

Science and Spirituality: Observations from Modern Consciousness Research

The leading philosophy of Western science has been monistic materialism. Various scientific disciplines have described the history of the universe as the history of developing matter and accept as real only what can be measured and weighed. Life, consciousness, and intelligence are seen as more or less accidental side-products of material processes. Physicists, biologists, and chemists recognize the existence of dimensions of reality that are not accessible to our senses, but only those that are physical in nature and can be revealed and explored with the use of various extensions of our senses, such as microscopes or telescopes, specially designed recording devices, and laboratory experiments.

In a universe understood this way, there is no place for spirituality of any kind. The existence of God, the idea that there are invisible dimensions of reality inhabited by nonmaterial beings, the possibility of survival of consciousness after death, and the concept of reincarnation and karma have been relegated to fairy tales and handbooks of psychiatry. From a psychiatric perspective, to take such things seriously means to be ignorant, unfamiliar with the discoveries of science, superstitious, and subject to primitive magical thinking. If the belief in God or Goddess occurs in intelligent persons, it is seen as an indication that they have not come to terms with the infantile images of their parents as omnipotent beings that they had created in their infancy and childhood. And direct experiences of spiritual realities are considered manifestations of serious mental diseases — psychoses.

The study of holotropic states has thrown new light on the problem of spirituality and religion. The key to this new understanding is the discovery that in these states it is possible to encounter a rich array of experiences which are very similar to those that inspired the great religions of the world — visions of God and various divine and demonic beings, encounters with discarnate entities, episodes of psychospiritual death and rebirth, visits to Heaven and Hell, past life experiences, and many others. Modern research has shown beyond any doubt that these experiences are not products of pathological processes afflicting the brain, but manifestations of archetypal material from the collective unconscious, and thus normal and essential constituents of the human psyche. Although these mythic elements are accessed intrapsychically in a process of experiential self-exploration and introspection, they are ontologically real and have objective existence. The matrices for them exist in deep recesses of the unconscious psyche of every human being.

In view of these observations, the fierce battle that religion and science had fought over the last few centuries appears ludicrous and completely unnecessary. Genuine science and authentic religion do not compete for the same territory; they represent two approaches to existence, which are complementary, not competitive. Science studies phenomena in the material world, the realm of the measurable and weighable, while spirituality and true religion draw their inspiration from experiential knowledge of the aspect of the world that Jungians refer to as “imaginal,” to distinguish it from imaginary products of individual fantasy or psychopathology. This imaginal world manifests in what I call “holotropic states of consciousness” — the altered states in which experiences surface that, as stated above, are very similar to those that inspired

the great religions of the world.

Spirituality is a very important and natural dimension of the human psyche, and the spiritual quest is a legitimate and fully justified human endeavor. However, it is necessary to emphasize that this applies to genuine spirituality based on personal experience and does not provide support for ideologies and dogmas of organized religions. To prevent misunderstanding and confusion that in the past compromised many similar discussions, it is critical to make a clear distinction between spirituality and religion.

Spirituality is based on direct experiences of ordinarily invisible numinous dimensions of reality, which become available in holotropic states of consciousness. It does not require a special place or officially appointed persons mediating contact with the divine. The mystics do not need churches or temples. The context in which they experience the sacred dimensions of reality, including their own divinity, is provided by their bodies and nature. And instead of officiating priests, they need a supportive group of fellow seekers or the guidance of a teacher who is more advanced on the inner journey than they are themselves.

Organized religions tend to create hierarchical systems focusing on the pursuit of power, control, politics, money, possessions, and other worldly concerns. Under these circumstances, religious hierarchy as a rule dislikes and discourages direct spiritual experiences in its members, because they foster independence and cannot be effectively controlled. When this is the case, genuine spiritual life continues only in the mystical branches, monastic orders, and ecstatic sects of the religions involved. A deep mystical experience tends to dissolve the boundaries between religions and reveals deep connections between them, while dogmatism of organized religions tends to emphasize differences between various creeds and engenders antagonism and hostility.

There is no doubt that the dogmas of organized religions are generally in fundamental conflict with science, whether this science uses the mechanistic-materialistic model or is anchored in the emerging paradigm. However, the situation is very different in regard to authentic mysticism based on spiritual experiences. The great mystical traditions have amassed extensive knowledge about human consciousness and about the spiritual realms in a way that is similar to the method that scientists use in acquiring knowledge about the material world. It involves a methodology for inducing transpersonal experiences, systematic collection of data, and intersubjective validation. Spiritual experiences, like any other aspect of reality, can be subjected to careful open-minded research and studied scientifically.

Scientifically conducted consciousness research has brought convincing evidence for the objective existence of the imaginal realm and has thus validated the main metaphysical assumptions of the mystical world view, of the Eastern spiritual philosophies, and even certain beliefs of native cultures.

The conflict between religion and science reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of both. As Ken Wilber has pointed out, there cannot be a conflict between science and religion if both these fields are properly understood and practiced. If there seems to be a conflict, we are likely dealing with “bogus science” and “bogus religion.” The apparent incompatibility is due to the fact that either side seriously misunderstands the other’s position and very likely represents also a false version of its own discipline.

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