

Quantum Physics Means Well, But Does It Mean Anything?

In Theology Tabletalk this morning, I mentioned that quantum physics, in being an enemy of scientistic materialism, is a friend of spirituality in general & of biblical religion in particular--most particularly, of Christianity. E.g., a reality paradigm transcendent of spacetime illumines the paradoxical conviction that in death we "go [immediately, trans-temporally] to be with the Lord [in eternity]," but also--in continuing affirmation of spacetime, nature (including our bodies), & history--we await the end-time resurrection of our bodies" to be "like his glorious [resurrected] body" in "the new heaven and the new earth."

Arriving home, I found in the mail a DVD of a last-year film titled (in deliberately garbled fonts) "What the bleep do we (k)now!?" Its box's cover has this description: "Science and spirituality come together in this mind-bending trip down the rabbit hole." Its missionary purpose is to show quantum physics as a friend of Hindu-Buddhist monism (& an enemy of the biblical deity, who's described [with a church background] as "this ugly, superstitious, backwater concept of God"). (It's a 20th-Century Fox production: would they produce a film this insulting to any nonbiblical religion?)

1 In light of the film's particular "spiritual" purpose, one could not be surprised that the parade of talking heads included no scientist of the Jewish or Christian persuasion. Or that the parade included a Hindu of Indian origin, a professor at a Hindu U. ("Maharishi U.," started by the fraud I helped--in a N.J. state trial--drive out of the public schools in five U.S. states), & a Hinduish Jungian.

2 This is a conversion story, a favorite genre of religious propaganda. This on the box's back: "Embark on a life-changing journey with Amanda (Marlee Matlin [in real life, a partial deaf mute; in this film, she says little--but language is lightweight in India's religions]), a divorced photographer who tumbles down a metaphysical rabbit hole....Ultimately, Amanda's perception of reality is turned inside out and [!] the meaning of life becomes clear." The clause after "and" is (in logic) a wild non sequitur & (in religion) a wild leap of faith.

Through her conversion, Amanda becomes a person in her own right. But the film interprets quantum in a way that doubly cancels the personal dimension of reality: (1) personalism's dualism (divine Speaker / human responders; inter-personal re/action) is washed out into impersonal monism; & (2) the mystery of the human person is reduced to brain biochemistry. The scientific method is an impersonal way of knowing; "meaning" is a personal concept; ergo, no product of scientific methodology (including quantum physics) can have any meaning.

But while science cannot help Amanda find meaning in life, quantum can stir up old religious-philosophical-existential questions Amanda can use in creating meaning for herself--indeed, for re-creating herself (a narcissistic-solipsistic project).

3 The film plays around with a commonplace of modern epistemology & hermeneutics, viz. the influence of the observer on the observed. The question enveloping the script is this: "Have you ever seen yourself through the eye of the ultimate observer?" Of course under monism, all is one, so there is no "ultimate observer" independent of the self, the god-self, the self as god: the ultimate observer is you-as-all looking at yourself-as-part, &--by really looking--transforming yourself, an activity for which (& here Stoicism weds the Hinduism) you bear full responsibility. In being "the physics of possibility," quantum undermines materialistic & religious claims of impossibility & thus of nonresponsibility--& mystery presents itself under the aspect of previously unseen possibilities; in which sense quantum, while meaningless, can stir up possibilities of meaning (as does Robt. Schuller, without help from sciences, in his "possibility thinking").

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4 "We only see what we believe is possible"--a psychepistemological commonplace. The DVD's Side 2--only monologs by the 3 directors & 4 principle actors (there being no promised "more")--reveals that the film's "brutally honest weird trio"--originators are radically countercultural (e.g., using "whatthefuck" in the title almost all the way through the project, changing to "whatthebleep" for marketing: "fuck" signals that the users are not of the [general American] culture) & just can't "see" the culture's main religions (Christianity & Judaism) because they do not believe it "possible" that either of those religions is true. Of the three, one says that for him, questioning functions as praying does for the traditionally religious, who believe that "God or Jesus will run the show": rather, running the show is an ego-autonomous do-it-yourself responsibility-project.

The three interviewed 20 scientists (to choose a few as witnesses in the film) --& we aren't surprised that they screened out those of biblical vision & in those who sound like the Esalen of the '60s & '70s (the mentality of the teachers the three took seriously). (When one says "I'm not trying to be a missionary," we know he's not telling the truth: he's a missionary for post-modern scientific spirituality.) (Contrast Eugene Peterson's solidly Christian CHRISTIANITY TODAY [Mar/05, 42-48] "Spirituality for All the Wrong Reasons.")

5 "Promethean hinduism" is an oxymoron appropriate to this DVD's mixed message. The Vedanta monism wipes out the I-Thou/it dualism (Cartesian & Buberian personalism), yet the person is seen as antitheistically autonomous (as Prometheus--a god!--was: the punishment for not believing in God is to be one [& this self-view uses quantum to leap from increased power--"What happens within us will create what happens outside us"--to increased responsibility--an unscientific ethical leap, the very leap Prometheus took into disaster]).

In a CCT 5.2.05 column, a neo-Hindu correctly said quantum "cannot affirm [I add, "or denigrate"] any particular faith's assertions," he then hinduistically opines that "maybe divinity is soaking through everything." (The DVD's religion cum quantum blatantly denigrates the two biblical religions & is two steps from them: (1) Bible: God helps the penitent; (2) Ben. Franklin's "God helps those who help themselves"; (3) Help yourself! It's a slide into a narcissistic solipsism in which God is nonexistent & other people are epiphenomena.)

6 Side 2 begins with a statement of belief that quantum can meet "a hunger in the culture," a spiritual hunger for meaning & transformation ("This move has changed my life," somebody soon witnesses). The epistemology is post-modern: "You're always within your own box" & the paradigm in which you do your sense-making. To the extent it's knowledge, quantum has value, though no meaning: meaning is a human additive to such knowledge as the verifiability process (i.e., so-called "science") produces. The DVD naively assumes a straight line from quantum to meaning, a naiveté enabling the bypassing-cooptation of traditional religions.

7 On both sides of the DVD, the talking heads spout New Age clichés. God is energy is God. God can no more be known than a fish knows water. Amanda has a "new birth" by "reperceiving herself": she's "saved" from hating herself to loving herself (but not, I add, from herself; contrast the gospel [Peterson, above: "We want to get people bored with themselves so they can start looking at Jesus"]). So much reinventing of the wheel: nothing not long preached about "understanding my emotions," but a neuronal imaging of brain-chemistry changes. And the same millenia-old questions, but in the DVD paraded as "leading to a redefinition of religion." We are asked to be "open-minded" & "open-hearted enough to consider something out of the ordinary" (viz., quantum): but for two millenia that's been the appeal of the Gospel Story of the Creator/Redeemer/Consummator, an historical movement out of which the scientific method itself sprang! Before quantum, God's incarnation-resurrection was (as the DVD says of quantum) "outside everybody's box." And before hologram "levels of consciousness," there was the Christian "Pray without ceasing." And before this "Get a grip on yourself!" there was the Christian "let go & let God." Claiming escape from materialism, this "spirituality" nevertheless says "It [emotions, addictions, ideas, behavior] all starts in the cells, which get their signals from the brain." You have it in you to "become an avatar: Buddha, Jesus." No good or evil, & "no god to punish anybody." Ancient folly strutting itself in quantum vestments. How sad.