

A Revealed but Hidden God



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How can professionally trained observers of nature view the same data and reach completely different conclusions as to what it all means?

A recent survey, reported in *Nature*, indicates that 40 percent of working scientists have a belief in a personal Deity. As a professional scientist, I find many of my colleagues are indeed devoted Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. But that is not to say our laboratories of molecular biology and particle physics are the breeding grounds for a massive new religious reawakening. I have other colleagues who are equally outspoken as atheists or as committed agnostics.

How does this disagreement come about?

Leading physicists, such as John Barrow and Paul Davies, argue that an accurate assessment of twentieth-century physics not only is compatible with religious thought but actually points to the necessity for the postulate that an Omnipotent and Purposive Creator is running the whole show. In a similar way, prominent biologists Arthur Peacocke and Elving Anderson have been led to make comparable claims based on an understanding of the forces behind evolution and an increased awareness of the exquisite complexity of the genomes of living organisms.

Over the past twenty-five years or so, such views have led to a relatively quiet but increasingly substantive dialogue among many scientists and religious thinkers. Together they are reevaluating the age-old question of the interface between science and religion.

Maimonides, the preeminent medieval Jewish thinker who was both a philosopher and a scientist, wrote the following:

There is a positive commandment to have love and awe for the Almighty God as it is written, "You shall love the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:5). But by what method can one achieve this? When a human being contemplates [God's] great and

awesome works (the Universe) and examines His creations, and from them he sees the unmeasurable wisdom and infinite capacities of the Creator, he will immediately be filled with love, and desire to praise and understand more about the Living God. (Mishnah Torah, Laws of Torah Fundamentals, 2 : 1)

It would seem that Maimonides shared the view of those modern scientists who feel that a deep and profound inspection of the world, with its intricate laws and patterns giving rise to both profound simplicity and remarkable complexity, is the correct and perhaps only way for a finite mind to develop love and appreciation for the infinite.

But on the other hand, what are we to make of those scientists who look out at the world and do not see it resonating with divine wisdom; those who see only a whimsical, probabilistic universe, driven onward by fate and chance? Can we ascribe their reactions to mere self-delusion and/or an obstinate will not to believe? Have they an a priori commitment to a materialistic universe without even a Blind Watchmaker in charge?

To throw some light on this we need a deeper insight into the character of the religious experience.

There is a beautiful hymn that is sung or recited at the Sabbath table during the third meal, as the holy day draws to a close. Written by a sixteenth-century Kabbalist, it begins: "God conceals Himself in the beauty of secrecy, the wisdom hidden from all conception."

Jewish thought has long recognized that while human beings long for the presence and company of God, it is often true that searching for the face of God can also be a frustrating experience. There are times when the world is undeniably a cold, hostile environment, not only lacking a suffusion of the warm love of God, but outwardly thwarting our most noble aspirations. We must understand that God at times hides his face.

This is fully acknowledged in the Bible; it is called *hester panim*. While it is true that there are times when God's guiding hand is abundantly apparent, as at the splitting of the Red Sea, there are also these periods of divine silence, as during the Holocaust.

Jewish rabbinic thinkers have extended this idea by introducing the idea of *Tsimtsum* or *contraction* to explain how a finite, material world can exist in the presence of an infinite, omnipresent Deity. In the act of creation, an all-powerful God had to contract and withdraw into himself, as it were, to make room for the finite physical world.

Since God "withdrew" in creating the universe, it is not surprising that there are no *obvious* footsteps leading back to God. Traditional Judaism is not tied nor necessarily committed to the validity of the Argument from Design. In fact, the Hebrew word for world or universe, *Olam*, is related to the root meaning "hidden"; God is, so to speak, *hidden* in this world. Our encounter with God is complex; it demonstrates a complementarity. As with the wave/particles of the quantum world, we are always exposed to the dual transcendent/immanent nature of the supreme Being.

As a staunchly committed Orthodox Jew and a professional immunologist, I am pleased that this new dialogue is taking place. I am convinced that holding a religious perspective can help us understand the spiritual dimension of science. Equally, I believe that grappling with scientific questions can help us achieve deeper insight into our religious traditions.



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