

Endmatter

LATE NIGHT THOUGHTS ON THE COSMIC SELF—NEW AND OLD:

A REFLECTION ON THE COSMIC SELF:

A Penetrating Look at Today's New Age Movements

by TED PETERS

by Alan Riddiford

Abstract. Responding to Ted Peters's *The Cosmic Self*, the author finds parallels and dissonances between New Age assertions and traditional mysticism, East and West. The comprehensive consciousness and interconnectedness of life are addressed by various mysticisms in their search for spiritual realities. However, many of the most recent movements are distinguished by superficiality.

Keywords: David Bohm; mysticism; meditation; New Age; Vedanta.

In a sense, I am the New Age person—an engineering physicist at one of the world's great research facilities, Fermilab, with its giant particle accelerator. I am also an oblate of the Catholic Benedictine Order and a brother of the Hindu Ramakrishna Order of India. At the lab, my name is Alan Riddiford; the Benedictines know me as Brother Benedict, while to the other members of the Ramakrishna Order I am Brother Yogindra. I have studied at some of the great Western centers of learning ("O" Level in medieval history, Tonbridge School, England; B. Eng. Physics, Cornell University; M.A., Harvard), and I have also submitted myself to classic modes of spirituality, East and West. I recount these personal matters not to impress the reader, but

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rather to explain how I approach the realities of spirituality in the contemporary postmodern world, the world of the New Age.

Located as I am in the worlds both of science and spirituality, Hindu and Christian, I do stand well within the world that Ted Peters looks at so penetratingly in this book. I share much of his concern for depth and truth, as well as his abhorrence of superficiality, unreality, and just plain hokum. What follows in my almost stream-of-consciousness reflections upon Peters's book is not a conventional review; I have neither the heart to judge his work negatively nor the desire to rubber-stamp his efforts. Rather, I let my thinking flow selectively from his provocations at two points—his discussion of David Bohm (1917–92) and the so-called new physics and his references to mysticism. At certain points I suggest going in directions different from those that Peters follows, and in this there may lie both an affirmation and a critique of his guidebook. If there is a lesson to be drawn from my musings, it is this: the phenomena Peters describes may be closer to the center of the mainstream, both religiously and scientifically, than he allows.

I am very glad to have read this book, and I have learned much, as I will explain below, but the feel of the book is much like overhearing worried parents trying to work out in their own terms why their child keeps dating unlikely marriage prospects. The reader wonders if the parents/author are/is more worried about the welfare of the child or their parenting/his presentation of his faith. One would not be surprised to find his counterpart in Moscow, Bombay, or Tokyo come to opposite conclusions for very similar reasons. There are many levels to the experience that this book assays, and Ted Peters does a good job of trying to sort things out. We can all be grateful that Peters was persuaded (in 1978) to leave his post at Loyola University in New Orleans and (besides teaching theology at both Pacific Lutheran Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union, [p. 100]: “the single most successful experiment in ecumenical theological education in the world”) continue his research on the relationship between theology and culture in the Berkeley/San Francisco area. The results of his research inform this book.

The first fifty pages open with the concern of troubled pastors who hoped lectures by a theologian would help them cope with channeling, Baghwan Rajneesh, L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology (and Bishop James Pike). Almost one hundred names are mentioned in the course of skillfully tracing themes over the last two centuries, including theosophy, ecofeminism, astrology, UFOs, crystal consciousness, New Age music, and holistic health. Mother Krishnavai, who gave herself over to strict asceticism, yoga, and meditation for

forty years before attaining cosmic consciousness, and who the author met in southern India, is contrasted favorably against Esalen, est, and the Rev. Terry Cole-Whittaker.

Chapter 2 traces the themes of his research, touching upon Huston Smith, Aldous Huxley (who wrote a book using Leibniz's title, *The Perennial Philosophy*, which Peters would prefer to call Gnosticism), wholism, monism, Shankara's advaita (non-dual) philosophy, Ramanuja's modified non-dual philosophy, the higher self, potentiality (Abraham Maslow), reincarnation, evolution and transformation (Institute of Noetic Sciences; "Maharishi effect"), gnosis, and "Jesus, sometimes" (Nicolas Notovitch, Elizabeth Clare Prophet).

The most virulent attacks against New Age phenomena come from the Blue Army of Fatima (Roman Catholic) and Detroit attorney Constance E. Cumbey (Evangelical). The dark side to the New Age can lead to abuse, to psychological damage, even to rape and death. (So can marriage, anywhere around the world.) The work of Sorting It Out (SIO), a Berkeley organization formed to aid dropouts from religious cults, is discussed in detail. Then three men are dealt with in as many sections: (1) the Dominican Matthew Fox, whose explication of the *imago dei* is better presented, Peters thinks, in the work of Philip Hefner (1993), who describes the human being as the "created cocreator" (von Balthasar [1991, V, 453] also mentions Nicholas of Cusa's [1401-64] suggestion of humans as analogous and "enigmatic" cocreators with God); (2) Jacob Needleman, professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University; and (3) the Benedictine Bede Griffiths (1906-93), Oxford graduate, who in 1955 went to India to foster a marriage of Asian philosophy with Christian spirituality, "perhaps the most serious proposal for a new age syncretism."

BOHM, WHITEHEAD, VIVEKENANDA, AND THE NEW PHYSICS

Chapter 4, in a fine thirty-five page summary, interprets physicist David Bohm's work on "the new physics and wholistic cosmology." Since this is closest to my formal training, perhaps some personal experiences are relevant. *Zygon* readers know that the journal devoted an entire issue to Bohm's work in June 1985, as well as publishing Kevin Sharpe's articles in March 1990 and March 1993 (note Sharpe's 1993 book *David Bohm's World: New Physics and New Religion*).

Having read several books by Bohm and others and being inspired by him, I detect a resonance between him, Whitehead, and

Vedanta Swami Vivekananda that may be worth dwelling upon. When discussing OM (*word* in English; *logos* in Greek) as the most sacred sound, Swami Vivekananda suggests that all instances of form emerging out of formlessness are guided by the Word. We recall the New Testament Gospel of John's identification of Jesus with the Word. Both are discussed by Swami Satprakashananda (1889–1979) (1965, 292–94), who founded the St. Louis Vedanta Society in 1939.

Whitehead's process philosophy talks about the subjective aim of the mental pole in polar physical/mental phenomena, which reminds us of the "fine body" of Indian philosophy (Dasgupta 1932, 312) or the "energy body" described by the biogenetic structuralist school of psychiatry and anthropology (Laughlin, McManus, and d'Aquili 1990, 302). These sources provide, primarily, a view of these phenomena from the outside. For a good account of the subjective experience, I suggest Philip St. Romain (1991, 45). Indian philosophers have suggested that this "body" is distinct from, but related to, our material bodies.

Intuitively, I might associate the "fine body" with David Bohm's attempt to solve the Schrödinger equation for light passing through a double slit by attending to the "quantum potential" in a way which looks beyond the usual preoccupation of physicists with calculating predictions to the ontology of the phenomena (Kafatos and Nadeau 1990, 114–17). Think of whizzing down a snow-covered hill on a sled. The quantum potential is the shape of the hill and the trajectory of the sled/photon is determined by the initial position and direction of the sled/photon and the shape of the hill. The quantum potential is distinct from, but depends upon, the wave function of the photon. It might be fruitful to think of the quantum potential as the "fine body" or "mental pole" and the wave function as the "gross body" or "physical pole."

In the same stream of consciousness, I recall John Hagelin's paper on field theory, in which he develops the idea that all known particles are resonances of the field (an intriguing idea for those of us sensitive to classical music) and that pure consciousness is the same field (1989). The meditating person is taught in Transcendental Meditation (and in any contemplative tradition?) to open in to the pure consciousness the effect of which is to bring peace into the society around the meditator and to set the evolution of personal relationships toward spontaneously constructive patterns. David Pailin, in his paper "Process Theology and Evolution" (1987), presented at the 13–16 March, 1986, European Conference on Science and Religion, quotes philosopher Lewis Ford as describing

the process of evolution as one in which the divine is continuously in dialogue with the Creation, seeking in the creatures spontaneous responses to "the new initiatives God is constantly introducing." I find it helpful to understand the creative interplay of dinner table conversation among friends as the Holy Spirit acting as the synapse between us "neurons." I find this same insight in Swami Vivekananda's OM or the Word/Logos of Saint John's Gospel, guiding the emergence of the form of our thoughts and words out of the formless "feel" that brings us into "touch" with each other. Is this the larger implication of Bohm's "quantum potential"?

But Hagelin, by identifying pure consciousness with his unified field, may be confusing uncreated reality with created reality. In a January 1991 presentation to the Chicago Center for Religion and Science and in an October 1993 talk at the Religion and Science Conference at the Vivekananda Monastery in Ganges, Michigan, I scrutinized Gregory of Palamas's synthesis (Lossky 1957, 217-35; 1963, 132; see also Ranganathananda 1991, 109) and the Philosophical Principle of Precipitation (the P³ Theme), in order to elucidate the distinction. Uncreated reality shines through created reality, for those who can see, and flows through created reality, for those who can feel (Knowles 1961, 183).

MYSTICISM

The word "mystic" is used often in Peters's book with little attention to what it has meant in the tradition of the Christian Church. Traditional mysticism is difficult for the analytic consciousness trained so severely by the Western educational establishment with its proclivity for focusing upon smaller and smaller areas of interest. The cognitive psychologist Robert Ornstein ([1972] 1986, 199-200) observes that "the analytic mode, in which there is separation of objects, and of the self from others has proved useful in individual biological survival," but the "survival problems now facing us are collective rather than individual. A shift toward a comprehensive consciousness of the interconnectedness of life . . . could begin to solve our collective problems." This comprehensive consciousness and interconnectedness of life are precisely what classical mysticism offers us. Gerald Heard presented his own elucidation of the thesis that human consciousness has developed three specialties: Chinese (social cohesion; the Orthodox intelligible light?), Indian (inner mystical heights; the Orthodox uncreated light?), and Western (external "objective"; the Orthodox sensible light? [Lossky 1963, 132]). Heard believed that the mystic's mind shifts to a longer focal

length and lives on two levels at once: our daytime level of consciousness and the level of superconsciousness, where the lives of loved ones appear as open books (Heard 1955; see also Alexander and Langer 1990). Peters would do well to recognize that this is rooted in our traditional past; it is not exclusively "New Age."

On 8 February 1991, the year in which Peters's book appeared, the *New York Times* printed an article under the title, "A Moment of Rapture as a Saint Is Marched Home," that provides a vivid picture of this longer focal length and bilevel living. "Waves of elderly women in tight wool shawls pressed forward relentlessly and an old man prostrated himself in the snow as the procession of Russian Orthodox clerics, with Patriarch Aleksy II in their midst, bore the relics of Saint Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833) in a reliquary of glistening brass from the Leningrad railroad station to the Cathedral of the Epiphany several miles away." The saint's relics were hidden for seventy years. "The church now hopes to carry the relics in procession all the way back to Deveyevo, about 450 miles, stopping at villages and parishes along the way. The aim is to arrive at Deveyevo on August 1, the saint's holy day."

The literature of Western mysticism suggests that what Heard describes is a significant and not uncommon phenomenon. Sergius Bolshakoff (1976, 122–43) provides one of the best descriptions of a transfiguration experience (remember Jesus with Peter and James and John?). Saint Seraphim practiced Hesychast prayer for years, observing complete silence for two years, and then became a recluse. He was a remarkable spiritual director, possessing the gift for discernment of the spiritual diseases from which his visitors suffered and also for what remedies to provide. Now there is a real mystic, befitting of Martin Marty's phrase, "silent mystics . . . striving, striving." Raymond Bailey, in his study of Thomas Merton, writes that "the monk experiences a kind of inner explosion that blasts his false exterior self to pieces" (1974, 197). Rueben Habito (1990, 234) points out that the central function of the Zen master is to bring about just such an implosion or destruction of the social-ego.

Peters's treatment of Zen Buddhism lacks this kind of understanding; perhaps he is relating only to unsuccessful postulants. The process of spiritual purification is often compared to lighting a fire under a pot. Ultimately, the boiling water will sterilize the contents of the pot, but the first result will seem just like the opposite: all of the impurities will boil to the surface, becoming more visible, so they can be skimmed off (Levinsky 1984). I quote a paragraph from Habito's article: "Reverend Willigis Jager, O.S.B. (Ko-un Ken), who had spent many years in Zen training under Yamada

Roshi in Kamakura and now directs Zen groups in Germany, commented at the 1987 International Buddhist Christian Conference held at Berkeley, with Yamada Roshi himself present in panel as one of the keynote speakers: 'Many can argue whether a Christian can validly do Zen or teach Zen, or not. The fact is, I am doing it.' " We could speak of other such meetings: the Third East-West Spiritual Exchange in 1987 when twenty-six monks and three nuns from Japanese Buddhist monasteries met Catholic monks and nuns in nine monasteries in Italy, Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Spain; or the 1979 visit by more than fifty Buddhist monks and lay people to Europe; or, in 1983, the trip of thirteen Christian monks and two nuns from Catholic monasteries of Europe to Buddhist monasteries in Japan. I miss this dimension of the reality of the "cosmic self" in Peters's survey.

ROLE MODELS NEAR AT HAND, THE QUIET ONES

Let me mention several more positive role models closer to the author of the book under review. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the leader of the disciples of Ramakrishna (1836-1886) of India, came to the Chicago World Parliament of Religions held at the Art Institute in 1893. Vedanta centers started in New York (1894), San Francisco (1902), Chicago (1930), Hollywood (1924), and Berkeley (1939). (See two Ph.D. theses: Carl T. Jackson, 1964, University of California, Los Angeles, "The Swami in America: A History of the Ramakrishna Movement in the United States, 1893-1960"; and Harold W. French, 1972, McMaster University, "The Ramakrishna Movement and the West.") Jesus defined who our neighbor is by the story of the traveler who was robbed and left almost dead by the side of the road, and who was then ministered to by the social outsider. In contemporary times, the robbers are not unlikely to be certifiable Christians, secular academics (our author suggests seminary professors too), bottom-line business people, and medical doctors with their hi-tech clinics and hospitals. Our neighbor will not infrequently be the Buddhist or Hindu who works quietly in our midst. Gerald Heard (1889-1971), author of almost forty books, spent the last thirty-three years of his life associated with the Hollywood Vedanta Center. He lectured at my undergraduate university (Cornell) and took time to write a letter to me, as he did to many young people trying to keep alive flickering spiritual flames in their lives. The conservative rule in these matters, which may well apply to our quiet neighbors today, is: "Those who say, don't know. Those who know, don't say." Monks have been quietly

working at these centers for most of this century. They are our neighbors. Srimata Gayatri Devi was brought by her uncle, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order of India, to his Ananda Ashrama in La Crescenta, near Los Angeles in 1926 (Levinsky 1984). In October, 1975, she was invited to represent Hinduism at the "Summit Conference of Religions" at the United Nations in New York. The only other woman invited was Mother Teresa! We may read her letters in *One Life's Pilgrimage* (1977), where she includes an autobiography in the first chapter. Serious attempts to relate the art of Eastern meditation to Western experience can be found in the Harvard Affect Study Group (Ablon 1993, 373-401), from the Western perspective, and in Bhavyanada (1984), from Eastern views.

Huston Smith (1984) helps us to understand these quiet neighbors in his explanation of the conservative rule, cited above, ascribed to chapter 56 of Tao TeChing: "It is hidden and secret . . . because the truth to which they are privy is buried so deep in the human composite that they cannot communicate it in any way the majority will find convincing." William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury (1942-44), also drew our attention to the character of these neighbors when he observed that the proper relation between prayer and conduct is not that conduct is supremely important and prayer may help it—but that prayer is supremely important, and conduct tests it (Temple 1958, 10).

Let me bring these reflections to an end with thoughts from Valdimir Lossky (1903-58), the Russian Orthodox theologian: "This mystical theology has as its goal turning the spirit from abstract notions to the experience of divine realities. . . . A philosopher runs the risk of losing the true value of concepts when he attaches too much importance to their verbal expression: much more so the theologian, who must be free even of concepts when he finds himself confronted with realities that surpass all human thought" (Lossky 1967, 57, 173).

Ted Peters has attended to a range of contemporary movements that have confronted these realities that surpass all human thought. His penetrating look lays bare the superficiality and deception of some of those movements, while it enhances our appreciation of their quest. We need to recognize that our religious traditions reveal a centuries-long heritage of persons who were equally devoted, if not more so, to these surpassing realities. His words of caution, however well-suited to the movements he has observed, should not be extrapolated to judge a longer tradition that many persons may, erroneously, equate with the New Age mystique that he describes.

The inner explosion of the spirit that blasts the false exterior self

to pieces is too important to be discredited by newer, less serious efforts, and its relationship to the scientifically informed culture of our time is well worth probing. Many can argue whether or not a late twentieth-century person can do engineering physics in a major government laboratory and practice the spirituality of two of the world's great religious traditions at once. The fact is, I am doing it.

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