

A Non-Concluding List of Open Questions

The chapters of this brief book are directions for further thought rather than finished philosophical treatises. Almost endless implications for further reflection are indicated by the considerations I have introduced. So for my conclusion I want to explore a list of questions that I intuit are productive directions for further thought about the basic issues raised in the four chapters of this book. Here is the first of those questions:

What does it mean for us human beings to be inclusive rather than reductionistic in our approaches to reality?

By “reductionistic” I mean making part of the truth our picture of the whole. Clearly, our knowledge of reality will always be limited. Our scientific knowledge of reality is continually being expanded by further research and discovery. Our contemplative awareness is also a journey that has no end except the end of surrender to unending journey. The we-approach to reality is likewise never static, never finished, never arriving at a conclusive consensus that endures for all time.

For the last few hundred years, we in Western and Westernized cultures have lived in a period of history in which the scientific or objective approach to reality was overemphasized to the neglect of the contemplative-approach and the we-approach to reality. This over-objectification of our lives is an example of reductionism in our approach to reality.

We can also cite examples of reductionism within the contemplative approach to reality. For example, while we need to be open to the traditions of the East because they are an important corrective to the rampant reductionism of an over-objective approach in the West, we also need to be aware of a tendency within Eastern traditions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, to negate the validity of objective knowledge. This rejection is taking place whenever the experience of enlightenment in the living now is interpreted to imply that our experiences of memory and anticipation are unreal, mere fantasies of our temporal minds that do not reflect reality. In several instances in the chapters of this book, I have attempted to illuminate both the validity of the living now and the validity of memory and anticipation in the living now. I have indicated that there is no “now” except one in which we remember “having-been” and anticipate “yet-to-be.” Memory and anticipation give the “now” its spatial and temporal depth. Some contemplative writers seem to suggest that everything temporal is unreal because it is passing away. Yet these same writers contradict themselves when they emphasize that being fully real means being lucid about the passing of all sensations, feelings, thoughts, experiences, and selves. Being lucid about temporal reality is clearly part of the contemplative approach to that experience which contemplatives call “not temporal.” It is important to note, however, that after these enlightening experiences of the non-temporal, the temporal does not go away. It is still there as the place and time for living our non-temporal enlightenments. Taken by itself, the contemplative approach to reality can lead us into making part of the truth (our non-temporality) an untrue picture of the whole. This is an example of reductionism.

The we-approach to reality can also be reductionistic. I have pointed out that the we-approach includes both intimacy between selves and commonality among the members of social groups. Some have reduced the we-approach to social commonality; for example, they are interested in politics but not in personal relationships. Others have reduced the we-approach to intimate relationships; they focus on personal intimacy but neglect or even despise the broad social sphere. Those who reduce the we-approach to intimacy tend to neglect the scientific approach to reality. Those who reduce the we-approach to commonality tend to neglect the

contemplative approach to reality. Much we-approach reductionism could be overcome by simply being clear that (1) all commonality presupposes intimacy and (2) all intimacy presupposes commonality.

Perhaps the most deadly form of we-approach reductionism is the one we have called “authoritarianism.” So often religious groups, cultural groups, or political bodies have claimed absolute everlasting validity for a particular set of beliefs and practices. This amounts to a non-openness to both further scientific knowledge and further contemplative wisdom. We have all been hurt by these powerful and often violent authoritarianisms--so much so that we are inclined to reject the whole we-approach to reality in the name of scientific or contemplative freedom.

So how can we remain open in our lives to all three approaches to reality: the it-approach, the I-approach, and the we-approach?

How can we become ever more clear that each of these approaches enriches the other two?

Such openness may be frightening if we are devoted to a specific form of personal, rational, religious, or cultural stability. But if our deepest devotion is a genuine openness to Mystery, then having three approaches to Mystery is better than one. Each provides Mystery that the other two do not. Each challenges the reductionisms of the other two.

Here are three more questions I want to briefly explore:

Is it reductionistic to speak of reality as temporal and spatial?

Do we experience an Infinite Reality that is not temporal and not spatial?

Is it reductionistic to speak of Reality as Infinite?

The following slogan can be applied to all three approaches to reality: “The more we know the more we know we don’t know.” Mystery is the end of the road in all three approaches to reality. Reality is mysterious, and Mystery is real. Mystery also presupposes some sort of knowledge or wisdom from which perspective we experience the unknownness of Mystery. The Mysterious is mysterious because it is the experience of finite knowers. Similarly, the Infinite is Infinite because it is the experience of the finite you and me. If we did not live within the finite ever-changing realms of time and space, we would not be experiencing the unchanging NOW of non-temporal, non-spatial Infinity.

Do we experience an Infinite Reality that is not temporal and not spatial? “Yes,” is my answer. I believe that this “Yes” is the deep contribution of the contemplative approach to reality. Mystery is not temporal. Mystery is not spatial. And we, as Mystery-experiencing beings, are just as mysterious as the Mystery of the entire cosmos that we experience. As the Hindus put it, “That Mysteriousness I am.” So I, as well as the overall, am not temporal! I, as well as the overall, am not spatial! If I choose this Mystery-experiencing depths of me as my basic identity, then everything spatial or temporal is not me!

My big toe is not me. I could cut it off and the Mystery-experiencing me would still persist. Yet it is also true that my big toe is me in a way that the bed post is not me. The discovery of the me-ness of my big toe is a discovery that a healthy developing human infant makes in the first months of life. If this identification with the body is not clearly made, dire psychological consequences result. Similarly, it is important for the developing child to distinguish his or her

own feelings and thoughts from the feelings and thoughts of others. These feelings are me and mine. These thoughts are me and mine.

Still later the healthy developing child learns that particular intimate relationships are me and mine, that particular social commonalities are me and mine, and that this natural planet is me and mine.

To experience the Infinite Mystery communicated in the passingness and yet connectedness of all things is to experience a depth of self that is beyond my finite relationships of me and mine. I become, as I identify with this Mystery-experiencing self, a no-self--that is I am not the self that is identifying with a particular body, feelings, thinking, personality development, intimate relations, social commonality, and planet Earth.

Nevertheless, after opting to be this enigmatic no self, I must live out this no-self-ness in my particular body, having my feelings, thinking my thoughts, being my process of personality-becoming, being my intimate relationships, being my social commonalities, and being part of planet Earth.

So I conclude that I am both a no-self living in the unchanging landlessness of Mystery and a finite self living in the changing landscape of space and time.

Perhaps this paradox is a clue for probing the symbol of the God-human in Christian heritage. We are fully flesh and fully Spirit at one and the same time and in one and the same place. This basic paradox is present in all sophisticated religious heritages--that Spirit cannot be fully expressed in any religious symbols or practices--that Spirit is not religion and religion is not Spirit. Spirit is participation in the unchanging Mysteriousness. Religion participates in the changing realm of time and space. Religion is flesh. Spirit is a wind that blows through flesh. Perhaps it is true that Spirit never appears in human life without spawning religion. And religion, if it is good religion, assists in the healing of particular people in particular times and spaces. Yet it is also true that every religious form can become a box that excludes Spirit rather than expresses it. Here is a poem about the relationship between Spirit and religion:

Soap and Water

Religion is like soap,
without water it won't wash.
Spirit is water;
it will wash without soap,
but it washes better with soap
if the soap is good soap.

Good religion catches Spirit.
Good religion,
if practiced in a disciplined fashion,
can intensify and mature
the living of Spirit.

But Spirit, like blood,
is the gift of God,
while religion is human-made,
subject to perversion
and obsolescence.

So let us never confuse
Spirit with religion.
Water is not soap,
and soap is not water.

Here is a further list of questions that grow out of these considerations about Spirit and religion:

What does it mean to distinguish the Spirit core of a religious heritage from the various religious forms that were used to express that Spirit core in the context of past cultural environments?

What does it mean to continue a religious heritage into the future by giving its Spirit core fresh expression in the context of the currently emerging cultural environment?

What does it mean to contribute the gifts of that Spirit core to the task of building “healthy” emerging culture?

What does it mean to criticize current culture and culture-building from the perspective of living Spirit rather than from the perspective of a now obsolete religious expression of Spirit?

What does it mean to conduct interreligious dialogue in a manner that reaches agreement among adherents of many religious traditions on what Spirit is and how Spirit informs us on envisioning new cultural, political, and economic commonality for humanity as a whole?

In particular how do we reach substantial interreligious agreement on the proper balancing of human presence with the wellbeing of the natural planet that sustains humanity and all other living forms?

And how do we reach wide agreement among many heritages on the proper strategies for deconstructing the currently obsolete commonalities and phasing in the workable commonalities that we need?

Such questions as these cannot be quickly or easily answered. They must be lived and explored and asked over and over again for decades to come. I will not attempt to systematically explore them in this book. I will conclude by simply noting with one more poem a basic direction for exploring these questions.

Not a Private Matter

Religion is not a private matter.
Religion is a sociological process.

Spirit is not a sociological process.
Spirit is only known in the secret solitude
of singular persons.

Yet Spirit is not a private matter either.
For Spirit is expressed in public
through outward acts of
freedom and compassion.
Or if sick, Spirit is expressed in public

through outward acts of
despair, self absorption, and destruction.

If Whole Spirit blows in you, you are the light of the world.
Do not put your lamp under a wash tub
but on a lamp stand
so it will illuminate the house.

Spirit is the same in every age,
but religion changes.
Religion is created by the human family.
Religion is part of human society.

Spirit is not a creation of the human mind or body.
Spirit is not an achievement of the human will.
Spirit is not a perfected personality.
Spirit is a gift from God like blood, like air.
Spirit is human authenticity
breathed by the Infinite Silence
into our finite processes of body and mind.

Bodies and minds do religion.
Spirit inspires bodies and minds.
Spirit fills the biological processes
of human beings.
Spirit is a bridge of relationship
between human biology and the Wholly Other
--the emptiness--the NO-THINGNESS from which
all things come and to which all things return.
--the fullness--the EVERY-THINGNESS in which
all things cohere.

Spirit is not a finite process.
Good religion is a finite process
that expresses Spirit.
Bad religion is a finite process
that only pretends to express Spirit
while providing means of escaping
from being and living Spirit.

Nevertheless, Spirit is inescapable,
even though escaping from Spirit
is the general condition of humanity.
And since escaping from the inescapable
is a futile journey,
humanity is not happy.
Indeed, despair is the general condition
of the human family.

The despairing only occasionally notice
that they are in despair,
for to notice despair

is the first step toward
moving away from despair.

To be stuck at this first step
of noticing despair
is intolerable.
So most noticers of despair
take a step backwards into hiding
despair from view
rather than a step forward
toward leaving behind the
understandings and commitments
that are causing the despair.

The unhappiness of despair
is rooted in some specific way
of not being willing to be Spirit.
Happiness is the state of willing to be
the Spirit relationship we are--
being that bridge between our wondrous biology
and the Wholly Other
--the emptiness--the NO-THINGNESS from which
all things come and to which all things return
--the fullness--the EVERY-THINGNESS in which
all things cohere.

And all this is not a private matter.
Every leaf and every hair
of the biological world
is involved in this public act
of choosing to be the Spirit beings
that we are.