

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, in general, through technology.

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.

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.

In religion and science, man has two of

the greatest forces 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.

Writing about the religious spirit of science, the renowned scientist Albert Einstein said, "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 naive 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.

"But for the scientist, the 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 insig-

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nificant 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."

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 wish to do science. This point has been stressed by many scientists as being indicative of the psychological connection between religion and science.

Scientists frequently talk in terms of religious experiences. However, there is an essential difference between the means the scientists 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 perception of order in nature, in the form of a spiritually moving experience.

Charles Darwin has described such an experience that imprinted itself on his mind in the Brazilian forests. He 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".

Albert Einstein insists on the overpowering impact that boundlessness of the objective intelligibility of nature makes on the mind of the scientist. According to him, 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.

Fred Hoyle, the famous astronomer, while delivering an address to a meeting of the American Physical Society, said, "Why in fact do we do science?? ... The real motive of course is a religious one ... our aim is the same (as that of religion): *to understand the world and ourselves*, not to make a profit or justify ourselves by producing an endless stream of technical gadgets."

Carl Sagan, the well-known cosmologist, said, "If we look at the universe in the large, we find something astonishing. The universe is exceptionally beautiful, intricately and subtly constructed. There are cataclysms and catastrophes occurring regularly in the universe and on the most awesome scale ... We see a universe simultaneously very beautiful and very violent. We see a universe that does not

exclude a traditional Western or Eastern god ...”

In Goethe's words, "Man 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 said: "At times in the silence of the night and in rare, lonely moments I come

upon a sort of communion with something which is not myself These moments happen and they are a supreme fact in my religious life. They are the crown of my religious experience."

Let us conclude with the words of S. Radhakrishnan, renowned philosopher and thinker 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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