

## **SCIENCE AND THE SACRED**

*David Lorimer*

## **THE SCIENTIST AND THE SAINT**

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This magisterial work can be unreservedly recommended to serious students of the relationship between science, spirituality and mysticism. Immense in scope and drawing on a wide range of literature, including French, Spanish and Italian as well as English, the book is a brilliant and cogent statement of perennial philosophy in relation to the materialistic metaphysics of modern science. The eleven parts address major themes in terms of worldviews, the ideology of science, evolution, the nature of consciousness — also in Indian thought — spiritual knowledge or gnosis, the testimony of the sages, esoteric and exoteric religion, death, evil, and finding the way out of the labyrinth. There are nearly 70 pages of notes and references, along with 25 pages indexing proper names — also an extended table of contents.

The author has a thorough grasp of the perennial philosophy, mysticism and the mystical path, metaphysics, evolutionary biology, consciousness studies, parapsychology, spiritual traditions, ethics, epistemology and levels of knowing, and the literature around death and near death experiences — in other words, of many of the central concerns of the Network and its members. His critical analysis of the limits of scientism is acute, and goes to the heart of the existential vacuum of our time in terms of meaning. He points out the fundamental division between those who espouse the materialistic view of random chance and accidents and those who see a deeper intelligence at work — these include people like Max Planck. He shows how the loss of the contemplative dimension in Christianity led to a more propositional approach to faith and belief and ultimately to the eclipse of the intellect or higher mind by discursive reasoning. Kant went as far as denying that such unitive knowledge was possible. The knowing of the intellect is immediate and direct, through the eye of the heart, where there is no separation between knower and known. Nor is there a

distinction between knowledge and love — the ultimate human experience unites being, consciousness and bliss as in *sat, chit, ananda*, as pointed out by many perennial philosophers such as Guenon, Schuon and Nasr.

This insight means that ethics are integral to the unitive state of identity with the Source, where modern thinking has divorced knowledge from love and produced an amoral and manipulative technology that also serves as a noisy distraction from the silence required for serious spiritual work. In this sense, the focus of the book is on the inner, the sacred and the qualitative, providing an essential corrective to the outer, quantitative emphasis in the contemporary world. The stress is on transformation rather than information, the surrender of the ego and the journey from self to Self as described in the testimony of the sages. The author reminds us that modern people tend to look up to the economically successful as role models, while in more traditional societies the Sage or Saint has been at the centre as a source of spiritual inspiration. Their witness attests to the primacy of consciousness and the reality of inner knowing and subtle worlds. It is mere metaphysical prejudice to dismiss saints and sages as deluded dreamers. However, in order to gain access to subtler perceptions, training is required, as it is in all disciplines. The section on spiritual knowledge explains this in detail with its insistence on an ultimate identity between being and knowledge whereby the logos ‘is at once the intelligibility of God and the agent of man’s intellection, mediator of knowledge’ — this is traditionally understood as Light, but a Light that is also Love, as experienced by mystics and some of those near death. The revival of the term intellect as the medium for immediate contemplative knowledge is in my view a vital part of any metaphysical revolution.

The section on subjectivity, mind and consciousness clarifies why consciousness is such a problem for materialistic science that insists on primacy of matter and the more or less epiphenomenal nature of consciousness: ‘consciousness is only a problem when it is not considered as a primary reality’ (p. 193) and explanatory attempts are made only from the bottom up or from the outside in. Maintaining the materialistic metaphysic entails ignoring the causal powers of consciousness as demonstrated in parapsychology. Raimon Panikkar is quoted as saying that the world is neither subjective nor objective, but rather the point at which objectivity and subjectivity meet. It is here that the Indian view of mind and consciousness is very helpful, as also expounded in the work of K. Ramakrishna Rao. Indian

thought does not confuse consciousness with its contents, and distinguishes pure witness consciousness from the mind. Atman is this pure consciousness, which is also the source and goal of self-realisation in unitive knowledge. The Atman is ineffable, transcending concepts and duality. However, as already indicated, in order to achieve this devoted *sadhana* or practice is required. This can be summed up in the quotation ‘know that by which you know yourself’ or in the phrase of Clement of Alexandria ‘if a man knows himself, he shall know God.’

The sage or saint is one whose sole being is in God, whose identity is surrendered as an instrument to the eternal spirit — Swami Ramdas provides a comprehensive description (p. 335). They all insist that our phenomenal reality represents only one level, and that there are other more real levels to be perceived beyond the limitations of the physical senses and personality. Sage exemplify both love and wisdom, having overcome any sense of separation. They also emanate peace and joy — people are transformed in their presence. As St Catherine of Genoa writes: ‘my being is God, not by simple participation, but by a true transformation of my being... my Me is God, nor do I recognise any other Me except God Himself.’ (p. 375)

The chapter on religion and religions quotes William James as saying that the life of religion consists in a belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. He might have said experience rather than belief. The language of religion is symbolism, and we live in a symbolically illiterate culture characterised by fundamentalism and literalism in both the sciences and religion. The author points out that there are traditionally four levels of reading Scripture — literal, moral, spiritual and finally anagogical. The distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric can be characterised as that between the spirit and the letter, essence and form. Bede Griffiths was one modern mystic who realised the importance of Dionysius in incorporating the esoteric wisdom of Platonism into Christianity and the need to revive the Christian contemplative tradition, also manifest in the work of John Main and Laurence Freeman. I could add here the work of the Bulgarian Mystic Peter Deunov (Beinsa Douno, 1864-1944) who, although not mentioned, represents a further testimony from a sage; also the work of Walter Russell (1871-1963).

Moving towards the end of the book, the author considers the importance of understanding the nature of death in relation to the meaning of life and spiritual practice. Here he also discusses transmigration and reincarnation, as well as the metaphysical significance of evil and suffering. In the final chapter, he returns to the question of the significance of worldviews and limitations of the current materialistic metaphysic. He is clear that science should not be discarded but rather valued within its limits and domain of jurisdiction, and that science as a method of knowing should be distinguished from scientism as an ideology; this will be a familiar thought to many readers. Hence the conflict is not between religion and science as such, but between dogmatic materialism and an equally dogmatic literalistic and fundamentalist religion. The author calls for a resacralisation of the world and transformative practice informed by what Bede Griffiths calls 'fides formata' — a transforming faith opening to the divine and working by love. This brings him back to the essence of spiritual life and the supreme goal returning to the Centre, Origin or Source and embodying the integration of love and wisdom.

This profound and erudite book is not only highly informative and topical, but also challenges the reader to remember and live out the essential spiritual purpose of life.