

SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by *Varadaraja V. Raman*

Abstract. To achieve peace on our planet we must bridge the gap not only between science and religion but also among faith traditions. Accepting the doctrine of multiple paths can reduce interreligious tensions. Every view of the Divine is partial, every faith system rests upon supreme spiritual experiences, and each one provides fulfillment in the yearning to connect with the Cosmic Mystery.

Keywords: Cosmic Mystery; doctrine of multiple paths; interreligious tensions; religious pluralism.

What began as wonderment about human awareness and poetic visions of the beyond grew into the magnificent framework of religion. Religions explore our relevance and destiny in the cosmos. Sages, poets, and the spiritually awakened have given humanity a rich backdrop that transforms mechanical and aimless existence into meaningful life. Choirs in churches, chants in temples, readings in synagogues, calls from minarets, and other invocations give joy and enrichment to the humdrum of night and day.

What began as clever ways of explaining planetary motions and quantitative descriptions of phenomena became modern science. Modern science has brought every facet of human inquiry under its overarching sway of reason, experimentation, and commitment to objectivity. It has erected a transcultural and international community of investigators who probe, prove, and provide answers, ceaselessly extending the bounds of knowledge. Revelations about the nature of the phenomenal world are given to the sage-searchers of the scientific realm.

Varadaraja V. Raman is Emeritus Professor, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY 14623; e-mail vvrsps@rit.edu. A version of this article was presented at the symposium "Religion and Science: The Questions that Shape Our Future" organized by the Zygon Center for Religion and Science, 1–2 May 2003.

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Religions have also splintered us into groups that sometimes regard with condescension those who pay allegiance to different visions of the Unfathomable Mystery. Religious history is marred by persecutions in the name of God and scripture. Likewise, growths from scientific knowledge have resulted in pain and potential disaster for our species.

For peace and harmony in our interconnected world we must strive to bridge the chasm not only between science and religion but also among the faith traditions of the human family. For the safety of our species we must be careful not to let science become an unbridled wild horse or allow religions to bicker and quarrel among themselves instead of serving to actualize the best in the human spirit.

Every believer proclaims his or her religious heritage with love and pride. This must be respected. But when this becomes belligerent, it is incumbent upon those who speak for science and religion to call for the arrest of interreligious hate and hurt.

At the doctrinal level, religious leaders will have to reformulate the dogma that the message of one's own faith system is the only voice of the Divine. Even while attaching primary value to our Sun because it is our sustaining source of energy, we must acknowledge that there are countless other suns, each central in its locality. In the same way, leaders and interpreters of religions must stress that no one faith system is final and for all. We cannot with moral dignity or rational legitimacy call one religious system inferior to another. Without falling into the simplistic error of proclaiming that all religions reveal the same truths, we can affirm that those aspects of religions that respect human dignity and mutual respect are superior to those that preach hate and intolerance.

To reduce interreligious tensions, there is no alternative to accepting the doctrine of multiple paths. When it comes to such ethical guideposts as love, compassion, caring, humility, respect for others, and reverence for the sacred, the religions of the world are bound in commonality, not shorn in animosity. In postures of humility in prayer and in the surrender to cosmic transcendence, religions resemble rather than reject one another. Religions differ in their historical roots, not in the spiritual sensibilities they evoke.

Every view of the Divine is partial. We proclaim our visions differently. Like the blind men who wanted to know the elephant, each of us gets a glimpse of the Ultimate, which is like a gem that glitters in different ways when viewed from different angles. It is enriching to see a facet of the Divine in the Star of David, in the Cross, in the Crescent of Islam, and in the abstract sound of the sacred *Om*. A Hindu prayer says:

*Ākāsād patitāntoyam yadā gacchati sâgaram
sarvadeva namaskârah srî keshavam pratigacchati*

As the waters falling from the skies go back to the self-same sea;
Our prayers to all the gods go back to the same divinity.

It is important to spread the message to the world of religion that one can have meaningful religious experience through the complex world-pictures of science, and to the world of science that one must also recognize and respect the religious dimensions of the human spirit in whatever mode of manifestation.

Religious pluralism is not abandonment of one's faith or naive embrace of all but rather the awakening that every religion enshrines some of the wisdom of the ages, that every faith system rests upon supreme spiritual experiences, and that every tradition of humanity provides fulfillment in the yearning to connect with the Cosmic Mystery.

As I see it, these should be among the goals of humanity for the new century.