**Mystics and Scientists 41**

**Eastern and Western Perspectives on Science and Spirit**

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“Through dialogue we can harvest wisdom”

*John Clarke*

This conference of the SMN in conjunction with the Sri Chaitanya Institute of Chandigarh, India, was a splendid example of cultural dialogue in action - between scientific and spiritual worldviews, and between the traditions of East and West, speakers and discussant, and especially within the dozen well-contrived round table groups, and the warm ambience of the conference centre itself. The deployment of the penetrating intellect of **Prof Max Velmans** as a roving discussant ensured that the theme and views expressed by speakers were systematically probed.

The mood of cultural interaction dominated from the start with **David Lorimer’s** timely introduction to the now often neglected life and ideas of Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), the great Indian scholar and statesman whose extraordinary life included the professorship of Eastern Religion and Ethics at Oxford and his election as second President of India. He was undoubtedly one of the great interlocutors between the worlds of East and West, and who at the same time sought reconciliation between the worlds of mind and spirit. David drew attention to Radhakrishnan’s belief that, though we as human beings belong to many worlds, our underlying nature is one of spiritual fellowship. The conflicts that divide us can only be reconciled if we commit ourselves to a new form of civilisation based on a ‘metanoia’ of consciousness and the creation a new universal spirituality.

The theme of dialogue was also emphasised by **Dr Joan Walton** who in her introductory remarks outlined the plan for round-table discussion groups which she hoped would enable all participants to be engaged with the conference and to “harvest the wisdom of the room.”

The conference continued with two powerful presentations by our guests from India’s Sri Chaitanya Institute, **Dr Bhakti Niskama Shanta** and **Dr Bhakti Vijnana Muni**, both professional scientists and committed to Hindu spiritual practice. The theme here, and indeed throughout the conference, was one of intellectual and spiritual dialogue, in effect a dialectical process in which opposites are complementary, and the tension between them is progressively resolved in the creation of new levels of thought and being.

Dr Shanta’s talk, *Missing Persons:* *Has Science Taken the Wrong Turn?*, which began with a prayer to his divine masters, gave emphasis to his belief that life, though based on chemistry, is clearly much more than this. He pointed to the fact that of its very nature science excludes meaning, mind and purpose, and hence science cannot give an adequate account of the human person. Nevertheless, the natural world displays evidence of mind, and we need to overcome the tendency towards reductionism which fails to bridge the gap between life and non-life. Organisms are complex self-modifying systems, and show self-directing propensity even at the level of bacteria. However, he argued, mind cannot be derived from matter, and indeed life rather than matter is fundamental, not derivative. This direction of thinking leads to key ideas in the philosophical and religious traditions of India including the Vedanta conception of matter as equivalent to mind, and to Krishna consciousness which transcends matter and points to our nature as eternal beings. These two sets of views from science and spiritual traditions respectively were, he insisted, well integrated into his own life and work.

In his talk *Towards a More Harmonious Concept through the Synthesis of Vedanta and Science,* Dr Muni also rejected the reductionist approach, but at the same time pointed towards the need to develop the principle of harmony between the various different levels evident in the natural world. Science points in this direction, he argued, with the move in physics from individual entities to fields, and the emphasis on organic holism in the living world. But for Dr Muni there are clear limits to the competence of science, limits which indicate the need for spiritual traditions such as those of the Vedanta non-dual tradition, captured in Tagore’s remark that “Truth lies in the harmony between subjective and objective realities.” Observer and observed cannot be separated, a view that traditional Indian thinking shares with key twentieth century scientists in the West such as Heisenberg.

Max Velmans agreed that the question “What is it like to be a person?” cannot be answered in purely materialist terms, but wondered if the speakers had exaggerated the degree to which science adopted a purely materialist worldview, and he emphasised the now generally accepted view that the possession of intelligence is not confined to humans. He wondered whether speculating about the ultimate nature of reality transcends the limits of human understanding, or is perhaps just “asking for fairy tales”.

Dialectical creativity was at the heart of the presentation by **Catherine Thom** which she entitled *From Music to Clay: A Spiritual Journey through the Meeting of East and West in Clay.* The *East and West* of her title was mirrored for her in Japan and Cornwall, and in her professional journey from guitarist to potter/ceramicist. The reverence which she came to feel for the clay she worked with was in turn mediated by her journey to Japan and by her encounter there with the work and descendants of Bernard Leach who had had a close association with Japan, but also with Japanese art and spirituality, its music, and especially with the traditional tea ceremony. This led her to a moment of insight – “the still point of the turning world” as she put it – in which she recognised both sides of her professional work as the spiritual links that bind different cultures together.

In his talk on *The Philosophy of Idealism in India and the West* **Prof Keith Ward** chose the obscure philosophy of Hegel as a useful vehicle for approaching the enigmatic thinking of the Advaita Vedanta school associated with the name of the eighth century philosopher Shankara. A bold move, wrapping an enigma in a mystery! What is key for this conjecture is that the philosophy of Hegel, who incidentally had a good if basic grasp of Hindu philosophies, could be seen as an attempt to construct an idealist system of absolute knowledge which embraced traditional Christian theology as well as contemporary philosophical methods. He pointed to the various ways in which traditional Christian concepts relating to sin and redemption, the incarnation, the self-sacrifice of the divine redeemer, and above all the doctrine of the Trinity itself, could be dialectically transformed in terms of the philosophical dialectic which was at the heart of Hegel’s post-Kantian philosophical system. In this way the pictorial and mythical images of religion could be recast in ‘superior’ and more spiritual terms which led ultimately, he believed, to the emergence of absolute, universal knowledge. In this way matter and spirit could be reunited in both cosmological and humanistic terms. This kind of cosmic Christianity, with its idea of world history as God’s self-creation, and of human creativity as an image of divine creativity, might well be interpreted as the Western counterpart of the Advaita Vedanta non-dual unity of Atman and Brahman, but Professor Ward left this hovering as an intriguing possibility.

Saturday evening featured the screening of an award-winning film *The Bridge* directed by SMN member **Amit Ranjan Biswas**, a life-affirming and heart-warming story, set in Kolkata, of the chance encounter between two lost souls, and of the bridge – literal and figurative - which connected them and gave them new life.

The starting point for **Prof Ursula King’s** talk, *Beyond Mysticism East and West: Towards a Global Spirituality*, was not philosophy but mysticism. And her goal was not absolute knowledge but a spiritual way through and beyond what she saw as the spiritual crisis of our time, especially in the West. In her wide-ranging multi-cultural analysis of mysticism, she drew attention to the dialogical tradition in mysticism studies and practices, beginning with the example of Rudolf Otto’s classic work *Mysticism East and West* which compared the figures of Meister Eckhart and Shankara. She went on to outline the universalist tradition of the Philosophia Perennis, mentioning the contribution of Nakamura and Teilhard de Chardin who with others have sought a new universalist synthesis, necessary she argued for the future of humanity. This led on to the counterpoint between those like Bede Griffiths who with others spoke of the ‘marriage’ between East and West, and William James who emphasised the worldwide ‘varieties’ of mystical experience, and what she described as ‘relational pluralism’. The importance of Eastern mysticisms in the modern West, which sometimes took the form of ‘orientalist’ condescension towards the East, was underlined by the way it contributed to various forms of ‘radical mysticism’, including the rediscovery of a female mystical tradition, the post-Christian cultivation of the inner life, and the emphasis on the creative imagination in the arts and in our attitudes towards the natural world. For Prof King mysticism was clearly not an esoteric bygone but an important contribution towards a global spiritual awakening, and her talk closed with the maxim: ‘Spiritual life is *your* life’.

The subsequent discussion, led by Prof Velmans with contributions harvested from the round-tables, pursued such questions as: How we can we integrate the diversity of mystical traditions with our evident need today for toleration and mutual inter-cultural understanding? How can we, and indeed *should* we, overcome the evident differences between the various mystical traditions and the worldviews they embody? Can we understand mystical experience beyond the doctrinal or cultural contexts within which they arise? How can we overcome lingering antipathy towards mystical experience in the natural and human sciences?

The Network is to be commended for conferences like this in which participants are encouraged to engage intelligently and imaginatively with the contested borderlands between cultures and worldviews. At the present time the world appears to be re-encountering old social, cultural and ethnic conflicts. From school bullying and digital trolling to communal wars and resurgent nationalisms we seem to be descending into a new dark night of the human soul. As an organization the SMN is not involved in political campaigning, but it is of vital importance that we continue to demonstrate how it is possible to engage in the spirit of open dialogue with a broad range of painful issues of global importance at a deep spiritual and intellectual level.

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