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A QUAKER SCIENTIST'S CASE FOR GOD

RICHARD K. TAYLOR

Ever since the scientific revolution, proponents of atheism have contended that the findings of science undercut the very basis of religion. The same use of science to debunk religion continues today in the works of popular authors like Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*) and Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great*). Some reviewers of these books discount their point of view by observing that they have a very inadequate understanding of faith. While this may be true, their wide popularity and best-seller status clearly is undermining many people's faith. Particularly for young people, reading these books can erect significant intellectual barriers to belief.

As a young person growing up in the '40's and '50's, I myself came to Christian faith long before Dawkins et al. gained such notoriety. However, even then the arguments about "science versus religion" raged. Even though I clung to my faith, nagging questions troubled and challenged me: "What if everything important can be explained by science alone? What if the spiritual world is just an illusion and the underlying reality of the universe is just atoms and molecules, mass, and energy? What if my faith really is a delusion?"

When I reflect on this attempt to use science to invalidate faith, my mind goes back 57 years to a quiet living room on the campus of Haverford College, outside Philadelphia. There a distinguished professor of Chemistry, Dr. Otto Theodor Benfey, met informally with a half-dozen students eager to explore the "big questions" of life. Since Dr. Benfey was both a scientist and an active Quaker, the conversations often turned to the interplay between science and religion. How could he believe in evolution and the scientific method, we asked, and still affirm faith in God?

We learned quickly (and for some of us, with astonishment), that science and religion were not two separate compartments in his mind or in his life. Dr. Benfey, in fact, used science itself to build a lucid, intriguing and persuasive "case for God." This he did gently, without pontificating, and while showing the greatest respect for our doubts,

questions, and ideas. We ourselves came to hold Dr. Benfey's thinking in high regard, not only because of his brilliance, rigorous thinking, and scientific background, but also because of his obvious familiarity with the history and philosophy of science and with the theology of luminaries like Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, whom he quoted frequently.

Because of his family's Jewish background, Dr. Benfey had been a refugee from Nazi Germany, at first living in England (where he became a Quaker), then in the United States, where he pursued a notable career in chemistry. Over the years, his accomplishments were such that the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* published a "Festschrift," a collection of essays in his honor.

Dr. Benfey told our little discussion group that at one time he subscribed to the widespread belief among scientists that there is an inherent conflict between science and religion. Further reflection (plus the experience of God he found in his adopted religion, Quakerism) convinced him that "the path of scientific discovery and the path of religious discovery have striking similarities." He never claimed that the scientific path and the religious path are identical, but he noted strong parallels between the scientific search to understand the natural world and the religious search to understand spiritual reality. More and more, he saw connections between what he called "the science of the natural world and the science of the soul."

In the physical sciences, he noted, observations and measurements of similar phenomena by many trained people make it possible for them to see common characteristics that can be described in a common language. These perceived characteristics are what Oxford mathematician Charles Coulson called "regularities in the combined system of observer plus observed." This agreed-upon language makes it possible for scientists to communicate with one another, to share their findings and add to the body of accepted knowledge.

The observations of physicists, for example, allow them to use agreed-upon words like "quantum of energy" or "photon of light" to describe the phenomena they have observed (sometimes not directly, but through highly sophisticated instruments like cyclotrons and nuclear magnetic resonance spectrometers). Astronomers, scanning the universe, can agree to use the term "supernova" to describe the sudden appearance and disappearance of formerly unexplained points of light. Similarly, biologists can communicate with one another with

terms like “cells” and “cytoplasm,” while geneticists can move from words like “genes” to the more sophisticated and explanatory “DNA.” Using scientific classification methods, ornithologists note that certain birds have enough shared characteristics to place them into species. Each scientific discipline follows a similar path.

Natural science is posited on a big assumption: there are physical realities that humans not only can observe, but also can describe with mutually understood words. This is the point where Dr. Benfey sees “striking similarities” between the scientific approach and the religious path.” The latter posits a transcendent/immanent spiritual reality that interpenetrates human life and that can be described by commonly understood words. If in actuality there is such a spiritual reality, then it makes sense that, after thousands of years of experiencing this realm and comparing notes with one another, human beings would have begun to develop a common language to describe it, just as science has developed a common language to describe its own phenomena.

And, of course, this is just what has happened. Those who have taken up a disciplined spiritual quest find that they have experiences which, while not completely parallel, are strikingly similar. They experience a convincingly real “something” both within and beyond themselves which can be discovered through prayer, meditation and other spiritual disciplines. This “something” goes by many names such as “God,” “Allah,” “Hashem,” words which point to a transcendent reality that awakens awe in those who follow this path. It invites them to respond and to be transformed by giving up egotism, fear and greed and by entering compassionately into the pain of others.

Taking into account the influence of different histories and cultures in which the experience takes place, and discounting institutional and individual misbehavior and misuse, these seekers find, as they “compare notes,” that they can describe this experience with a more or less common language. This gives them the capacity to communicate with one another and with others and helps them (if they choose) to have similar experiences. This mutually shared language points to a spiritual reality in much the same way as the language of the physical sciences points to objective physical realities.

One of the big differences between the natural sciences and religion is that, in the former, it is surprisingly easy, once you know the basic principles, to hammer out a communicable language about observed regularities. The task is much more difficult in religion because it posits not only the material world which physical scientists

study, but also a transcendent/immanent spiritual world in which the material world exists.

The language of religion is more like the language of psychology or psychiatry, whose practitioners are not dealing with realities that can be observed through a telescope or run through a particle accelerator. For example, no one has ever seen “the unconscious.” It has never been dropped into a test tube for study. Yet few thoughtful people would doubt that this word points to an actual reality that affects people’s thoughts, feelings, motivations, and behavior. The term, “the unconscious,” is part of the common language that psychologists and psychiatrists share. Within their fields, however, there are enormous disagreements about the meaning of the term. Whole competing schools of thought have been built upon differing interpretations of this fecund word.

Not surprisingly, religion, which is even more complex, all-encompassing, and with a far longer history than the psychological sciences, also shows competing schools of thought, reflected in differing theologies, doctrines, denominations, even whole religions. Yet, in spite of sometimes extreme disagreements about what is true, there is enough similarity of language to show that each affirms a spiritual world which has certain effects and which lays certain demands on those who open themselves to it.

Among the mystics of each faith, there is even more agreement about what it means to encounter “the holy.” In Christianity’s mystical tradition (e.g., Meister Eckhardt, Thomas à Kempis, Teresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Evelyn Underhill) there are even more communalities. In fact, says Dr. Benfey, “their words and their teachings could never have found a following unless they too had found a way of communicating insights that resonated in the thought and experiences of others.” It might be said that the mystics are the pioneers in encountering spiritual reality and in crafting a language to describe it.

The immediate objection, of course, is that this so-called “religious experience” is nothing more than some kind of mass delusion and that the so-called “common language” is just the babbling of extremely deluded human beings. However, where else in human life does one find a mass psychosis that produces not only communalities in language but long-term effects of exemplary lives marked by compassion, self-sacrifice, joy, peace, and a sense of oneness with all existence?

In response, skeptics may say that, in order for these effects to be produced in people, they necessarily will be influenced by other “seekers.” This influence, it is claimed, changes them and distorts their perceptions so that they are no longer objective and no longer reliable communicators about ultimate reality. But, says Dr. Benfey, this is no different from science, in which one also has to subject oneself to very rigorous training that changes one at very deep levels. As a very mundane example, he points out that “as a chemist, when my moist hands feel cool in a breeze, I see water molecules escaping and stealing heat energy from my skin as they depart; non-chemists just feel chilly.”

“The purpose of training,” Dr. Benfey states, “is not to initiate you into a select group to enjoy each other’s esoteric chatter. It is to ready you to participate in the common and supremely important and urgent search for new truths and insights of help to the wider community. The knowledge regarding the inner life can be at least as life-saving as scientific and technical knowledge.”

In sum, both science and religion are endeavors for expanding and deepening our view of the world and making us perceive realities about which we otherwise would be unaware. The “evidence” of religion, Dr. Benfey argues, is not that different from the “evidence” of science. Both point to actual realities which can be described in a common language; both describe “regularities in the combined system of observer plus observed.”