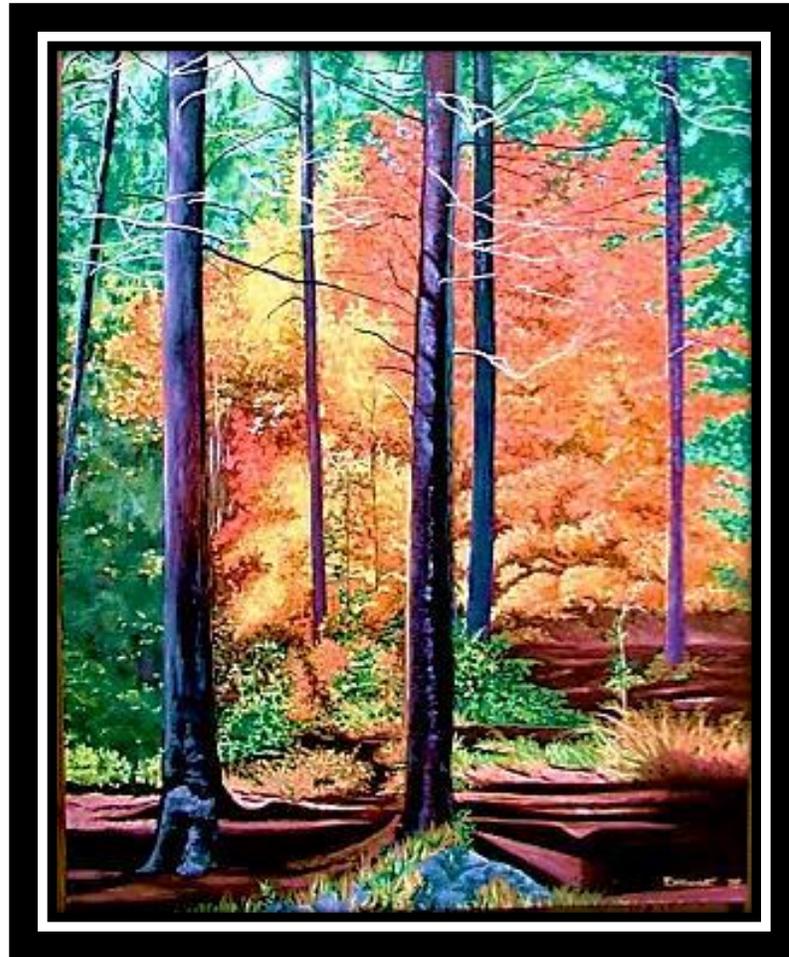


DR 907

Religious Traditions of the World

An In-Depth Report



Burning Bushes

Mewhort R. 2008. Oil on Canvas

Rose Mewhort

August-October, 2015

A Hymn from the *Rig Veda*

Neither not being nor being was there at that time; there was no air-filled space nor was there sky which is beyond it. What enveloped all? Under whose protection? What was the unfathomable deep water?

Neither was death there, nor even immortality at that time; there was no distinguishing mark of day and night. That One breathed without wind in its own special manner. Other than It, indeed, and beyond, there did not exist anything whatsoever.

In the beginning there was darkness concealed in darkness; all this was an indistinguishable flood of water. That which, possessing life-force, was enclosed by the vacuum, the One, was born from the power of heat from its austerity.

Upon It rose up, in the beginning, desire, which was the mind's first seed. Having sought in their hearts, the wise ones discovered, through deliberation, the bond of being and non-being.

Right across was their dividing line extended. Did the below exist then, was there the above? There were the seed planters, there were the great forces of expansion. Below there was self-impulse, above active imparting.

Who knows it for certain; who can proclaim it here; namely, out of what it was born and wherefrom this creation issued? The gods appeared only later-after the creation of the world. Who knows, then, out of what it has evolved?

Wherefrom this creation has issued, whether He has made it or whether He has not -- He who is the superintendent of this world in the highest heaven--He alone knows, or, perhaps, even He does not know.

Rig Veda 10.129 in W. T. de Bary (Ed.). *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961. In Mishlove, J. (1993).

Traditions and the New Visions

The Rig Veda, over 3000 years ago posed the question of creation with all the ambiguities that for centuries have set forth belief, theory, speculation and wonder. The journeys through the imaginative and mythical religious stories are a delight to savor as the sages of many cultures pondered questions of meaning. For thousands of years our literature, philosophy, art and theology have nourished wisdom traditions in diverse cultures. These have provided compass bearings for the thriving of a human species to its present level of complexity. In the responses of sages and scientists in this 21st century, a new vision is rumbling with the force of an incipient cataclysm to unite all peoples in reconciliation with the natural world.

The monotheistic traditions cherish a creation story where the Divine whispered the earth into being. The poetic genius of ancient Judaism blossoms under the scrutiny of science. Charles Darwin (1809 –1882) and his followers are suggesting that from a single cell the complexity of this material world continues to vibrate into being. We now speculate that this has occurred over millions of years. We have seen that a type of moss or algae is growing on Mars and there is a

recent find of salt water on this distant planet. The vastness of the universe that is seen in space travel and photography hints to a limitless divine.

Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) a Jesuit paleontologist and mystic of the 20th century conceived the idea of the Omega Point (a maximum level of complexity and consciousness) towards which he believed the universe was evolving. From the deserts of China he reflected on evolution, Ignation spirituality, patterns of natural development and the human relationship with the divine. He recounted his vision of the unfolding of the cosmos and the evolution of matter toward humanity and ultimately to a reunion with Christ. Christ in this new theology can be considered the anointed natural world. Chardin abandoned literal interpretations of creation in the Book of Genesis. Central to this vision is the idea of consciousness, a non-material realm elusive to study by science. Scientific fact or evidence is based on observations, purportedly objective that have been attained through the sensory capacity of human beings.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Teilhard_de_Chardin

Since the life and theories of Chardin, the classical scientific paradigm has been shattered by the advances in study of the quantum phenomenon which holds the assumption that there is an “immutable objective reality "out there" that is totally independent of what happens in consciousness "in here." Mishlove, J. (1993). This heritage from science with it's a materialist and mechanistic orientation has in latter 20th century embraced quantum theory, relativity theory, the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, and moved into areas of knowledge traditionally reserved for religion and philosophy. We are now examining the discoveries of the sciences for uncanny similarities to traditional mysticism. Scholars in this borderland enjoy a quiet aspiration that the fields of physics and mysticism are in concurrence. There are cautions however when we consider that

mysticism does not submit to principles of reductionist science and that science is always changing with the reworking of old theories in the light of new discoveries.

With the recent openness and dialogue among scientific and religious leaders, the insights of Teilhard de Chardin are evidence of the need for faith that seeks understanding in a world profoundly informed by science. Using the evolutionary model he suggested that there is a third evolutionary era, a “noosphere” involving psychological and moral qualities of being. At the omega point of unification, the point of communion is the *divine milieu*. It is a center with the power to unite and complete all that exists. This milieu is not “out there” but within the unfolding universe.

From the evolution of the universe . . . there seems to emerge patterns, pulsations, vibrations and cycles. The loss of uncertainty, the entrapment of spirit in matter as we descend from the photon to the molecule, seems to be balanced by the increased freedom, the rise of matter into spirit, as we ascent through the plant, animal and human kingdoms. The orchestration of the universe is a most complex and subtle symphony (Mishlove, J. 1993).

Philosopher Beatrice Bruteau (1930- 2014) followed the lead of Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin. With her unique synthesis of natural sciences, psychology, mathematics, physics, chemistry, politics, and economics, she approached science with the mystical insights of the contemplative. She recognized the world as “divine self-expression” containing within itself that creativity built into the world as its essence. Within her comprehensive scientific analysis there is the recognition of the human challenge to “co-create with the divine” through the energy of consciousness i.e. human becoming. In her view we have the capacity to

create what has not existed before, by redirecting the energies of our deepest selves. Perhaps the visions of peace on earth and agape are the essential energy behind all activity. It is here we meet the intuitive genius of Jesus, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammad and the great saints of these and other traditions.

Consciousness

In contemporary and simplistic language the word “intention” can be understood as the very process articulated through most traditions. Within a union with the divine “expressed intention” is known as prayer. For the mystical mind which lives in the domain of deep personal experience, the explanation of how God works is satisfied by narrative. The biblical narrative is set within a context of the times and the stories are meant to foster community. Each of the great religions is organized around stories that give meaning to the awesome facts of living. In the western world by the end of the Middle Ages the distancing effects of science have eroded the sense of a loving divine. Now in the post-modern era a pervasive meaninglessness, polarization and lack of global community signifies a “dark night” with possible extinction of our species.

We as humans seem to be “aware that we are aware” and gifted with those intricate intellectual and emotional propensities that propel us toward the conscious decisions to transcend. The term consciousness unfortunately is often subjected to inferences of Cartesian dualism. For the purposes of this paper the spiritual understanding of consciousness is that of the relationship of the mind and the Divine or the relationship of the mind and deeper truths more fundamental than the physical world. Richard M. Burke, a psychiatrist described cosmic consciousness as awareness of the life and order of the universe, possessed only by humans who are enlightened. Ken Wilber compares eastern and western understanding of

consciousness with the notion that a spectrum of the mind includes ordinary to enlightened states (<https://en.wikipedia.org/Consciousness>).

Notwithstanding, contemporary science and religions remain androcentric. Many of us are interested to know if there is non-human consciousness. Our animal friends fear death by predators and natural forces with the valiant struggle to survive. In the new ecology of the 21st century, observations of animal behavior suggest (as any pet owner knows) that animals love, display devotion to lifelong partners as well as human beings and show uncanny abilities akin to extra sensory perception. A controversial theory of morphic resonance popularized by Rupert Sheldrake who studied at the ashram of Bede Griffiths, offers studies of animal behavior that open new areas of understanding of non-verbal communication as well as species' memories and habits.

<http://www.thinkingallowed.com/youtubelist.html> [Rupert Sheldrake 3 - 'A New Science of Life' - Interview by Iain McNay](#)). Cosmic consciousness may not be at its most enlightened form in the human species. The age old religions that knew interdependence as a manifestation of the divine may have insight into consciousness that is yet to be reconciled with western science.

Traditions under Siege

“Nonetheless, science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both.” *Laudato Si* (62),

It is evident that in the latest papal encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis and his advisors are aware of the catastrophic effects of centuries of division between beliefs among nations and the dominating paradigms that are shaping human

activity. There is pervasive distortion of religion that motivates terrorism as well as unreasonable religious premises that deny the truths of science. Yet careful analysis of the celebration of secularism and the new atheism reveal in some cases the vested self-interest that belies individualism as a social more. Secularism, a paradigm robbed of divine mystery, contributes to meaninglessness. The goal of comfortable and convenient living is a first world obsession. Instant gratification satisfies only the addictions of greed and self-aggrandizement within the confusing cloak of rapidification. Interestingly the glamor of the New Atheism is predominantly a British and American phenomenon whose roots can be traced to colonial and imperial practices (Beattie, T. 2008). The need to justify domination of the natural world has emerged from anthropocentric concerns. The ethics of labor and endurance since the beginning of the industrial era gradually outweighed virtues that lead us beyond ourselves into living both compassion and justice. In the Christian tradition we remember the great St. Benedict of Norcia who contextualized work and prayer as necessary for growth of the spiritual life. “*ora et labora*” from the 6th century persists as wisdom. Benedict who pioneered the monastic tradition viewed prayer and work as allies, and believed in combining contemplation with action. The need for depth in prayer to contextualize labor has become a prophetic statement for our times. The marriage of east and west as foreseen by Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) expands the limited western view of theology that is infused with dominating paradigms.

Learned scholars of Islam, Judaism and Christianity since antiquity have examined both the natural world and faith to inform theology. The eastern religious traditions magnify the imaginative, disciplined and contemplative dimensions that so richly augment the zeal to power that betrays deep faith. Extremism, acts of violence, and fundamentalism, has characterized the religions propagated through

the media in the latter 20th century. Political and social agendas are distorting those deeper stories understood by the very human need to interpret; to seek meaning beyond the facts of the material world. Sadly the beauty of religious thought has been reduced to exclusivism on a turbulent planet beset by inequities among people and the horrors promulgated in the name of God.

Some of the more fundamental of Christian believers adhere to an overly literal interpretation of scripture that cannot affirm that God is Self-expressing and Self-realizing in evolution. Bruteau's examination of biology, the study of the patterns of growth from a single cell to organs, from organs to systems, to systems that cooperate and reciprocate, to individual persons, to family and communities is a plausible juncture between theology and science. Perhaps we can now envision another great evolutionary step that of consciousness, the movement to see the other as the "I am", the agape love that seeks well-being, the fullness of being of the beloved. Bruteau relates to the "I am" statement in Judaism when the divine speaks to Moses. St. John's gospel reiterates the "I am" as words of Jesus. Agape, the Divine action begins in the one, extends to the other, and wills to share being and "participates in the glory of God that fills the whole world" (Bruteau, B. 1997).

The ancient Indian notion of Brahman does not neglect creative activity. Brahman manifests as world. The world is holy and the world needs to be encouraged to ripen. For most faiths there is the Absolute that expresses itself as relative; yet the infinite and finite are co-existent. Any living human person is the same in structure as the eternal and is simply manifesting its "being" in time. Enlightened ones such as Mohammad, the Buddha, Confucius, their mystical followers throughout the ages found their way into union with the Divine. In their encounters with deepest self, the limitations in perception that divide human beings

gave way to the Truth that is our union. “There is no other” is a popular affirmation that reminds us that the individuated self we celebrate as ego has to give way to the truth of interconnected systems in order that compassion and justice blossom.

Agape

From the theological perspective the most perfect love is that of the divine. In the Christian perspective many kinds of love include friendship, romantic and altruistic love. Bruteau (1997) brings new clarity to what we know of the highest form of love, divine love. In agape love there is recognition of the value of what on the surface may not appear as our “self.” The energy of divine love is vested entirely in the other’s own being (Bruteau, B.1997. P.172.) Agape is both the acknowledgement of the absolute value of “Being” in the other, and an unconditional will to its well-being. The creaturely model we all observe is the powerful nurturing impulses of the parent. Biologically speaking, an infant continues to be part of the mother until maturity. If we consider maturity on the spectrum from biology to moral development and the attainment of wisdom every human person is in a maturing process. We live this in relationship, in communal adaptation and transcendence. Sins are the failure to recognize the ground of interconnectedness in the “other” and this in turn comes from failure to recognize it in ourselves. When we find the “I am” in the center of ourselves, the goal of contemplative prayer, the ecstatic union is transformative. And having found it, we discover that its intention is toward becoming; the work of evolution.

Integration and Differentiation

Pope Francis in his latest encyclical *Laudato Si* called for a global faith community outlining an analysis of the institutional structures created by human beings since industrialization. The scope of his vision is multidimensional. From his viewpoint, his understanding of Christ's message, interdependence and global community are dire necessities. This call to unity on a planetary scale has to value variety of faith belief. The diversity of species are diminishing, access to clean water to support life is waning, developing countries are exploited for natural resources, human slavery has mutated into forms that leave families all over the world fearful and powerless. Xenophobia inhibits the human impulse to enjoy multiplicity yet the process of evolution demands differentiation to create new forms. "Diversity is absolutely essential to the unity of the composed being . . . It means the greater the variety of the relations and interactions among the composing entities, the more intricate the composed unity (Bruteau, B. 1997).

The ancient doctrine of the Trinity is meant to point to this underlying connectedness. We now understand the cosmos as webs of energy, fields within fields. In our cosmic roots we are already one. In the psychology of Bruteau's vision we are "persons" rather than individuated beings. We evolve into persons when we have a more pervasive other-centered consciousness. The notion of a personal godhead can be an obstacle for natural sciences. Yet an evolutionary theory, that fully grasps the process of becoming, reveals a continuum and a spectrum of conscious development into personhood. Evolution to knowing Agape reunites the spiritual and moral dimension to lived experience and corporality.

Summary

The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge: *Laudato Si* (80)

John Haught (2015) notes that “With the help of the works of scientifically informed religious thinkers, such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin . . . the universe does indeed have a purpose, namely, that of bringing about the self-justifying value of beauty. “ (<http://www.stvchurch.org/council-committees/outreach-engagement/the-cry-of-the-earth/#scharper>). It is not sufficient however to dwell only in the academic world to argue for a meaningful and beautiful universe. This course with its very comprehensive exploration of the traditions, rituals, and stories of world religions reveal the diversity of ideas about the divine that must be valued. Dialogue and ensuing appreciation of intuitive awareness within each person tends not to argument but to celebration. Outdated systems such as patriarchy, sexism and discrimination must come to an end with the realization that every person on Earth is emerging out of a cosmic whole.

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