personal level. Religious experience is then seen as an extension of scientific activity.

Talking about the religious spirit of science, Albert Einstein has said⁵; “You will hardly find one among the profounder sort of scientific minds without a religious feeling of his own. But it is different from the religiosity of the naïve man. For the latter, God is a being from whose care one hopes to benefit and whose punishment one fears. It is a sublimation of a feeling similar to that of a child for its father, a being to whom one stands, so to speak, in a personal relation, however deeply it may be tinged with awe.

Causation: But the scientist is possessed by the sense of universal causation. The future, to him, is every whit as necessary and determined as the past. There is nothing divine about morality; it is purely a human affair. His religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection. This feeling is the guiding principle of his life and work, in so far as he succeeds in keeping himself from the shackles of selfish desire. It is beyond question closely akin to that which has possessed the religious geniuses of all ages”.

Seeker: Science and religion, in spite of being autonomous undertakings, are like complementary forces that operate in tandem. In fact, as is the opinion of many a scientist, religiousness is an indispensable condition for anyone who wishes to do

science. This point has been stressed upon by many scientists as being indicative of the psychological connection between religion and science. The renowned scientist Huxley once opined⁶ : 'Nothing great in science has ever been done by men, whatever their powers, in whom the Divine afflatus of the truth-seeker was wanting'.

About man's inquiries into the unknown Sir J. J. Thomson opined⁶ ; 'As we conquer peak after peak we see in front of us regions full of interest and beauty. But we do not see our goal. We do not see the horizon. In the distance tower still higher peaks, which will yield to those who ascend them. The still wider prospects deepen the feeling, the truth of which is emphasized by every advance in science that "Great are the Works of the Lord"'.

When Sir Ronald Ross was carrying out at Bangalore the intricate research required to determine the cause of malaria and its remedy, he wrote the pleading lines⁶ :

In this, O Nature, yield, I pray, to me.
I pace and pace, and think and think, and take
The fever'd hands, and note down all I see,
That some dim distant light may haply break.
The painful faces ask, can we not cure?
We answer, No, not yet; we seek the laws.
O God, reveal thro' all this thing obscure
The unseen, small, but million-murdering cause.

Thanksgiving: To Sir Ronald Ross belongs the honour of tracing the various stages of the existence of the parasite in the body of the mosquito until it was ripe for the injection into a human being by the bite of the insect. He proved, by numerous experiments, that the only means by which a healthy person can acquire malaria is by the bite of a mosquito, which has previously bitten someone whose blood contains the particular organisms associated with the disease. On the eve of this remarkable discovery, Ross offered up a prayer of thanks, which makes a beautiful supplement to the lines written several years before:

This day relenting God, Hath placed within my hand
A wondrous thing; and God, Be praised. At his command,
Seeking His secret deeds, With tears and toiling breath,
I find thy cunning seeds, O million-murdering Death.
I know this little thing; A myriad men will save.
O Death, where is thy sting? Thy victory, O Grave?

The author of the classical medical reference work, Ibn Sina's approach⁷ to life and his commitment to Islam was anything but conventional. To him, religion and science were perfectly compatible and there was nothing contradictory in being committed to both. ... He wrote: "if a (scientific) problem was too great for me, I retreated to the mosque and prayed, invoking the creator of all things until the gate that had been closed to me was opened and what had been complex became simple...."

When Galileo turned his telescope towards the heavens at night, he opened up new vista of knowledge, which he described in his book, *Sidereus nuncius* (Messenger of the Stars). In it he says⁸: "I give thanks to God, who has been pleased

to make me the first observer of marvelous things unrevealed to bygone ages. I have ascertained that the moon is a body similar to the earth... I have beheld a multitude of fixed stars never before seen.... . But the greatest marvel of all is the discovery of four new planets (four satellites of Jupiter)...I have observed that they move around the sun.”

An anecdote from the life of Lord Moyniham, the great British surgeon, is worth mentioning. Lord Moyniham had just finished operating before a gallery full of distinguished visiting doctors, when he turned to them and said, “You see, there are just three persons present in the operating room when I operate – the patient and myself.”

“But that is only two,” his questioner commented. “Who is the third?”

Moyniham responded, “The third is God.”

In the words of Abdu'l – Baha[®], “Religion and Science are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone. Should a man try to fly with the wings of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.”

The core of religion is the ‘religious experience’. True religion does not thrive on belief, it requires us to *become*; it is not a set of propositions to be accepted, it is a state to be *experienced*. The so-called religious experience is the progeny of a free mind; a mind that does not conform unthinkingly, but questions everything and finds the truth itself.

Humility: Such a mind is capable of turning inward, searching for truth in its deepest recesses and experiencing the absolute. With this, there is not the arrogance of religious power but the humility of compassion; there is not the necessity for words and scriptures, for there is the immensity of silence. For the truly religious mind with an intelligence of its own, religion is not a static abstraction, but a way of life[®].

Scientists frequently talk in terms of religious experiences. However, there is an essential difference between the means the scientist uses to reach this stage and the way of the mystic. While the mystic’s way is inward and contemplative, the scientist’s is outward and analytical.

It has been the experience of many great scientists, that science ultimately leads man to a personal encounter with the absolute, or the ultimate reality. An awareness of the ultimate reality may come to the scientist through the perception of order in nature, in the form of a spiritually moving experience.

Charles Darwin had described about such an experience[®] that imprinted itself on his mind in the Brazilian forests. He had said, “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or one. And whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved”.

Harmony: As scientists, Johannes Kepler and Tycho Brahe⁸ might have turned their backs on astrology, and yet both were convinced that the stars controlled man's nature and his destiny. The fact that they believed in an ordered universe made it possible for them to accept man's relationship to heavenly influences. Later Kepler's visions of a harmonious universe, tuned by God's hand, were to result in one of his most important books; but even at this time he could say: "I feel carried away and possessed by an unutterable rapture over the divine spectacle of the heavenly harmony."

Albert Einstein insists on the overpowering impact that the boundlessness of the objective intelligibility of nature makes on the mind of the scientist. According to him⁹, this gives rise to a sense of religious reverence. In his words: "In every true searcher of nature, there is a kind of religious reverence; for he finds it impossible to imagine that he is the first to have thought the exceedingly delicate threads that connect his perceptions". Science then, according to Einstein, becomes a reverential activity.

In Goethe's words, "Man's highest happiness is to have fathomed and to bow in reverence before the unfathomable." To quote Einstein again: "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical.....(it is) to know that which is impenetrable to us really exists... This knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of all true religiousness".

H.G. Wells, the famous science-fiction writer, once said¹⁰: "At times in the silence of the night and in rare, lonely moments I come upon a sort of communion of and something which is not myself.... These moments happen and they are supreme fact in my religious life. They are the crown of my religious experience".

Concluding with the words of S. Radhakrishnan¹⁰, the late philosopher and President of India, "Anyone who has the (religious) experience is seized by it and does not indulge in fruitless metaphysical or epistemological speculation. Absolute certainty brings its own evidence, and has no need of proofs. Its numinosity and its rationality mark it as authentic experience".

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