

## Religion and science: III

# The mystery of it all



People of faith can claim to have knowledge of God through what has been *revealed* to them through sacred texts and the lives of their mystics, prophets, saints and teachers, on the one hand, and through prayer and personal experience, on the other. Similarly, science can develop knowledge of the laws and principles that explain the workings of the natural order, at least at the large-scale, macroscopic, level, and apply this knowledge to bring improvements to the world in medicine, technology and so on.

So far, so good—and certainly an accurate description! However, it is equally accurate to claim that God can never be fully known by anyone in this life, while scientific research for its part has shown how, at the smallest level, indeterminacy reigns. In short, God and the universe remain a great mystery.

Let us examine this more closely, beginning with science:

In order to better investigate and explain a problem, science regularly reduces it into smaller units. Hence, in 1928, mathematicians Hilbert and Ackermann posed the challenge of devising an algorithm or set of instructions for deciding the truth or falsity of any mathematical statement that would offer a general method for reducing logic to mathematics. Three years later, Gödel proved by means of his ‘Incompleteness Theorems’ that the challenge could not be met; he showed that any devised formal system is insufficient in itself to prove or disprove a proposition, but will always require input from outside. This position was repeated in 1935 and 1936 by Church and Turing respectively—thereby revealing that science has built-in limits to what it can achieve.

Likewise, there is the ‘Uncertainty Principle’ first introduced by Heisenberg in 1927, which asserts that there is a fundamental limit to the overall accuracy of related pairs of measurements at the subatomic level of investigation. In short, you may be able to calculate the position of a particle or its momentum, but not both together. A similar concept to this within quantum physics is the so-called ‘observer effect’, which shows how merely observing a phenomenon by taking a measurement of it is not possible without affecting the result. According to Italian theoretical physicist and writer

**The greatest obstacle to  
discovery is not ignorance—  
it is the illusion of knowledge.**

**Daniel J. Boorstin**

Carlo Rovelli in his book *Helgoland: The Strange and Beautiful Story of Quantum Physics*, ‘knowledge is process’, and to this he adds, ‘Science is not a Depository of Truth, it is based on the awareness that there are no Depositories of Truth.’ Again, we see that there are serious limitations to what science can achieve—which, moreover, is recognised by scientists.

Religion too offers a very incomplete picture of reality and what we understand by ‘the divine’.

Various prophets of the Old Testament, acting as intermediaries between God and humanity, have held preconceptions of what God is about, only to be disabused of their ideas. Habakkuk, writing in the seventh-century BC, is a prime example of this: he is unable to cope with the violence and wrongdoing he witnesses in society, imploring God ‘how long shall I cry for help, and thou wilt not hear?’ (KJV, 1:2), especially since he believes that God is ‘of purer eyes to behold evil and canst not look on wrong’ (1:13). His pleading is reminiscent of many people today who question not just the wisdom but also the existence of God because, they claim, a God of love would not let ‘bad things happen to good people’. When God informs Habakkuk that He is using the Chaldean warriors to inflict punishment on Judah for its transgressions, the prophet is even more perplexed since ‘the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he’ (1:13). What he has failed to understand is the need for patience and trust in his creator: ‘Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith.’ (2:4)

Then there is the famous remark from St Paul (1 Corinthians 13:12) about seeing ‘through a glass, darkly’, which points to the fact that it is only a restricted vision that people, as finite beings, can have of God in this life. In the NIV version, this is translated as ‘For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.’

There is also a form of theological reasoning, known as ‘apophatic theology’ (from the Greek *apophatikos* meaning ‘denial’ or ‘negation’), which argues that, in attempting to understand God, it is safer to say what God is *not*, in order to arrive at what God is. For example, God does not change (hence is immutable); God cannot die (hence is immortal); God cannot be seen (hence is invisible); God is not a body (hence is incorporeal); and so on.

At the mystical level too, much has been written about how it is spiritually safer to simply love God than to try and understand what God is all about. The anonymous author of the fourteenth-century text *The Cloud of Unknowing* (supposedly an English monk) had this to say,

Lift up your heart to God in a humble impulse of love and aim for him alone, not for any of the good things you want from him. Try, indeed, to hate thinking about anything but him, so that there is nothing at work in your mind or heart but only him. [...] Don’t stop [...] but apply yourself to it

assiduously until you feel this longing. When you first begin you only encounter a darkness and, as it were, a cloud of unknowing. You don't know what is happening, except that you feel that your will is starkly and strenuously bent upon God. Whatever you do, the darkness and cloud come between you and your God and prevent you from seeing him clearly by the light of intelligence and reason [...] For if you are going to experience or see God in this life it can only be in this cloud and in this darkness.

Similarly, the poem by the sixteenth century Spanish mystic St John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, describes how the path to God is largely unknowable and proceeds in darkness with only the light of the soul to guide it, a light 'more true than the light of noonday'. In addition, the conversations recorded with the seventeenth century French friar Brother Lawrence, in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, reveal someone who was not troubled by dogma or the niceties of theological debate, but who, instead, sought only to offer his love to God in every action he took, day in, day out.

Finally, we conclude with the familiar line from Philippians 4:7 (RSV), which forms part of the blessing at the end of Church services and which stresses human ignorance in the face of God: 'And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' In the words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who spent his whole life trying to reconcile the truths of

religion and science, 'The most telling and profound way of describing the evolution of the universe would undoubtedly be to trace the evolution of love.' Put succinctly, love of God is the real key to understanding.

***Si comprehendis, non est Deus***  
(If you can understand it,  
it isn't God)  
**Augustine of Hippo**