

# Science and the spiritual quest

By PHILIP CLAYTON

Religions have always been drawn to "the Beyond", which is deeper, higher or more real than everyday appearances (*maya*). But why would the Beyond matter from a scientific perspective?

I offer five suggestions: (1) Western science defined itself by setting boundaries and excluding non-science in order to bring knowledge under its sway. Metaphysics and religion thus became its chief opponents. The record shows, however, that this attempt at boundary setting was fundamentally unsuccessful.

For a while, of course, modern humans thought that science might have no boundaries. For a time Newton's laws seemed to reign supreme. It was believed that all could be reduced to "particles in motion" and men of science turned to the laws of nature to explain everything as states of physical matter and energy. Such silly ideas still corrupt the pages of some of our science journals. Today that reductionist vision of the world is collapsing into rubble around us.

(2) No compartmentalised approach to knowledge can comprehend the limits of science and what lies beyond them. Discipline-bound methods cannot describe disciplinary boundaries. Instead, the task requires a mode of discourse that is rigorous yet able to cast into question hegemonic claims to knowledge — be they religious or scientific. Our challenge is to find a synthetic vision that encompasses multiple fields of science as well as multiple religious traditions.

The task of working across disciplines is a funny one. Scientists around the world are strongly discouraged from engaging in it. Yet you can do it well only if you are really good at one specific discipline. Unfortunately, inter-disciplinary discussion is somewhat like a drug: most scientists eschew it, but those who become "users" often have difficulty regulating its use. The dosages quickly become larger and larger; the drug of universal integration causes one to float comfortably over huge expanses of science; and soon the once-cautious scientist is making pronouncements over reality as a whole.

The way to navigate the inter-disciplinary river is to step in slowly, never losing contact with the shore of your own discipline. Learn to wait on the synthetic vision like one waits for the final note of a beautiful composition. If you introduce synthetic vision too early, you will bring the entire process to a screeching halt.

## Science and philosophy

(3) Science and the spiritual quest is self-involving. In this dialogue the scientist cannot leave himself or herself aside, as he or she might when doing normal bench science. New habits of mind are required to explore "science and the spiritual quest" for here the self plays a role as inner compass which is unfamiliar to most practising scientists.

(4) Progress in the new dialogue between science and spirituality requires a partnership between science and philosophy, for there is no "theory" of science and religion that is not mediated through philosophy.

This new metaphysical quest may be the most exciting intellectual project of the 21st century. But, sadly, it is one at which we are all too likely to fail. Why? Real partnerships

exist only when the partners are genuinely equal. Unfortunately, there is a serious danger that metaphysics will mount a hostile take-over bid of the discussion. Yet there is a way for the other stakeholders to prevent this take-over. I submit my recommendation under the heading of "the three quests".

The scientific quest. It is standard to speak of science as a quest. Great scientists continually turn their eyes beyond the well-tended gardens of successful theories; their attention fixates inevitably on the wild jungles of anomalous phenomena that confront current theories.

## Metaphysical quest

The spiritual quest. Engaging in spiritual practices is part of a quest equally as unending as the scientific quest. A famous passage in the Christian scriptures beautifully expresses the longing for what is not yet: "Now we see in a glass darkly; then we shall see face to face. Now we understand in part, but then we shall understand fully, even as we are fully understood." How deep a longing is expressed by Jews as they await the coming of the Messiah; how deep is the longing to know the mysteries of the divine that is expressed in the verses of the *sufi* mystics.

The metaphysical quest. In face of these first two quests, why is it then that many speak with such certainty when it comes to metaphysical answers? If science is a quest and religion is a quest, how can metaphysics be a final possession? I plead, then, for humility in metaphysics for caution, for tentativeness.

(5) What scientists can bring to this debate is a hard-mindedness often lacking in theology and inter-religious dialogue. Philosophers and religious scholars have important methodological lessons to learn from the way that scientists approach their work.

I would like to conclude with apparent heresy. If we remove the tension between science and the Beyond, we lose the potential worldwide impact that this new discussion could have. Reducing tensions and removing tensions is not the same.

There are meetings enough of religious leaders who plead for the modern world to forsake science and return instead to religious truths and spiritual insights. "Instead" is the key word here. We have the capacity to build new bridges between science and spirituality. And not just imaginary bridges. In principle, we can help to resolve the hard conceptual issues of cosmology and consciousness, and the hard ethical issues surrounding technology today.

But we face a monstrous danger. To be honest I think the odds are greater that we will succumb to this danger than that we will overcome it. It is the danger that we will "reconcile" pseudo-science and spirituality, a watered-down version of science rather than the actual project of science. Let there be a wedding of science and spirituality, but let it begin with real partners, with all their flaws and blemishes, and with their real strengths.

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