

A VISION OF UNITY

Outlines of a Holistic Worldview

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1. Introduction

Science and religion, from a commonsense point of view, are divided by what seems to be an unbridgeable gulf, the one dealing with matter and the other with the invisible world of the spirit. This assumption, however, rests on a fundamentally distorted conception of reality. For reality is not to be split into distinct entities, which can be neatly separated from each other, as the static conception of the world would have us believe. What we call 'matter' and 'spirit' are by no means discreet entities, but different facets of one whole, or, in other words, different levels of vibrations in the endless energetic fluctuations of Being.

'Being' is a whole which is in constant change and flux. Any attempt to divide this whole is a more or less conscious violation of truth (truth as the correct, namely holistic, perception of reality), which stems from the inability to accept reality as it is. From this results existential insecurity, which manifests in frantic attempts to construct conceptual models. Through these we try to capture glimpses of an essentially dynamic process into rigid positions that we can analyse according to our prejudices.

It is not, however, that these models are necessarily wrong. The problem lies in mistaking these models for truth itself, when in reality they only provide us with a particular glimpse of truth. Thus, we become enslaved by what should be but useful tools. As the Buddhist parable goes, after crossing the river we carry the raft which took us to the other shore on our shoulders.¹ We end up being burdened by what might have originally been a useful asset! In this way we end up worshiping the models which we created to understand reality, thereby becoming idolaters, instead of using them as windows open onto reality.

2. Dynamics of Our Times

The times in which we live are particularly ripe: the possibilities of spiritual elevation are great, indeed, for those who truly *wake up*, but so is

¹Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1996, 11 f.

the danger of utter madness, destruction, and chaos. Whichever happens first depends very much on humanity and on the decisions we take.

In particular, we face the possibility of freeing ourselves from the dichotomy of spirit and matter to which centuries of carefully nurtured mental habits have enslaved us, and which have caused and still cause so much suffering in our personal lives and in the life of humanity as a whole.

How is this possible? Firstly, science has come to realize that the static dualistic worldview it has religiously adhered to since Descartes fails to give us an adequate picture of reality.² In particular, since Einstein, the model which sees reality (light in particular) as either particles or waves is no longer applicable. Scientists have come to appreciate that light is both particle and wave at once. This means that what once seemed to be two irreconcilable positions have come to be accepted simultaneously, and it is only by unifying both perspectives that the true nature of light could be understood.³

In a similar vein, scientists are beginning to realize that the alleged dichotomy between spirit and matter, as well as between subject and object, is on the verge of collapsing. Science has been forced to accept that its claim to absolute objective knowledge is untenable. We cannot refrain from being participants in our study of a given phenomenon, and we, as human beings, can only have a particular perception of that phenomenon, depending on the angle from which we view it. Such a realization has, it may be said, pulled the ground from underneath the feet of the modernists' claim to absolute scientific truth. The unfortunate corollary of this

²See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

³The partial recovery in modern times of a holistic perspective was ushered in by a discovery bearing on the nature of light, even though the far-ranging repercussions of this discovery have hardly been recognized. In any visionary outlook, the nature of man, of knowing and of the world is recognized to be pervaded by light. This profoundly luminous perspective has been restated in various historical and geographical contexts by the greatest visionaries of traditions as far removed from each other as are Sufism and Tibetan Tantra and rDzogs-chen; see Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, New York: Omega Publications, 1994; and Herbert V. Guenther, *The Teachings of Padmasambhava*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996. In more recent times, if we turn to the poetry and paintings of William Blake, we can see that for this great prophet "light does not shine *down* on the objects of sensory perception so much as from within, *out of Being* itself." See Brian Keeble, "William Blake: Art as Divine Vision," *Temenos Academy Review* 9 (2006), 176-88, esp. 181.

discovery, however, has taken shape in postmodernism, which has come to the conclusion that because science has failed to give us the absolute certainty we longed for, there is no such thing as absolute knowledge, and that reality is ultimately unintelligible. Now, in academic circles, any claim to knowledge is circumscribed with so many apologies that one begins to question the use of institutions claiming to serve the purpose of knowledge, when they seem to question the possibility of knowledge itself.

Thus, those whose avowed profession is the search for knowledge now busy themselves more with the production of theories of knowledge than with the search for truth itself. Philosophy, in particular, whose original meaning is love of wisdom, has degenerated into a profession of thinkers whose only aim is to outwit each other by producing vain and shallow arguments which are neither beneficial spiritually nor even useful materially.

3. Nature of Religion

In this state of affairs, it may be asked, where does religion stand? Does it still have any relevance in the modern world? The obvious answer given by the pragmatist historian of religion is that a mere cursory glance at the world around us will show that for a large section of people, religion, in its diverse forms, continues to play a vital role in their life and understanding of themselves and the world, and that the demise of religion predicted by Nietzsche and others has certainly not occurred so far. This is clear both in its worst manifestation of religious fundamentalism of every kind, which daily fills our headlines, and in its most sublime embodiment in saintly human beings, who still continue to exist, of which Mother Theresa and the Dalai Lama are two very prominent examples. That religion and religious aspirations are still very much part of the modern (or even the postmodern) world is also obvious from the rise of the so-called new religions, the various cult-groups whose charismatic leaders often attract large numbers of wide-eyed, naïve followers.⁴

⁴It is important, nevertheless, to realize that the form religious aspirations take in our contemporary world is changing. In particular, in modern societies religion no longer governs the public sphere of life as it did in the past, becoming increasingly relegated to the private sphere. In a way, this situation itself contains a huge potential, for it can enable man to go beyond the often politicized forms of religions to penetrate their mystical essence.

However, this answer, although correct as far as it goes, is rather superficial. In order to go deeper, we must probe the very nature of religion. Religion, in its essence, is that aspect of human endeavour that seeks to *relate* man back to his sacred origin. What is this sacred origin? It is essentially a Unity, what we have hinted at above by speaking of ‘Being’, which is the ground and source for all more limited expressions of being. In other words, any being exists solely by virtue of Being, which at once embraces all while transcending the finiteness of particular beings. Every being partakes in and expresses on the individual plane the unlimited and transcendent qualities of Being, or Being-as-such.

Religion is that link which *relates* man, as a particular being, to Being-as-such, so that, from naturally being its manifestation (as everything, without the slightest exception, is), he becomes its conscious embodiment. As he realizes to an ever fuller extent his participation in and embodiment of Being, the human being *relates* to other human beings in that capacity, respecting them as much as himself for this potential and capacity. Thus, we arrive at the embodiment in human society of the sacred configuration of individuals totally conscious of their spiritual origin and role.

What has been termed Being, or Being-as-such, has received, as the history of religion tells us, numerous names. It has been termed God, the Godhead, Allah, Yahweh, the Brahman, the Ātman, the non-Ātman, the Dao, the Buddha-nature, etc. The reason for choosing the term Being in this article is that it is neutral as regards religious doctrine and does not oblige us to incorporate into our discussion exotic terms or religiously loaded concepts. Moreover, the word Being itself expresses a very fundamental truth, namely that the world’s and man’s nature is *to be* before it is *to have* and *to do*. We cannot do the slightest thing whatsoever, or have an iota of dust, before we are.

What we address here is not a level where Hamlet’s question “to be or not to be” has any relevance. Such questions arise when man has become alienated from Being-as-such, and find himself in the isolated state of a being. In this state, he is in the fearful situation of a small, limited being versus the seemingly infinite vastness of non-being; the latter is all that which threatens to put an end to his sense of being alive.

The irony of this situation is that it is totally self-inflicted. The state of being (in the sense of any isolated being) cannot exist in isolation to that of non-being. Both arise from a being’s alienation from Being. It is only through attunement to Being-as-such, that this helpless sense of smallness

and isolation can be overcome and that we can again embody wholeness and holiness.

Now, it may be objected, especially by those who are familiar with the study of religions, that the equation of the above terms, taken from very different religious contexts, with what I have named Being, is questionable and, indeed, presumptuous. Who am I to say that what the Christians mean by God, the Hindus by Brahman, the Buddhists by the Tathāgatagarbha and the Daoists by the Dao is one and the same Reality? How can this be upheld when we know from history how these various groups slaughtered each other brutally, or at least debated violently, each with the hope of establishing its God or Absolute as the only and supreme Reality?

Many modern scholars of religion are likely to claim that it is more reasonable and cautious to accept that various religious and mystical traditions merely produce local narratives of reality, discourses on truth, of which nothing can be said regarding their content, and of which it can only be said with certainty that they do indeed compete. To such doubts it can only be replied that if we are to take the various mystical traditions' narratives as representing absolute differences, then we must arrive at the conclusion that there are competing absolutes corresponding to these various traditions. Of course, this is a contradiction in terms, one that the postmodernists are likely to accept with a complacent shrug since they are so accustomed to the deadening waters of relativism. The absurd conclusion that each spiritual tradition has its own paradise, each striving to attain it, is a polite way of saying that because they differ from each other they all are false.⁵

It is one thing to assert that the various spiritual traditions have differing conceptions of Ultimate Reality, which no one in his right mind could deny; it is quite another thing to affirm that because this is the case, none of these traditions has actually come to glimpse that Reality and each is a victim of its own fantasy. The latter view is untenable for the simple reason that it is illogical and also contradicts the evidence before us.

Regarding the statement that it is illogical, it will be explained here. Each of the great mystical traditions expounds in its own way that the Ultimate Reality is beyond the confines of language and ordinary human

⁵For a critique of the modernist and postmodernist approaches to the study of religion, see Dylan Esler, "The Light of Perennial Philosophy on the Study of Religion," *Sophia Journal* (Summer 2007).

discursive thought. For instance, the Islamic tradition does this by affirming that God is at once totally transcendent while being immanent, enveloping man in spiritual experience;⁶ the Buddhist tradition does the same by stating that the Buddha is beyond birth and death, coming and going, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāna*.

Each mystical path, at the same time, seeks to provide a means whereby Ultimate Reality can be approached, experienced, and embodied by the practitioner, and allows for differing levels of participation in that Reality, depending on the temperament and commitment of the individual. In providing such a means of approach, which includes linguistic descriptions of the path itself as well as (to some extent) of Ultimate Reality, no one tradition can provide a full account for the simple reason that what it seeks to describe is truly indescribable. Each religious tradition has a particular genius for approaching Reality from a particular angle, for opening a particular perspective onto Truth, while developing, on the human plane, particular traits of saintliness.

4. Multiplicity of Religions

All religious traditions are bridges from the human to the transcendent. As such they incorporate features of human limitations together with aspects of transcendent infinity. It is quite illogical to expect anything else. To expect them to provide the same approach to Ultimate Reality would be to want a relative phenomenon to take on an absolute character.

If there were only one MAN, there would be but a single PATH. But as things are, humanity is diverse, and corresponding to these different temperaments are various religious traditions; within these, corresponding to various aptitudes and levels of commitment are differing paths, ranging from the exoteric to the esoteric modes of approach; and these again open up to ever deeper and subtler dimensions of Reality.

At the same time, the transcendent dimension on which each mystical tradition opens is also present at the outset and becomes manifest in the mystical vision of Ultimate Reality at the path's culmination, as well as in the ever unfolding embodiment of holiness in the practitioner's life. Here, we arrive at our second objection, namely that the statement that each religious tradition produces its own fantasy, apart from being illogical, also contradicts evidence. That evidence is none other than sacred art and holiness. None who has spent but a few moments of

⁶Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1990, 13.

contemplation in any of the great religions' sanctuaries (even if these be but a tradition's exoteric structures), or who has heard inspired music or stood before visionary art, can fail to notice that something of the transcendent is transpiring in the world of matter. For those who are privileged to so witness, there is no more moving embodiment of transcendence than in the saint, the human being whom spiritual practice has made holy, and whose very flesh has become luminous.

Such things are not wonders, nor are they coincidences, nor accidents. For such inspired art to be created, or for such saints to be alive in both past and present, there must be a cause, and that cause is none other than the recognition of Ultimate Reality; sacred art and holiness could not exist if they did not stem from Truth. If the various religious traditions were but the fantastic edifices of idle dreamers, they would never in a thousand years have been able to inspire transcendent art or saintliness. Could such beauty stem from a lie?

It is irrelevant to object that religious traditions have also produced and still continue to instigate much hatred and violence. "The corruption of the best is the worst."⁷ This corruption, moreover, is accidental, not essential, that is, it stems from the limitedness of human existence.⁸

5. Multidimensionality of Religion

In order to comprehend the unity of religions, it is of absolute necessity to recognize that any given religious tradition is not a monolithic whole, but, as was hinted at above, incorporates numerous levels of participation and commitment, which open up varying degrees or dimensions of spiritual experience.⁹ In other words, each religion includes both an exoteric shell and an esoteric kernel, the latter being not an accidental addition to the tradition in question, but its very essence. This is true even at times when

⁷In Latin, *Corruptio optimi pessima*.

⁸Martin Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, Cambridge: Archetype, 2001, 48.

⁹This is because if we look merely at the exoteric dimension of religion, we will of course fail to discover the unity in question. This unity is not to be found on the level of forms. It is only by turning to the esoteric kernel and penetrating the outward forms to an ever greater extent until we reach the mystical dimension that it can be discovered. On the relationship between the exoteric and mystical dimensions of religion, see Shuja Alhaq, *A Forgotten Vision: A Study of Human Spirituality in the Light of the Islamic Tradition*, 2 volumes, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1997, 1:24-27.

the exotericists are unaware of, or even shun and persecute the representatives of the tradition's esoteric and mystical dimension.

A exoteric dimension of a religion includes the rules of moral conduct which are incumbent on the mass of believers, and which they are to follow in the hope of gaining salvation after death. For the majority of Christians, this means the observance of the Church's moral code and the taking of the sacraments, with the faith that one will be forgiven one's sins and will gain entry to paradise.¹⁰ In a similar way, for most Buddhists the goal of *nirvāṇa* is so far-fetched that they prefer to observe their moral precepts, accomplishing virtuous deeds such as donating money to their local monastery, in the hope of obtaining a good rebirth as a god or human after death.

This dimension of a religion is, of course, an important one, as in many societies across the world this was so far the best means available to regulate social interaction between human beings and to ensure that the greatest possible number of people could participate, at least passively and indirectly, in the particular religion's hue of grace. However, social control is not the only purpose of religion. If it were, there would be no dimension of grace whatsoever, and religion's activity would stop short at this outer level. The truth is that a religion's essence is its mystical dimension or esoteric kernel. This dimension, of course, is only accessible to the elite among a religion's believers, because it requires, as a pre-condition, the acutest abilities, and, for its actualization, complete dedication. It requires nothing short of death, meaning an initiatory dying to worldliness so as to be reborn among those who seek to realize transcendence in this very life.

Those seeking the mystical dimension, however, are not satisfied with gaining salvation after death. They want to experience transcendence as immanence, and seek to come face to face with the Ultimate Reality while still alive. To do this, they must die to their limited individuality, to their clinging to the world, in order to be freed from all that stands between them and the Ultimate Reality.¹¹ Of course, this path is much more demanding than that of the exotericist. While the outer obligations

¹⁰For the mystic, these same observances may be seen as aids on the spiritual path. For instance, by penetrating the symbolism of the Eucharist, the Holy Mass within the Catholic tradition becomes a vehicle for mystical realization.

¹¹From the perspective of Ultimate Reality, there is of course nothing which could stand between It and the mystic. In a sense it is from the individual point of view only that there is such an obstacle, as, ultimately, everything is a manifestation of, and, for the *accomplished* mystic, a pointer to the Ultimate Reality.

laid out by the religion, through their symbolical and regulatory value, can provide an aid on this path, they are also, at some point, transcended, either outwardly, by casting them away, or at least by inwardly becoming free of their limitations.

6. The Mystical Paradox: Expressing the Inexpressible

Every mystic is to some extent conditioned by his or her upbringing, religion, and even mystical path. In particular, although various mystics experience the same Ultimate Reality, they speak of it according to the terms in which they have been taught to think of it. For instance, some will talk of the unification of Ātman with Brahman, others of the extinguishing of the lover in the Beloved, others of the shining forth of the Buddha-nature. There will obviously be differences in their way of understanding this experience. But, it should be remembered, the mystical experience is so overwhelming that it is truly impossible to describe it fully in any terms. That experience is totally unconditioned by and beyond the limits of language.

Nonetheless, the mystic is also a human being, and it is through understanding that he reflects on the mystical experience and through language that he seeks to express it to others. His understanding of the experience in its aftermath and the language he uses to point it out to others are conditioned, even if the mystic be unaware of it.¹² Although much of the mystical experience is beyond conditioning, the mystic as a person is not.

The mystic's very vocation is one that embodies paradox, as he seeks to fathom the unfathomable and express the inexpressible; and yet he knows, beyond the least trace of doubt, that what he has experienced is infinitely more real and valuable than what is known to the common man. So, in his very person the mystic unifies the conditioned with the unconditioned, the limitedness of being human with the infinity of his realization. Especially if he is an accomplished mystic, he is not content with a one-off experience which has no relation whatsoever with his ordinary life. The difference between the ordinary and the accomplished mystic is that for the latter his experience is totally integrated to his life,

¹²On the relationship of mystical experience to language, see, for example, Agehananda Bharati, *The Light at the Centre: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism*, London and The Hague: East-West Publications, 1976, 66 f.

and his every breath is imbued with its power.¹³ He becomes an instrument that leads others to the same accomplishment, or at least to benefit from the grace which naturally surrounds anyone in constant attunement to the Ultimate Reality.

7. Conclusion: Closing the Circle

Having said this much about religion and mysticism, if we turn to science, we will come to realize that while for long it rejected the entire religious worldview (which was necessary for its development), it is now coming to appreciate that any understanding of the world which is true must take account of the whole of reality and be holistic. Thus, surprisingly to some, the cutting-edge scientists are coming to very similar conclusions about reality that the world's great mystics reached intuitively centuries before. In fact, we live in a privileged epoch, when we witness the fact that whether we approach reality from the angle of matter or from that of spirit, we come to the same conclusion, although by different means. This brings us back to the premise of this essay, namely that Reality is one, and that matter, energy, and spirit are but different dimensions of Reality.

For centuries man has endeavoured to free himself from the gravity of matter, transcending his given condition through elevation of the spirit. In relatively recent times (i.e., since the Copernican revolution), we have sought to transcend that gravity not through elevating ourselves above matter, but by penetrating it to ever greater depths through understanding and mastery of its laws. But by penetrating the atom scientists have come to realize that every atom contains the information-structures of galaxies, so that the smallest microcosm reflects the macrocosm as a whole. The universe reflects itself endlessly like a gallery of mirrors, and we, as observers, are also mirrors interdependently linked to all other mirrors, whether animate or inanimate. Finally, all these reflect Reality, in its unfathomable mystery and endlessly enchanting beauty.¹⁴

¹³In Sanskrit, the difference between the ordinary and the accomplished mystic is expressed with the terms *sādhaka* in *siddha*, respectively.

¹⁴I would like to express my gratitude to Venerable Naga Choegyal, whose constructive criticism and insightful comments have greatly benefited this paper. It has also profited immensely from discussions with Shuja Alhaq on the subject of science and its relation to spirituality.