

## **2023 02 12 Cruse Homily: Science and Religion**

In today's service, I will replace the word religion with spirituality in its broader meanings that include religious forms. And by spirituality in today's homily, I will focus on the singular experiences of spiritual transcendence, of union with the cosmos as our second reader, Alan Lightman records along with others.

The scientific challenge for such higher-level spirituality is whether or not such experiences are the result of natural neural responses in human consciousness, called material responses by the scientists. If so, then they may be artificially simulated in the future by a digital form of fully human consciousness in a machine or artificial being. If not, then we can claim that the experiences are those of fully transcendent realities with names associated with various cultural and religious forms. This is today's real challenge between science and religion or spirituality.

All living systems are conscious in that they (and we) sense external stimulations. Tesla's automation is an example of artificial consciousness as it senses, and acts based on its sensing. It is mostly but not always self-correcting, as a digital form of self-awareness. As humans we also have the ability to be more than just self-aware by our mental ability to be aware of our own state of awareness that scientists call meta-awareness. Meta-awareness is that consciousness that is beyond awareness.

Using our capacity for meta-awareness is the basis for the mystic's ability to shed layers of self in a deeply meditative process. That shedding of self to find union with God is what Meister Eckhart

describes as becoming naked before God. The experience of union with God is deeply embedded in the Catholic mystical history.

Pseudo-Dionysius, thought likely to have written at the end of the fifth century is the likely source of this mysticism in the early Church in his writings on contemplation. He wrote that the relationship between Me and Thee, human and God, “must be transcended by a process leading to ecstasy. The human spirit,” he continues, “must seek to go forth out of itself into the Uncreated Object of its contemplation and so to be utterly merged.” This is a fully transcendent experience for one who has made this contemplative journey.

Transcendence is defined as an existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level. One can experience transcendence, for example, in a beautiful sunset. Such fully transcendent personal experiences, a state of non-being in the presence of the infinite, the cosmos, God, the eternal Buddha are my focus today.

For scientists, these are likely to be the result of a special brain state, our material being as science contends. Alan Lightman’s experienced full transcendent union with the starry cosmos overhead, an experience of a total loss of self into the starry sky as he lay on his back one clear night off the coast of Maine. Lightman wrote in one of his books that his transcendent experience is captured in a quote by an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century psychologist and Unitarian, William James, in his book Varieties of Religious Experience.

“I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was deep calling unto deep – the deep that my own struggle had

opened up within being answered by the unfathomable deep without, reaching beyond the stars. I stood alone with Him who had made me, and all the beauty and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. ... Having once felt the presence of God's spirit, I have never lost it again for long. My most assuring evidence of God's existence is deeply rooted in that hour of vision in the memory of that supreme experience."

Even with these words, as a scientist Lightman pursues a scientific explanation of his experience as he takes us with him in the PBS series.

Pseudo-Dionysius's words I quoted from the fifth century are just such an experience as these. I too have experienced a fully transcendent union with the Divine through a Zen Master-guided contemplation or meditation process leading me to mindfully shed the many layers of self. Ultimately, I found myself in a pure state of cosmic awareness. I truly experienced a sense union with no awareness of self. It was a wonderful state perhaps even ecstatic as pseudo-Dionysius wrote. The singular experience of such a union with the infinite, the Divine, is a touchstone experience that, as with James is: "[m]y most assuring evidence of God's existence" in that cosmic experience. And, yes, it is mysterious.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote on a key meaning he found in the Lotus Sutra writing:

"We participate in the Buddha's infinite life span and limitless spiritual strength when we are able to get in touch with the ultimate dimension of everything we see...we are also in touch with our own ultimate nature and spiritual power."

I have revisited the reality of my own experience of cosmic awareness in the days leading up to today. I believe that I experienced the true nature of God as fully aware, fully compassionate. In this pure state of cosmic awareness, we know the truth that God is here with us in times of trauma and times of deep spiritual needs. It also has taught me that in the carpet of life this cosmic awareness I call God does interconnect each of us now and to the past. I choose to fully embrace this reality of God's caring presence with us as our source of our Hope for the future of our planet and humanity.

Alan Lightman's series of meetings with leading scientists regarding his transcendent experience was to find out if his experience was simply a state of neural harmony that tunes out all other self-consciousness. He reached no answer but chose to believe that Science will find a material condition behind such fully transcendent and personal experiences.

I have chosen from my own personal experiences of touchstone moments that they do not derive from a material but from the ultimate Divine, God. I do not expect to live long enough to see the end of this scientific searching that Lightman explores. Rather, in the spirit of our closing video song, I am content to let that mystery be.