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Does Science Replace Religion?

By Trudy Myrrh Reagan

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I. INTRODUCTION

I straddle two worlds. My scientific family and studies have given me a closeup view of the scientific endeavor. Its work, driven by curiosity and belief in logical methods, and conducted with an obedience to truthfulness, have inspired me to incorporate science ideas and images into my art since 1967. Here I examine scientism and secular humanism, which propose that the methods of science and logic are the single best basis for knowledge and personal conduct. My other world is that of a practicing Quaker. Quakerism is an experiential religion rather than one of doctrines. It grew out of the political and religious turmoil of 17th century England. It is a Christian sect, and has several branches. Some congregations are very Christ-focused. Others, like the one I attend, allow one to seek wisdom from Buddhism and other sources. Through my

engagement with the world through Quaker service, and a stunning experience years ago of the Inner Light (as well as my intuitive work as an artist), I am moving toward an amplified view of how to move through the world. I share this here.

II. THE VIRTUES OF SCIENCE

Scientists who are hired to promote industry agendas are shills. Fortunately, they are the exception. One of the key values of science is truthfulness. This makes it possible to create an edifice of reliable data that new discoveries build on. And truthfulness is a way of being, of creating trust with others.

Researchers are acutely aware of the possibility of being later proved wrong, and of great unanswered questions. It instills in them a kind of humility. My geologist father embraced evidence of the movement of continental plates in the 1970s, in spite of having written a book on mountain-building based on an earlier theory.

New tools permit us to see astonishing images, taking us down to the atomic level, as well as so many light years distant that we approach beginning of this universe. It excites a humbling sense of wonder.



Fig. 1 : Number Governs Form, 1994, acrylic on .95 cm Plexiglas, 114.3 cm, engraved white areas, backlit

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Science is developing a picture of where we are in space and time that humans very much need. All over the world, all through history, humans have woven creation stories. Now, our ideas of where we are in space and time has been redefined by scientific discoveries, many of them quite recent: The antiquity of the universe; its hundred billion galaxies, with dark energy beyond; Earth as a whole system, with its oxygen created and recreated by innumerable bacteria in the oceans; and what DNA shows us about ourselves. DNA studies have revealed that all humans have a common set of ancestors in Africa that spread out and populated the earth. Yet in war, humans tend to see enemies as less than human. All through human history, people have been bounded by tribalism. How differently will we treat each other when DNA facts become common knowledge?

III. METAPHYSICS

It was because of his religious upbringing that Michael Faraday believed in a great underlying unity in nature. He believed God's creation would be orderly throughout. It was he who discovered that a moving magnet could induce an electric current, thus uniting

two of the great forces of nature. This led him on a long search for proof that magnetism influences light, which he ultimately found.¹

I myself harbor a drive to identify what is always true in nature outside of ourselves. Science has informed my search.

I confess that I have trouble believing in a personal God. In relation to humans and the size of the universe, physicist Richard Feynman has said, "The stage is too large for the play." Yet, I have had uncanny events happen to me. It seems that events outside my control do come to my rescue upon occasion. More often, as I pray over a problem, a unique solution suggests itself. A Quaker saying is "Way will open." (fig: 2)

The movie *Pi* concerned a young man who drove himself crazy seeing numerical significances where none existed. Such is the propensity for humans to see patterns in chaos. Yet, how astonished was I when my physicist husband told me that the discovery of antimatter and black holes had been anticipated by physicists' mathematical calculations! And more recently—the Higgs boson.

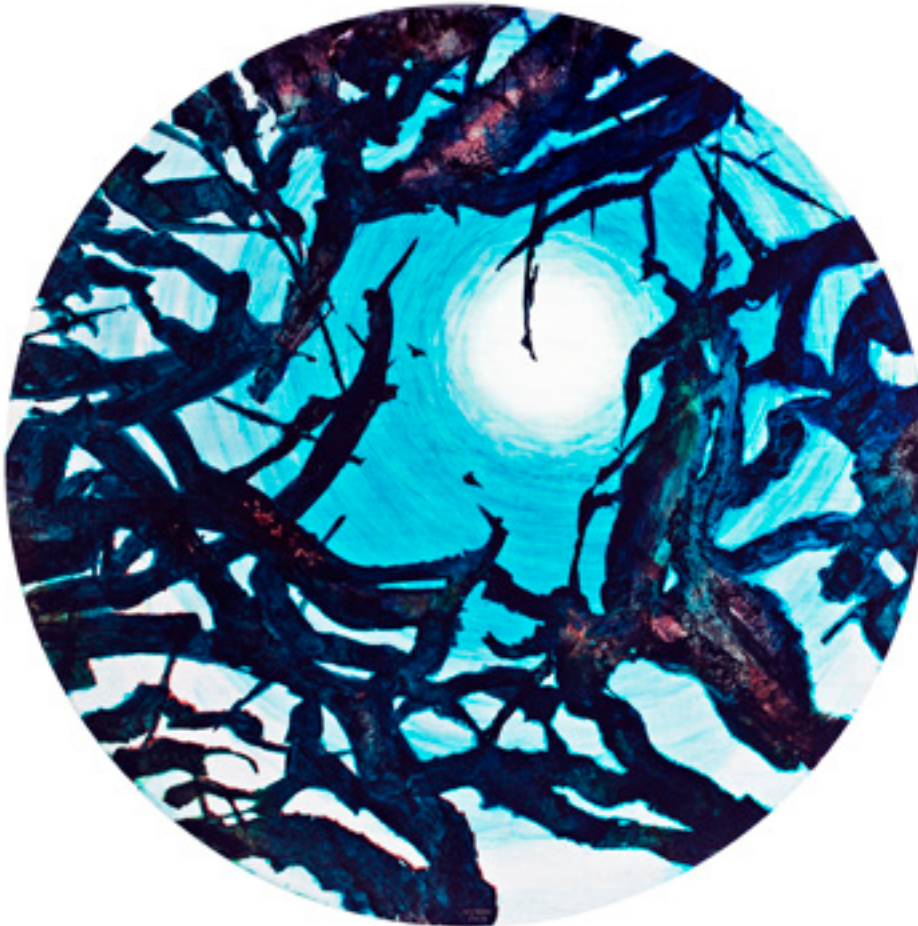


Fig. 2 : Way will Open, 2013, 76.2 cm diameter on .32 cm Plexiglas, backlit

Number Governs Form, (fig. 1) part of my Essential Mysteries series of paintings, celebrates the formal mathematics found even in everyday patterns in nature.

Physicist and mathematician Roger Penrose said in 2003,

I view the mathematical world as having an existence of its own, independent of us. It is timeless. I think, to be a working mathematician, it is difficult to hold any other view. It's not so much that the Platonic world has its own existence, but that the physical world accords with such precision, subtlety, and sophistication with aspects of the Platonic mathematical world. ... This idea is central to the way we do science. Science is always exploring the way the world works in relation to certain proposed

models, and these models are mathematical constructions.... And it's not just precision. The mathematics one uses has a kind of life of its own."²

All of this satisfies a need we have for "eternal verities" in the midst of a tempestuous world of societal and climatic changes. Spinoza felt it. Einstein felt it.

The entomologist, E.O. Wilson, in 1998 wrote a book, *Consilience*, attempting to prove that all knowledge is one, uniting not only the various sciences, but social sciences and the humanities (even aesthetics and religion) as well. This has been somewhat controversial.³ In 1975, I intuited a related idea. From my observation of the scientists, artists, and religious people I knew, I sensed that their driving quest was to somehow achieve a deep sense of the world we live and move in.



Fig. 3 : A Vast Consilience, 2004, acrylic on .95 cm Plexiglas, white engraved lines: 121.9 cm square

The disciplines I chose were:

- The astronomer (who probes the farthest reaches of the universe)
- the biologist and others who explore the extremely small
- the artist or composer, who delights in new pattern configurations within the basic order

- and the mystic, striving for an emotional appreciation of the Whole.

The center of *A Vast Consilience* (fig. 3) shows an eclipse, because the total pattern is unknowable—not by us, not by the culture as a whole, nor by future thinkers. It is interesting that both the Greek words *logos* and *cosmos* have imbedded in them the idea of an underlying order of the universe. When I learned that

ancient Greeks also had thought about this, I realized that this quest extends not only laterally, across disciplines, but vertically, through history. In my art, I have treated this theme several times. The latest iteration I named *A Vast Consilience*. I thank Wilson for bringing me this wonderful word.

IV. MY RELIGIOUS LIFE

Still, for helping us through our lives, science, mathematics, and awe of nature provide only half an answer. In my seventy-eight years of experience, religious practice has brought me illumination, greater compassion, support of a community, and, I hope, wisdom.

This is hard to say because I am from a family of mostly hardheaded materialists. It makes it hard for me to utter the word "God." It is even harder for me to dismiss the idea of God after being surprised by grace with an experience of what Quakers call "the Inner Light." I learned that Mother Theresa had such an experience in a railway carriage when she was young, and declared that she spent the rest of her life hoping for its recurrence. Whether, as some say, certain areas of the brain are involved in this is irrelevant when my experience half a lifetime ago brought me an awareness of a path of goodness through life, and the energy to pursue it.

Not everyone is blessed with this vivid response. Nor did it remain vivid for me. It is like falling in love in that way. However, we can draw close to it with music, poetry, meditation, or heart-lifting worship. I was privileged as a teenager to visit many black churches that powerfully invoke the spirit. When I encountered Catholicism in college, I could feel the power of ritual for people. It can be called forth, say, on a vision quest in the desert, full-immersion baptism, Sufi dancing, or any number of practices from religions around the world.

The discussion of my personal religious life that follows will mirror, I am sure, personal experiences from many different faiths.

Regarding compassion: It is not easy. It forces me to take seriously my own conduct and, more importantly, Gandhi's Seven Deadly Social Sins: Politics without principle—Wealth without work—Commerce without morality—Pleasure without conscience—Education without character—Science without humanity—Worship without sacrifice.⁴

With the Quakers, I did service work in Philadelphia slums in the 1950s. Through them I developed a willingness to look under the facade of my society, analyzing what structures in the system protect some people and ignore or abuse others—another kind of truth-seeking. I have found especially valuable Quakers' special trainings in listening to people very unlike myself. Respect for truth is very allied with respect for each person. Quakers base respect on their belief in the Inner Light.

Since then, I have come face-to-face with refugees from Central America, and homeless people—learning where I am—as part of a society. In both cases, I was somewhat fearful at first. I had to push myself to get started. Because my Quaker Meeting (church) was involved, it was far easier. We helped each other make a difference, each individual exceeding what he or she thought themselves able to do—and made friends across societal boundaries along the way.

Even meditation, either with the Quakers or with Buddhists, is easier for me with other people than alone. The mutual support of a congregation is more comfort the older I get. My twice-weekly practice, midweek with Buddhists and on Sundays in silent Quaker worship, let me experience deep stillness, which some have called the Ground of All Being. The palpable effect on my life is an equanimity and magnanimity that I have long sought.

For this reason, I can say that science has not replaced religion. Science provides a floor for knowing where we are in beyond-human space and beyond-human time. As humans, we need this floor. Otherwise, why would each human tribe have a creation myth?

Moreover, I continue to seek wisdom from viewpoints like Buddhism, Taoism and other faiths. Combined with my life experience, it has been a journey of continual surprise, and a joyful one that steadies me.

However, I can say from long experience that any religion that tells me what to believe, whether by creeds, authority of clergy, or the promise of supernatural rewards and punishments, merely stirs the embers of my skepticism.

This is why the work of Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh interests me. He instructs his community:

"Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight kill, or die for."⁵

My religious practice feels consonant with what science teaches me about the universe.

Things seen and unseen, the universe itself, all are larger than human imagining.

This is the background in my painting, *Paradox*. The white net you see is the human attempt to explain it by religious doctrine or science theory. Like imagining angels dancing on the head of a pin, or the existence of an "ether" in 19th century physics, we stumble on *paradox*. A continual recognition of the majesty and eternal flow of the unbuilt world, or the generous smiles of little children, serves us better.

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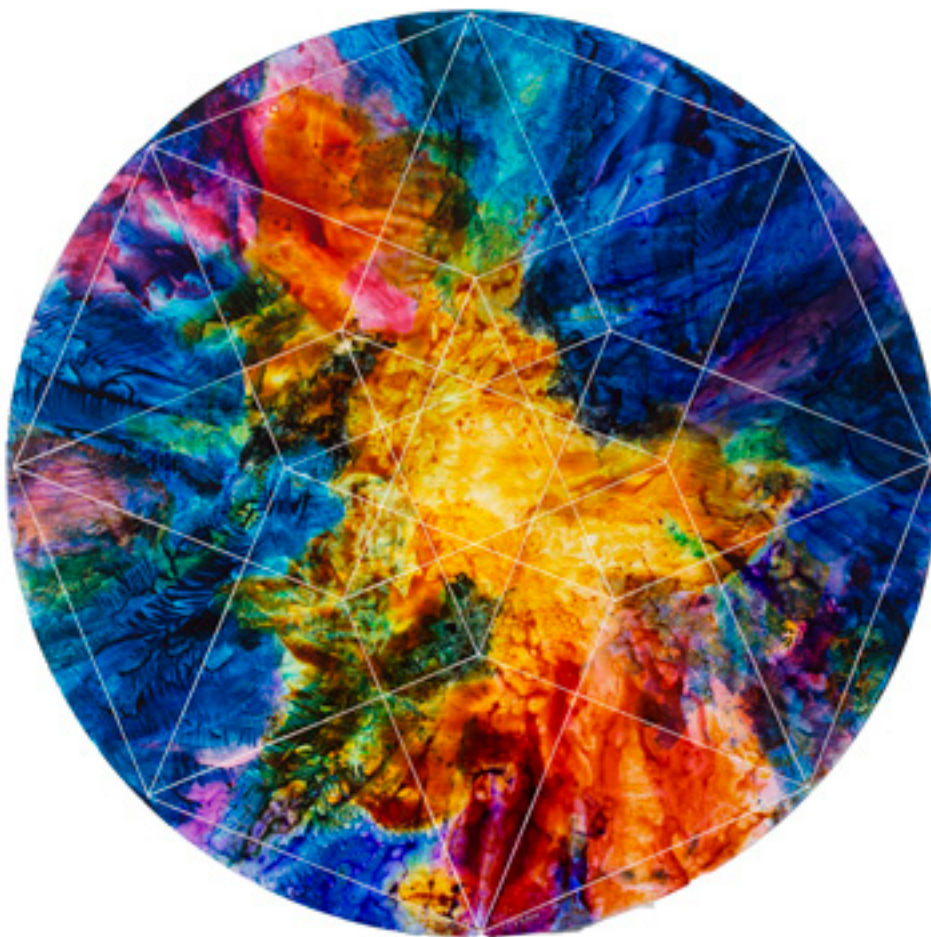


Fig. 4 : Paradox, 2014, acrylic painting on .32cm Plexiglas sheet, 76.2cm diameter, backlit.