

Cosmotheology

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Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are part of the mystery that we are trying to solve.

Max Planck, *Where is Science Going?*, 1932

What Planck saw as a fatal limitation to science can be viewed positively as a theological revelation, for the discovery that our familiar universe had an origin in time ultimately leads to awareness that the creating power is at one with all that is created - everything is within it and it is within everything.

This, I would take it, is the intuition of Jesus and of countless other mystics in all the world's religions, but it is a truth which traditional religion has failed to teach and develop, even though a feeling of oneness with a greater power is by no means uncommon among quite ordinary people. In his classic 1900 work *Cosmic Consciousness* the psychiatrist Richard Bucke gave many instances of this, and there are thousands of similar accounts in the Archives of the Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales in Lampeter. A well known passage from Admiral Byrd's autobiographical work *Alone* may speak for all, and illustrate their commonality. He tells of going outside one evening during his spell in Antarctica, as the sun was setting and of his experience of

imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless In that instant I could feel no doubt of man's oneness with the universe. The conviction came that that rhythm was too orderly, too harmonious, too perfect to be a product of blind chance - that, therefore, there must be purpose in the whole and that man was a part of the whole and not an accidental off-shoot, [that] the universe was a cosmos, not a chaos; man was as rightfully a part of that cosmos as were the day and night. [1]

I would like to make three points regarding this spiritual experience and its connection with religion and a theology based on post-Hubble cosmology. Firstly, it is a perfect example of what the psychologist Abraham Maslow calls a "peak experience", whereas mysticism properly understood concerns an habitual awareness of the same kind but far less intense and absorbing. Secondly, An essential function of evolved religion has always been to focus this background awareness, through contemplation, *lectio divina*, etc. Thirdly, modern cosmology can be used in this way to focus spiritual awareness and raise it to a higher level.[2]

If this were to happen, it would constitute an evolutionary step in religion, and hence a new term is called for to mark its significance. “Cosmotheology” springs naturally to mind, but the word already exists in a less specific sense than I wish to propose. It was, for instance, the title and theme of a Templeton conference held in 1998 to discuss the effects upon theology of modern cosmology.[3] *Cosmotheology* was used there, however, very loosely, to cover “a diverse collection of musings”, as one reviewer put it,[4] whereas I would like in this appendix to give a sharp definition based on three clear criteria:

- i. postulating the real existence of hyperspace, as discussed in the body of the talk,
- ii. approaching the cosmos scientifically as an expanding thermodynamic system, a
- iii. approaching the cosmos theologically as a new creation story.

From this position I will argue that cosmotheology presents us with a creative resolution of the historical conflict between the transcendental and immanentist models of God. In the precise sense that I will use the term, cosmotheology promises to show how the apparently different theories of a god without and a god within are mutually supportive and mutually revealing.

The great revolution in cosmology that began with discovery of the galactic redshift is our awareness that we live in an expanding universe. Its vital importance to theology lies in the reasonable assumption that the more cosmology reveals about the processes of creation, the more it will reveal about the nature of the creating power. Since this information became available to theology less than a century ago, cosmotheology marks a significant advance in the evolution of religion, for it is based solidly on empirical observation. Thus it is a prime example of the kind of fact-based theology which Arthur Peacocke has recently argued must be a new standard for authentic religion. Religion, he says, must “become truly open theologically” and theologians need “frankly to infer the best explanation of the data - and not build theological castles in the air based on historically unsupported events ... and on outdated metaphysical systems.” [5] To his argument I would add that this is the first time in history that intellectual honesty, which is an essential in science, has been taken as a defining criterion of religion. Until now honesty in religion has always been subordinated to the founding principles of the so-called “faith community”. From this perspective - and is there any other for the genuine seeker of truth today? - cosmotheology becomes not one option among many but a universal moral imperative, making all other creation myths obsolescent.

This assertion is not likely to go unchallenged, because we have become so accustomed to defining religion in terms of mythical truth. Nevertheless, because cosmotheology is a fact-based and fact-seeking creation story, it will offer the chance of a unified and truly global understanding of the power that is variously called God, or Allah, or Brahman. The prospect of the human family rising above the different religions which now so tragically divide it may seem like a pipe dream, and even undesirable to those who have a vested interest in the *status quo*, but it is a vision which cannot fail to inspire the true evolutionist or anyone who yearns for peace between nations.

The theology which follows from the new cosmology will be paradigmatic in several respects, not only in being fact-oriented and thus different in kind from the various mythologies on which the world's competing religions are based, but in being dynamic. By "dynamic" I mean that it inherently defines religion as a transforming way of life involving a new sense of human identity. It leads not just to passive acceptance of great theological truths, such as Tillich's definition of God as "the ground of being," but to a deeper kind of awareness, where these truths are, in Wordsworth's words, "felt in the blood, and felt along the heart." It leads, in a word, to a more intimate relationship between the human and divine, indeed to a blurring of the "I and Thou" relationship which Martin Buber proposed as an ideal. More controversially perhaps - but we must at all cost be honest - it will go beyond the "loving father" metaphor that is central to the teaching of Jesus, and the trinitarian model of divinity which gave birth to Western civilisation. In the long term view it is potentially a new model for a global civilisation. In this respect, cosmotheology raises the religious bar, as ethical monotheism and trinitarianism raised it in the past.

To dismiss traditional formulations so tersely is to overlook the vital function of pastoral theology, whose challenge is to shape the truth into a form which can most effectively be communicated - one does not give meat to babes. Abbot Chapman once advised a correspondent who was having difficulty with silent prayer to pray with words as long as she could. In the present context, his words could be transferred into advice to pray to a father above the clouds as long as one can, but there is no reason why traditional perceptions of divinity cannot co-exist with a new perception as it develops, each used as one's mental and emotional needs may vary.

From an evolutionary perspective each great advance in spiritual intuition brings into being an institution which, in preserving its past, eventually becomes an obstacle to further progress. This was true of Judaism and is increasingly true of Nicene Christianity, as both are seen to be, in the rear view mirror of history, vital but transitional steps in the development of higher religious awareness. What now beckons is a future stage which is global in mindset - *katholikos* on a new and greater scale - and symbiotic with science. It will be transformational in an evolutionary sense, looking forward, as did Pauline Christianity, to "a new man" and "a great new human family" (*Romans* 8:29) or, in biological terms, to a new human type of which Jesus is the holotype.

Like all paradigmatic shifts in religion, closer identification of the divine and human, to which cosmotheology leads, will be on first encounter a shock. It will come as either live-giving or life-threatening, a new good news or an affront to orthodoxy, an inspiring truth suddenly recognized or an alien idea to be rejected. Although cosmotheology may appear at first like heresy, its practical conclusions are, in fact, a natural extension of the inner logic of Judaeo-Christianity, Islamic Sufism and Vedic Hinduism. It will be the fulfilment of the prophetic vision of Judaism that one day the Law would pass away and God would write it in men's hearts (*Jeremiah* 31:33) and a reinforcement of Paul's definition of Christianity as "having the same habitual consciousness as Christ" (*Philippians* 2:5).

It is worth noting that the sense of God-within to which cosmotheology leads has been the greatest stumbling block in western religious evolution, and in Islam. Paul was accused of blasphemy, and narrowly escaped assassination,

when he preached God within Jesus (*Acts 21:30*) and the Blasphemy Act of this country was deliberately passed in response to the Quaker preaching of “that of God within all men.” Sufis too were initially persecuted and sometimes killed as pseudo-Christians because they sought and taught the type of unified consciousness that Jesus exemplified.

Cosmotheology promises to heal the cultural rift which has developed in the West since the Enlightenment, as the secular doctrine of the inviolable and sovereign self has seemingly come into conflict with the doctrine of selflessness which is at the heart of Christian teaching, and the Islamic principle of submission. The conflict is, in fact, illusory, since giving away the self has no meaning if we have no worthwhile self to give. Without a strong sense of self-value, or ego-strength as psychology terms it, passive submission to “divine will” regresses society to a herd-mentality and makes political and religious dictatorship inevitable.

To those with a knowledge of the historical development of religion, cosmotheology will come as a restatement of ancient spiritual wisdom in new forms. In this respect it exemplifies the spiral path by which human evolution so often moves upward. It needs perhaps to be emphasized in a scientific gathering that human evolution does progress, for in science’s search for objective, value-free knowledge, free of occultism and emotional bias, it has become taboo to talk in terms of upward, forward or progress. This prohibition is not science but scientism, and only if we are prepared to consider an ape or caveman “different but equal” to a Jesus, Shakespeare or Mozart can the fiction be upheld. There are obvious criteria for judging progression or regression, and once these are agreed, it can be seen how often religion, and sometimes also science, progress by rediscovering an ancient truth but at a higher level of understanding. The spirality of evolution is, in fact, a principle which will be invaluable in avoiding clashes between the old and the new which are bound to come as a new religious paradigm struggles to be born.

At the heart of cosmotheology is a simple thought experiment. As we wind back in imagination the film of cosmic expansion, we come to the realisation that all that now exists, including each individual consciousness, must have its origin in the energetic reality that can be traced back to the singularity of the Big Bang. If the expanding cosmos is a closed system, everything within it now was there in potential at every earlier stage, much as an oak tree may be said to have been contained *in potentia* in an acorn. Judaeo-Christianity has missed this truth, because it has traditionally emphasized the doctrine of creation from nothing. Cosmotheology, by contrast, throws it into stark relief and disposes once and for all of the illusion there once was a sky god working magic on a nothing to make it into a something. The reality is, as the poet put it, that

The lark, the shark, the cloud, the clod,
The whole darned universe is God” [5],

But human consciousness is God in a very special and challenging way.

As this conclusion starts to come home, religion will enter into a new axial age, going from monotheism to panentheism and beyond that to a new awareness that is a kind of deeply experiential and cooperative panentheism. We

can see now, as past ages could not, that human beings are in a quite astonishing way divine agents in the evolutionary drama. We are the only species that can evolve deliberately, and thus the future of the species, and of the planet, is in our hands. We are in the most literal sense possible co-creators.

Although modern scriptural scholarship tells us that hardly any incident in John's gospel is historically true, the evangelist was surely right when he put into the mouth of Jesus the claim that "the Father and I are one," and his critics were surely wrong in saying, "being a man, you make yourself God." There is a primitive confusion of logical categories here (as if, for instance, one could not be both a wife and a politician at the same time), a confusion that arises from an inadequate premise that the divine power, the ultimate reality, is an all-wise, all powerful male existing above the clouds - *der Alte*, the "Old One", as Einstein was accustomed to call "him". Cosmotheology leads to a new understanding by breaking down the familiar model of Judaeo-Christian orthodoxy. Meister Eckhart saw no contradiction in saying, "Where I am, there is God." Had he been able to explain that he was speaking holographically, and from within a framework of cosmogenesis, he may perhaps have escaped his inquisitors' charge of heresy - but not if they were ignorant of holography and cosmology.

References

1. Richard E. Byrd, *Alone*. 1938. Various editions still in print.
2. None of this excludes the necessity of other disciplines in spiritual development, a point that perhaps needs to be made in an age of consumerism which seeks spirituality on the cheap.
3. Steven J. Dick (ed.), *Many Worlds: the New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life, and the Theological Implications*. Templeton Foundation Press, 2000.
4. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 17, No 2, 2002. Insofar as there is a common thread in the different contributions, it lies in speculation about the theological consequences that would follow from the discovery of extraterrestrial life, particularly its effect on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. In a word, could God send his only son down again to become a Martian, having found a suitable virgin, or must they remain unredeemed? There is a very serious point under the facetiousness of the question.
5. 'Problems in Contemporary Christian Theology,' *Theology and Science*, 2 (1), (2004) p.3
6. From a short poem of Robert Service, entitled simply "God".