

GLOBAL SPIRITUAL CONFUSION AND THE NEGLECTED PROBLEM OF EXCESS SPIRITUAL INFORMATION

6

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THE BIGGEST PROBLEM facing the spiritual progress of human beings, after evil and stupidity, is confusion. Spiritually potent visions of the world abound. They sustain billions of lives each day. Many of us have friends and neighbors with worldviews different from our own, and media outlets are filled with images of diversity. Our species desperately needs to advance in wisdom or spirit to cope with the turmoil of technology and the perpetual clash of civilizations. But advance where? Along which path of wisdom should we stumble?

Some advise us to advance spiritually by digging deep into our own home traditions. The global picture of religious and cultural pluralism is what causes the confusion, and we should just learn to ignore it. Surely it is sage advice to appreciate our home traditions, but if we follow the path closest to hand thoughtlessly, we may deepen global spiritual confusion. After all, personal spiritual confidence is the proudest possession of the enthusiast, the often ignorant, sometimes dangerous, true believer. Most of us can't simply ignore alternatives. Nor can we rest content with the "we have ours and they have theirs" policy without committing intellectual suicide. The conflicts among spiritual visions of reality are obvious. We can't just wish them away. Digging deep in our home tradition (if we have one) might be necessary, but it is not sufficient.

Some say the generic and allegedly global spiritualities of humanism or of nature are the answer. But they are ideas rather than spiritual paths. They lack the symbolic power of traditional religions. Meanwhile, New Age spiritualities make a virtue of pluralistic confusion, while creating as much economic activity as wisdom. These cultural and class-specific alternatives to traditional religion don't appeal to most people.

Some say science can resolve the confusion. Science creates basic knowledge that people can agree on regardless of culture or religion. Cutting-edge science can be controversial, even among scientists, but educated people all over the world accept almost all of mainstream science. That's promising. But science's picture of the world is modest. It doesn't address issues of perennial concern to human beings: life after death, justice and goodness, meaning and purpose.

Some insist that we shouldn't give up just because science has a limited mandate. They say we can search for signs of an ultimate reality hidden within the workings of physical processes. More than that, they claim to know the secret key that unlocks the spiritual information hidden within scientific knowledge.

How do they do this? American philosopher William Lane Craig (who con-

tributed an essay to this volume) advocates analyzing scientific discoveries to find spiritual information. He uses sophisticated arguments to show that Big Bang cosmology discloses a creator God. Scholars as diverse as mathematician William Dembski and biologist Michael Behe argue that some biological systems are so complex in a special way that evolutionary theory will never explain them; an intelligent designer of some sort must be invoked. A host of scientists have been studying the effects of prayer and spirituality on health. Others have been looking for the basis of moral teachings such as self-sacrificial love in evolutionary biology and neuropsychology. The list of intellectuals seeking spiritual information through science is long and often distinguished. (Like Craig, many are represented in this volume.) And now there is generous funding to help them, from the John Templeton Foundation and from other like-minded organizations.

The claim that scientific discoveries encode spiritual information is stunning. If it is true, then maybe science's knack of producing agreement about mundane matters could help us resolve our spiritual confusion. Here's how it would work: We extract the spiritual juice from the fruits of existing scientific research. We devise new science research efforts to keep up the flow of spiritual information. We use a class of middleman communicators to get the word out to the world, especially to leaders in education and to high-profile opinion makers. And then we enter a brave new world: science in harmony with spiritual information, overcoming ancient religious and cultural rivalries, transforming the globe into a place of peace and harmonious prosperity.

This is a bracing picture of the future, moving and insightful, and akin to the hopes of Sir John Templeton. But there is a challenge to overcome first because this vision of human progress through discovering spiritual information neglects a simple but deep fact: *The problem causing our spiritual confusion is not that we have too little information, but too much.*

It has always been this way, as the conflicted history of religions and cultures shows. And it continues to be this way even now. The latest scientific discoveries do not help to pare back this excess of information to an essential core. The basic spiritual worldview options persist, and each can be made more or less compatible with our growing knowledge of the world through science. Spiritual progress is essential to our survival and is flourishing. But we need something other than merely more spiritual information through science to achieve the goal of eliminating spiritual confusion.

How can we handle excess spiritual information? Experts in extracting spiritual information from scientific knowledge have little to say about this. Perhaps they know a lot about science and maybe one spiritual tradition, but only a little about the history of civilizations and cultures or about the world's great religions and philosophical ideas. In other words, they are biased by their local spiritual perspectives and tend to notice only the way that emerging spiritual information confirms their viewpoints. If the quest for spiritual information through science becomes more cross-culturally balanced, this bias will collapse. In its place will arise a number of brilliant worldviews already known to experts in the study of world religious philosophies, each more richly articulated by means of new spiritual information.

But this is neither consensus nor progress. It is merely a gloriously intensified version of the spiritual confusion that is already so familiar.

At this point, the long-suffering mystics would have us listen to them. Always marginalized because of their obscure ways of talking and peculiar spiritual practices, mystics can't compete with the achievements and prestige of science in our era. But the problem of excess spiritual information gives them an opening. If their famous claim to experience ultimate reality directly is true, then perhaps they can help sort through the excess information.

Obviously, novices in spiritual experiences will be of little help. Their enthusiasm for such experiences is vital for their own lives, but does not foster the wisdom and perspective needed to handle the problem of excess spiritual information. Even master mystics may not be able to assist much. Taken together, the collection of spiritual insights offered with deep conviction by the world's recognized masters of mystical wisdom, and received with reverence by their faithful disciples, seems massively contradictory.

For mysticism to help us, we would have to consult mystics with profound knowledge of the world's spiritual traditions, attuned to both historical and scientific ways of thinking. They would have to care about coordinating conflicting mystical visions. They would probably be committed to the proposition that a core truth lies beneath the diversity of mystical reports.

Enter American mystic and scholar Huston Smith. He is revered for his lucid scholarly accounts of the world's religions. He is also admired because of the decades of his long life spent traveling the world and getting to know religions and mysticisms from personal experience. He is an outspoken advocate of the view that mystic-scholars can solve the problem of excess spiritual information.

Smith is convinced that all religious traditions have a common core. You can't find it in rituals or teachings, where the diversity is overwhelming. But the mystics of all religions know about it. He argues that their direct experience of ultimate reality has enabled them to reach consensus on this core view of reality, even though the religious traditions to which they adhere differ enormously from one another. This core view was already present even in preliterate tribal religions, he says, and persists down to the present day. It is called the "primordial tradition" because of its age or the "perennial philosophy" because of its staying power (see his book *The Primordial Tradition* for a summary).

What does the perennial philosophy say? There are four levels of reality, with increasing dignity and power, and four corresponding levels of the human being:

- ◆ The human body = the terrestrial level
- ◆ The human mind = an intermediate level
- ◆ The human soul = the celestial level
- ◆ The human spirit = the highest level, the Infinite

That's the way the universe is built. It goes beyond science, but does not contradict it. We should all be able to agree on it.

But wait a minute. I noted above that a quick survey of mystics shows massive conflict. How can Smith dare to mention consensus? He explains the variety of

mystics' reports as the result of connecting with reality at one of these four levels:

- ◆ Nature mystics engage reality at the terrestrial level.
- ◆ Mystics grappling with discarnate beings such as demons and angels engage at the intermediate level.
- ◆ Mystics for whom the final vision is a personal deity engage at the celestial level.
- ◆ And mystics for whom the ultimate vision is the Infinite—God without attributes, God beyond comprehension, God beyond God—engage at the highest level.

So here is the perennial philosophy's recipe for human progress. Each person should belong to a vital spiritual tradition. Using its resources, we deepen our spiritual and moral insight. We bring our actions into harmony with those insights. New spiritual information unlocked from science helps experts articulate each tradition more richly. For those who dare to learn about other ways, the perennial philosophy is the master worldview. Thus, we do not fall prey to mutual incomprehension or deadly conflict. And for those who don't care about such advanced learning, each tradition has basic rules about how to behave that make for peace within and among nations and religions. Within this framework, each person can advance in spiritual wisdom.

It is a grand vision. And it offers a real corrective to the earlier vision of progress through science-driven spiritual information. But just as the first vision was marred by the problem of too much information, so Smith's is spoiled by a simple fact: The perennial philosophy's claims about a common core to religious traditions simply do not survive close scrutiny. The data don't allow it. Who says? The overwhelming majority of specialists who study religion might revere Smith, but they find his arguments far too hopeful. Smith might think that his critics are in thrall to the details of religious differences and miss the big picture. But his critics are convinced. Rarely has a scholarly argument been read so widely and rejected so universally.

Some have argued boldly that "entheogens"—once innocently called "psychedelic drugs"—may hold the key to getting information about ultimate reality. Proponents claim that entheogens open up ignored human capacities for perceiving reality. But how useful is the information that people obtain through using entheogens? There is some evidence on this question, such as the famous "Good Friday" experiment at Boston University conducted in 1962 by Walter Pahnke. It seems that, as in mystical experience, people describe their drug-assisted experiences using the concepts and words available to them. Thus, getting information from drug-assisted experiences is no simpler than interpreting diverse mystical texts.

The problem of excess spiritual information has no neat answers. But that doesn't mean it is intractable. The world's great religious traditions might not share a common core vision, such as the perennial philosophy, but we are not left with a riot of absolute disagreement. The patient study of the great spiritual worldviews has produced valuable insights into the ways they agree and disagree.

The task of comparing religious ideas and practices is modest in itself, but it serves the more adventurous goal of truth-seeking. Yet even comparison has its

skeptics. Many experts say that information about world cultures and religions is now so richly detailed that even the modest hope of meaningfully comparing the great spiritual worldviews is futile. How could one person ever gain deep knowledge of the languages and material needed to make a fair comparison, let alone decide whether one view is better than another or detect a core view beneath the diversity? Maybe comparison was feasible a hundred years ago, but surely it is no longer.

Scholars of religion skeptical about comparison can take a lesson from scientists. The natural sciences proceed in a corporate fashion these days. They must do so because we are long past the days when any one scientist could know all there was to know in science. The result is a messy social process, but it works. Perhaps the task of managing excess spiritual information—of comparing and analyzing worldviews—can also be conceived as a corporate task for a wide variety of experts.

This lesson seems to be sinking in. Some experts in religious and philosophical traditions—the ones who have not given up on comparison altogether—have devised corporate methods for comparing and assessing spiritual worldviews. They refer to their field with names such as “comparative metaphysics.” American comparative metaphysician Robert Cummings Neville is an example. His Cross-Cultural Comparative Religious Ideas Project was a bold attempt to try out his proposed method in a small community of expert scholars. The project’s four years and three volumes of results show how comparative metaphysics works in detail. There are several other noteworthy examples. But all belong to the world of scholars. The search for patterns and core ideas in our world’s spiritual traditions is difficult. There are no shortcuts.

Resolving global spiritual confusion requires us to dig deep into our home traditions. It calls for paying attention to the ways that science can generate the sort of spiritual information that helps to articulate spiritual traditions more richly. But nothing less than comparative metaphysics will be able to turn the excess of ideas about ultimate reality emerging from the study of nature and spiritual experience into anything like reliable information. Of course, we also need great spiritual leaders and teachers, as well as technological and economic innovation and political systems that cultivate tolerance. But spiritual progress for human beings depends on facing a hard fact: Seeking spiritual information from science, like digging deep into our home spiritual traditions, produces an embarrassment of riches. Spiritual information from science is not the antidote to global spiritual confusion, at least not by itself.



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