

‘... IT’S LIKE LOOKING AT GOD’

By MARGARET BRENNAN

THE FRONT PAGE OF TORONTO’S April 24th 1992 morning paper pictured what looked like a mottled blue Easter egg, with an orange band that stretched from end to end. Actually, according to the newspaper report, it was a sky map produced with data from a NASA satellite that shows striking new evidence of the way the early universe developed. The different shades of blue are indicative of the tiny variations in the microwave radiation that remained after the initial explosion that created the universe. The left-over radiation is somewhat like the embers that remain after an enormous fire has died out. Scientists called the discovery ‘a clean window to the early universe’, a ‘Holy Grail’. Astrophysicist George Smoot, leader of the team that made the discovery, summed up his feelings at a news conference in Washington D.C., ‘If you’re religious, it’s like looking at God’.¹

Such a seemingly pious, and even mystic expression from a scientist is no longer viewed as so out of the ordinary as it might have been in previous generations. Overwhelmed with the beauty and symmetry of the earth, the first astronauts who viewed the planet from outer space read the creation story from the Book of Genesis to an awed television world. Years before, Einstein’s famous statement that ‘God does not play dice’ argued metaphorically to more than randomness at the origin of the universe. And more recently, some physicists like David Bohm and Fritjof Capra have written convincingly of the relationship of their work with ideas that are endemic to Eastern mysticism. Stephen Hawking, the brilliant Cambridge scientist, while dismissing connections between quantum physics and Eastern mysticism as ‘pure rubbish’, does nevertheless admit that there must be clear religious implications whenever one starts to discuss the origins of the universe.²

It happens too, as in the case of James Lovelock, the originator of the Gaia Hypothesis, that religious implications of scientific theories can develop quite apart from the intentions of the author. The Gaia Hypothesis, named after the Greek earth goddess, maintains that the planet is a living organism, alive, resilient, and capable of existence beyond our own misuse of her gifts and bounty. Our lives depend more

on her than her life on ours. After publishing his first book entitled *Gaia: a new look at life on earth*, Lovelock expressed shock and surprise that the majority of his readers interpreted his message within the framework of religious faith.³

It must be acknowledged, however, that there are many scientists who are not convinced that there is any meaning to the assumption that the human spirit can have any sense of kinship with the cosmos. In its extreme manifestation this doubt takes the form of an imperialistic scientism which claims that science is the only genuine description of the real. In an article in *Theological studies*, Christopher Mooney S.J. quotes the geneticist Jacques Monod as expressing the logical conclusion for such an assumption: 'The ancient covenant is in pieces; man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe out of which he emerged only by chance'.⁴ But a growing number of scientists, as has already been attested, indicate that science as such is not value-free nor are scientists so uninfluenced by personal beliefs and subjectivity.

Moreover, belief in and experience of a sense of the Absolute which transcends sense perception has been universally present in all the world religions. The question for theologians has been to search out the extent to which this experiential component can also communicate objective truth and reality.⁵ The unmistakable and deeply felt sense of belonging to God, of knowing in some way that the true self is in the image and likeness of God is the meaning of mysticism. It is a realization that can characterize the totality of a person's life. Its concern is as deeply about reality as is that of the scientist. The focus of this article is to examine the influence that the changing scientific paradigm has had on new awarenesses of and new explorations into the reality of God.

Explorations on the frontiers of science and spirituality have been the subject of much fruitful reflection in recent years. One such attempt can be found in the book entitled *Belonging to the universe*. In this volume physicist Fritjof Capra dialogues with Camaldolese Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast and theologian Thomas Matus on the parallels between the new paradigm thinking in both science and theology. The result is an animated and enlightening conversation which offers new insights into the nature of reality from both the discoveries of modern science and the ancient and traditional wisdom of spirituality.⁶ Among the many areas of agreement and coherence between science and religious experience that are discussed by the authors, one which would seem to touch upon a new understanding of the meaning and reality of mysticism is that of the shift from the part to the whole. In the new

scientific paradigm what were formerly called parts can now be understood only from the dynamics of the whole. 'Ultimately, there are no parts at all. What we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships.'⁷ The same kind of shift is operative as well in theology, but from another perspective.

Ultimately revelation as a process is of one piece. Individual dogmas focus on particular moments in God's self-manifestation in nature, history, and human experience . . . History is itself the great truth of God's self-manifestation. Revelation as such is intrinsically dynamic.⁸

The new scientific theories regarding the origin of the universe as emerging from a vast primeval explosion are illustrations of these paradigmatic shifts. Already we have begun to experience profound effects on the ways in which we have begun to re-understand and re-evaluate our role as human beings in the continuing evolution of our planet. To see ourselves as connected and interrelated to and with all other living things in a universe that is dynamically alive has not only expanded our experience of God but has also given birth to an environmental consciousness which itself will require the creation of a new cultural vision which is both spiritual and social.

A kind of 'plumb line' for measuring the depth of spiritual experience from which such a cultural vision can take shape and focus is contained in a newly awakened awareness of the transcendent that manifests itself in the thirst for meaning, for belonging, and for connectedness to the cosmos. Such awareness is not always expressed nor experienced as intentionally religious but it is always spiritual. To be *spiritual* in this sense is to be aware of the presence of mystery, of the hidden meaning of things. For David Steindl-Rast, such encounters with mystery are

like an insight—not a clear idea or concept—an insight through which our restless search finds rest for a brief moment. It's a dynamic kind of rest, in no way static or complacent; a sense of belonging that urges us on with new longing.⁹

For Steindl-Rast, such insights may, in the briefest of moments, allow us a glimpse of the answer to the unexpressed question of life that we carry inside. It may be in the smile of a baby or in the captured glance of an unexpected sign of new life—like an early spring flower that lifts its head up and out of an unexpected April snow. For Vaclav Havel, playwright and President of Czechoslovakia, the emphasis is on the social aspect of the vision. Addressing himself to the role of politicians in

a postmodern world, Havel believes that the search for meaning must include a trust in the world, in one's own thoughts and one's own soul.

Soul, individual spirituality, firsthand personal insight into things; the courage to be himself and go the way his conscience points, humility in the face of the mysterious order of Being, confidence in its natural direction and, above all, trust in his own subjectivity as his principal link with the subjectivity of the world—these are the qualities that politicians of the future should cultivate.¹⁰

These encounters with mystery, with the spiritual, have been enhanced by a growing ecological awareness which has made us keenly responsive to the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all creation embedded in a cosmos and earth which is ongoing and continually developing. It is what scientists call *deep ecology* in contradistinction to *shallow ecology* which sees human beings as above or outside nature. They have also been provoked by the need to change radically our attitude to the world, to recognize genuine pluralism, to see things as they are in their individuality, to promote an atmosphere of tolerant solidarity, unity and diversity based on mutual respect.¹¹

In the past few years a growing volume of books, articles, videos and audiotapes have addressed this quest for the experience of deeper meaning. Many of these make no attempt to connect the search for belonging with the riches of religious traditions of the past. For example, publications coming from the New Age movement for the most part reflect the conviction that 'humanity is waking from a long sleep of ethnic cultures and belief systems that have outlived their time . . . They have failed to realize and to mirror all of what humanity is and wants to be.'¹² For adherents of New Age philosophy, what will replace organized religion with its static ideology and lack of dynamism will be a sense of heightened human awareness in a living and whole universe that we are empowered to co-create and participate in. It is their belief that the cultivation and recognition of psycho-spiritual experiences based on extra-sensory perceptions and new ways of enhancing relationships with others can lead to the total transformation of every level of personal and social life. Moreover, they are convinced that as our expanded awareness comes into contact with the great Cosmic Creative Being we will be enabled to bring about the creative healing and transformation of individuals, of society and of world culture.¹³

It must be said, however, that the seemingly positive direction of New Age spirituality cannot but be severely compromised and impoverished in denying the rich contribution and accumulated wisdom of the world's

great and ancient religions that have offered so much learning, beauty and inspiration to countless millions. Nor is it possible that humanistic psychology, channelling, and the cultivation of holistic therapies and meditative practices alone can lead to individual and social transformation without a corresponding commitment to the hard work of social analysis and the challenging of unjust structures.

While not specifically espousing all the aspects of New Age philosophy, new patterns in feminist spirituality also espouse a commitment to the transformation of religion, and in particular to the experience of spirit in women's lives. There is no doubt that connecting feminism with ecology has enabled women to reflect on the dualistic and non-relational world into which they have been socialized. Beginning with a critique of the Judaco-Christian patriarchal understandings and articulations of a male, transcendent and warrior God, feminists have disclaimed allegiance to the 'God of their fathers' and have sought instead the God/ess of compassion, nurturance and fertility. Such an understanding of the divine allows women to honour their own bodies as created in the image and likeness of God and as sources of the Spirit's life-giving energy and transforming power.¹⁴ Feminist rituals of worship that arise from such awareness give time and space to bonding, grounding, and creative movement that acknowledges the divine presence in the participants and in the world of nature. Such celebrations are more often than not oriented to the need for the transformation of destructive social structures and tendencies that continue to keep alive the cleavage between humanity and nature. In such instances 'transcendence is no longer the issue. But healing the web of life is.'¹⁵

Among the women who are committed to a feminist, earth-based spirituality, many would call themselves post-Christian or neo-Pagan. Their commitment is to a divine principle that is not only *in* nature but *is* nature. The trees, the water, the air, fire, the earth are all sacred. The sacred pulsing energy of life, death and rebirth is the unifying force that links the sea, the sky, the earth and all living things and persons. For many proponents of this spirituality, symbols of Goddess worship more adequately express and acknowledge the experience of women in their search to legitimate and affirm the goodness of female power which has been denigrated for so long.

Power is not only power-over—the ability to manipulate, control and punish—but also power-from-within, the inherent ability each of us has to become what we are meant to be—as a seed has within it the inherent power to root, grow, flower, and fruit. Power-from-within is not limited and there is no scarcity of it within the universe. My power does not

preclude your having power, rather my skills and knowledge may augment your own.¹⁶

An unsolved and unsettled question underlying the meaning of the Goddess in terms of relationality is well stated by Carol Christ, a feminist theologian who has reflected on her own journey from Christianity to the Goddess.

Though my theological training tells me I must know whether Goddess is one or many, personal or impersonal, whether she is nature or more than nature, I am not certain that these questions can be answered. The answers do not seem to be required for participation in ritual.¹⁷

On the other hand it is feminists within the Christian tradition who have written powerfully and convincingly of the world as God's Body.¹⁸ This creative and challenging concept builds on a holistic concept of the human person which has moved away from the dualistic view that body and soul were quite separate realities, held together in some mysterious way in life but separating at death with the hope that 'in the last day' they would once more be united. Building on this analogy can we ask if the same is not true of God's relationship to the cosmos? Can we conceive of the cosmos as the embodiment of God's self in the same way as the human self is embodied but not identified? If we were to conceive of the cosmos in this way, would it not give us a new reverence for the earth? A conversion from our exploitative and destructive ways? The metaphor of the universe as God's body sees the cosmos as expressive of God's very being, enabling a very special relationship between God and the world.

Those who have remained committed to the rich heritage of any one of the world's great religious traditions have also witnessed to and experienced a new awareness of thinking and feeling relationally with all of creation and with all other living beings. Christians today who espouse this same ecological awareness express an openness to God and to Jesus which includes an openness to truth, goodness and beauty wherever they are found. For example, creation-centred spiritualities have made us mindful and respectful of spiritual traditions of Native Americans, Africans, Asians and other tribal peoples whose worship of the Great Spirit is intimately connected with the living force in all things. They have given us a new appreciation of an immanent God dwelling in all things, and in all persons and peoples. A new space for dialogue has opened where Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Moslems and Jews can share insights toward acknowledging the same unifying force which roots us in a transcendent source of life and being.

How are we to evaluate this variety of spiritual experience that has emerged from the new understandings of the cosmos in itself and as it relates to us and to God? Contemporary science has convinced us that the universe is a developing, expanding reality. In contemplating the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of everything from the great spiralling galaxies, the solar system and on our planet earth, we already sense that we have touched upon a creative well-spring of a widening and deepening experience of the mystery of God.

Can we say then that there *is* the possibility for a 'new' mysticism, a new experience of the Absolute in the new cosmology that has forever altered our view of creation and of the transcendent God of our traditional faith?

The answer to this question will depend on a clear understanding of mysticism, on what it has taught us about the nature of reality, and on how the new scientific venture can expand and enliven the traditional mystical experience that has once again become so significant in a world of such uncertainty.

Evelyn Underhill, a great modern teacher of mysticism, has stated that:

To be a mystic is simply to participate here and now in real and eternal life, in the fullest, deepest sense which is possible to man. It is to share as a free and conscious agent in the joyous travail of the universe, its mighty, onward sweep through pain and glory to its home in God . . . The mystic act of union, that joyous loss of the transfigured self in God, which is the crown of man's conscious ascent towards the Absolute, is the contribution of the individual to this, the destiny of the Cosmos.¹⁹

Mysticism is not a religion, though it has found a home in almost every known religious tradition. It may twine itself around credal statements or use them as a kind of scaffold by which the mystic may ascend but often, as in John of the Cross' depiction of the mystic ascent of Mt Carmel, the road simply fades away as one reaches the top.²⁰ As was indicated previously, it is to be aware of the hidden meaning of things—an insight through which our restless search finds rest for a brief moment. It is an insatiable longing to know God as an experience rather than as an object. It is a desire to pass out of oneself and to become Being itself.

Margaret Smith, well-known Anglican scholar of mysticism, has drawn together four basic assumptions that have been generally accepted as fundamental principles or premises on which the mystics can base their claims for taking the journey into the Absolute. Initially

mysticism assumes that the mystic is gifted with the intuition or inner spiritual sense that enables a penetration and grasp of truth that is gained without the normal processes of consciousness. The confession of Job, 'I *know* that my Redeemer lives', is not knowledge based upon empirical sense-knowledge. It is, in the thought of St Paul, 'the evidence of things not seen'—things not presented to sense-perception. Similarly, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Arjuna, desiring to behold God, is answered by Krishna—the embodiment of Vishnu: 'But for that thou canst not see Me with this thine own eye, I give thee a divine eye'.²¹ In his classic text *The idea of the holy*, Rudolph Otto quotes very significantly on this point from a sermon on 'Jacob's Wrestling'. As daylight approached, Jacob holds fast to his divine antagonist as though aware that the daylight would rob him of an anticipated blessing which he feels conceals some deep truth.

God is approached more nearly in that which is *indefinite* than in that which is definite and distinct. He is felt in *awe* and *wonder* and *worship* rather than in clear *conception*. . . . God's plan was not to give names and words, but *truths of feeling*.²²

Secondly, mysticism holds as true the belief that all creatures are in the Divine Nature. Mystics have constantly taught that God is the 'Ground of our Being'—that in each of us is a divine spark, a point of light that seeks to be reunited with the Eternal Flame. In a celebrated passage of *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*, Thomas Merton testifies to this basic and spiritual sense of belonging:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point of spark which belongs entirely to God . . . It is the pure glory of God in us . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.²³

A third assumption of mysticism is that the attainment of the knowledge of God—of the Absolute—can only come through self-purification. 'Who shall ascend unto the hill of God? or who shall stand in God's holy place? Only the one with clean hands and a pure heart', sings the psalmist. Eastern and Western mystics alike insist on a certain withdrawal from self, a quieting of the senses, a stilling of the mind. The

point is well-illustrated by Rudolph Otto in recalling a conversation with a Buddhist monk who had been expostulating on the arguments for the 'theology of negation' and 'emptiness'.

When he made an end, I asked him, what then Nirvana itself is; and after a long pause came at last the single answer, low and restrained: 'Bliss—unspeakable'. And the hushed restraint of that answer, the solemnity of his voice, demeanour, and gesture, made more clear what was meant than the words themselves.²⁴

Perhaps more familiar to those of us in the West are the well-known words of St John of the Cross in the first verses of his mystic poem *The dark night of the soul*.

Upon a dark night,
With all my cares to loving ardours flushed,
(O venture of delight!)
With nobody in sight
I sent abroad when all my house was hushed.
In safety, in disguise,
In darkness up the secret stair I crept,
(O happy enterprise)
Concealed from other eyes
When all my house at length in silence slept.

Finally, the fourth assumption of the mystic path is that the mystic always regards himself or herself as a lover and the object of his or her search is always in terms of the Beloved. It is love that sets the mystic free 'to pass from that which seems to be to that which is'. Evelyn Underhill remarks that whether the mystic be symbolist, quietist, nature-mystic or transcendentalist, he or she is at home and fully developed in every great religion. What makes the mystic 'belong' is often beyond adherence to credal statements. It is the way he or she thinks about and relates to the Deity in love. Mystics, whether they be Brahman, Sufi, Jewish or Christian are far more like each other than any one of them might be to believers in their own tradition. Their all-possessing consciousness of the divine life is what unites them and becomes 'the common factor which unites those apparently incompatible views of the universe which have been claimed at one time or another as mystical'.²⁵

What then do the mystics tell us about the nature of Reality? In Margaret Smith's summarization, they announce first and foremost that the Object of their quest, be it the World-Soul, the Absolute, the Living

God, the One Reality, is also the Beloved. They insist that the mystic way is both practical and active, requiring discipline and a way of life. Because it is permeated by Love, it can never be self-serving and what is given is to be shared and communicated with other human beings. In the introductory chapter to his book *Understanding mysticism*, Richard Woods suggests that the mystics have a truly prophetic function to raise the collective consciousness to values and beliefs that have been forgotten or submerged. In this sense, they are always men and women of the future.²⁶ For Sandra Schneiders, 'Prophecy is the public face of mysticism'.

Finally, we return to the place of our beginning. Can the new scientific venture expand and enliven the traditional mystical experience? For Evelyn Underhill, though the experience of God—of the Absolute—will itself remain unchanged, nevertheless 'our ways of describing and interpreting spiritual experience must change with the rest, if we are to keep in touch with reality'.²⁷ Is the ability to look more deeply into the heart of our cosmic origins 'like looking at God'? Does the scientific theory of an ever-expanding universe that began billions of years ago in the exploding of a star indicate, mysteriously, that there is an intelligibility behind it all, however baffling? Does the realization that we as humans are *not* the primary ones for whom the material world exists elicit a sense of wonder, a new experience of belonging and connectedness to the earth that gives birth to a new significance as regards our own importance and dignity as human persons? Have those who have sensed and felt these questions somehow touched and tasted the ineffable mystery of the Absolute?

A thousand mystic experiences cannot make a mystic, yet even one encounter with the Being of God, when we feel that we have touched the divine within and as part of our inmost self, can be enough to change irrevocably the course and direction of our life. In this sense, the new paradigm thinking in science *can* offer the possibility of a new mysticism because it opens the way to a greater experience of reality and the truth of things.

For Christians the question of cosmic thinking and a new mysticism must not only include but be centred in the person of Jesus Christ. This will require some courageous and creative approaches to Christology which will continue to consider Jesus Christ as the central symbol of its faith while not dismissing nor demeaning the place and the contribution of other world religions.²⁸ To bring together the story of Jesus of Nazareth and the story of the cosmos is a challenge not only for theologians but for all of us as well who believe in and live out of the truth of St Paul's words that:

He is the image of the invisible God,
 the first-born of all creation;
 for in him all things were created,
 in heaven and on earth,
 visible and invisible . . .
 He is before all things,
 and in him all things hold together.

Col 1:15-17

NOTES

- ¹ Smith, Michael: 'In the beginning: birth of a universe', *Toronto Star* (24 April 1992), pp A1, A32.
- ² Boslough, John: *Stephen Hawking's universe* (New York: Avon Books, 1985), p 115.
- ³ Lovelock, James: *The ages of Gaia* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), p 203.
- ⁴ Mooney, Christopher: 'Theology and science' in *Theological studies* 52 (1991), p 292.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p 301.
- ⁶ Capra, Fritjof and Steindl-Rast, David: *Belonging to the universe* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p xii.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p 13.
- ¹⁰ Havel, Vaclav: 'The end of the modern era', *New York Times* (Sunday, 1 March 1992).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Blair-Ewart, Alexander: 'Reflections in an Aquarian eye', *Dimensions* (October 1990), p 29.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ See for example Plaskow, Judith and Christ, Carol (eds): *Weaving the visions* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989).
- ¹⁵ Morton, Nelle: *The journey is home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p 216.
- ¹⁶ Starhawk: 'Feminist, earth-based spirituality and ecofeminism' in Plant, Judith (ed): *Healing the wounds* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989), p 177.
- ¹⁷ Christ, Carol: *Laughter of Aphrodite* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), p 110.
- ¹⁸ See Jantzen, Grace: *God's world, God's body* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), and McFague, Sallie: *Models of God: theology for an ecological, nuclear age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
- ¹⁹ Underhill, Evelyn: *Mysticism: a study in the nature of man's spiritual consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 1961), p 534.
- ²⁰ Smith, Margaret: 'The nature and meaning of mysticism' in Woods, Richard (ed): *Understanding mysticism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1966), p 20.
- ²¹ Otto, Rudolph: *The idea of the holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp 191, 228.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp 226-7.
- ²³ Merton, Thomas: *Conjectures of a guilty bystander* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1966), p 158.
- ²⁴ Otto, Rudolph: *op. cit.*, p 39.
- ²⁵ Underhill, Evelyn: 'The essentials of mysticism' in Woods, Richard (ed): *op. cit.*
- ²⁶ Woods, Richard (ed): *op. cit.*, p 7.
- ²⁷ Underhill, Evelyn: *op. cit.*
- ²⁸ Edwards, Denis: *Jesus and the cosmos* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).