

Discussion Questions for Book Groups

Gateway to the Divine: Finding Spirituality in Science

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The following chapter-by-chapter questions are intended to set the stage for meaningful discussion and dialogue by book groups and other interested reading groups. Each chapter has a brief synopsis, followed by specific questions to reflect upon and then discuss.

I. The Big Picture and Dramatis Personae

1. Our Technologically Bedazzling 21st-Century World

Core Insights

We have become myopic, jaded by the lush fruits of our technological golden age, as if these miracles of human ingenuity, our slick tools and toys, simply floated down from the heavens to serve our every whim. But this is not so. At the deepest level, science is the driver of all technology, the original gift-giver, and it lurks there still under the shiny covers of our cherished widgets, to be discovered if we can develop eyes to see it. And see it we must, for the gateway to spirituality that our world both craves and desperately needs lies buried with it, conjoined treasure waiting to be unearthed. Join me for some digging into the technological miracles that define the twenty-first century, among them three nuggets this chapter explores: wide-eyed awe at all we have achieved, exploring the science lurking within our technology, and how we are deeply interconnected and relational with all things, both animate and inanimate.

Questions

- Recall Otto's concept of the "numinous." Think about your own numinous encounters, those deeply emotive, life-changing spiritual or religious moments in our lives. Name one. What was the feeling like?
- Technology and its underlying science are both awe-inspiring and profoundly mysterious. Have you ever considered modern technology to be numinous? Why or why not?
- What kinds of technology do you find most awe-inspiring? Why?
- Technological advancement over the past century has occurred with a rapidity that is completely without precedent. Do you see this as problematic for the future of humanity? Why or why not?
- There are two essential ingredients that enable all advanced technology: electrons for energy transport and transistors for processing and control. Does the fact that the former are 13.8B years old, while the latter on about 80 years old, strike you as important? Why or why not?
- Both science and technology are born from a deep interconnectedness between humanity, the Earth, and the greater universe. Does this relationality strike you as important? Numinous?

2. Our Confounding and Fraught 21st-Century World

Core Insights

The smartphone, the most sophisticated technology per unit volume ever created by humankind, a widget rife with complicated science churning away beneath the covers, turned out to be a Trojan horse in disguise, gunning to destroy our sense of inner peace and well-being. Slick and shiny, artful in both form and function, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, smartphones have become indispensable to modern life, for young and old alike. But they are also powerfully addictive, especially as an access platform for social media and AI. This was Big Tech's original intent, in service of the almighty dollar. The exponential transistor growth patterns in both performance and cost that drive our technological age break every known rule in both economics and computation; hence, its societal impact, for good and ill, will be

both lasting and globally transformative. On a better note, kicking your smartphone addiction and embracing the preferred silence of the universe can open the door to a deeper spirituality. The only requirement is to open the gate and walk through.

Questions

- Are you an “activity addict”? What activities stand out as most addictive for you? Why? What role does technology play in your addiction?
- Where would you place your “inner peace” on a scale of 1 to 10? How do you feel about that?
- How large is your busyness quotient (BW)? Head-high or in the clouds? How do you feel about that? How would you go about changing it?
- Have you ever thought of your smartphone as a Trojan horse? How comfortable are you being without your smartphone close by? Have you ever considered going on an electronics-free vacation? Does the thought induce panic, or a wistful sigh?
- How important is social media in your life? Which one is your go-to? Why? Do you find social media a positive or a negative contributor to your BW? How about for humanity’s well-being?
- Do eAddictions work separate you from your spirituality and sense of well-being? How so? How is that best changed?

3. The Things That Keep Us Up at Night

Core Insights

Given the right circumstances, we humans are given to self-reflection and to asking questions. On our best days, our thoughts bend toward questions of meaning and existence, and these are often of a spiritual nature. The generous questions we seek invite honest, deeply felt, life-giving answers, sometimes possessing the potential for personal revelation. Such generous questions fall into two broad categories: the practical, those supporting our day-to-day existence during our life's journey; and the philosophical, questions that have been asked, without definitive answers, for as long as humans have been around. Both categories of questions are worthy of our attention.

Questions

- Are the questions we ask and wonder about important? Why? What does it mean to ask a “generous” question? Why does that matter?
- Have you ever taken the time to share around an open fire out in nature with friends or family? Have you ever stared at a rising full Moon, or stargazed on a moonless night? What was that like?
- Do you find Practical BIG Questions or Philosophical BIG Questions more engaging? Why should humanity continue to ask questions without definitive answers? What do we gain by doing so?
- What is your favorite Practical BIG Question?
- What is your favorite Philosophical BIG Question?
- Given our eAdditions and our sky-high BQs, has humanity fallen away from appreciating the value found in thinking about BIG Questions? Does this matter for the future of humanity? Why or why not?

4. Rethinking Religion and Science

Core Insights

We humans are spiritual beings, and the religions we created provide a sense of community, a moral grounding, and answers to our deepest questions of meaning, our why? questions. But we humans are also curious beings, given to wonder about how things work, and science developed the tools needed to understand the material universe and answer our deepest questions of mechanism, our how? questions. The tension between why and how, between religion and science, runs long and deep, bolstered by fundamentalists on either side, but common ground can be found in embracing a Convergence perspective that seeks a fuller truth by bringing into conversation both our why? and our how? questions. By combining “scientific seeing” and “spiritual seeing,” we can become “rational mystics,” a worthy goal for those who seek common ground.

Questions

- How do you feel about the tension between religion and science? How does politics play in this tension? Do you think this tension is detrimental to the future of the human community? Why or why not?
- Were you aware of the Cartesian bargain? How has it impacted human history, for good or ill?
- Do you consider yourself religious, a religious “None,” spiritual but not religious, or none of the above? Think back to your decision-tree that led you to where you are today. How do you feel about it?
- What is spirituality to you, and how does it differ from religion?
- Do you think religion is misunderstood? How and why? Do you think science is misunderstood? How and why?
- There are fundamental unprovable assumptions that science rests upon, which in some ways can be likened to faith. How does that strike you?
- Mathematics, and by extension science, has fundamental limits as what it is capable of knowing with certainty. Do you find that comforting or confounding? Why?
- What does the word “God” mean to you? What is your “image” of God? Do you believe in God?
- How does it strike you that the vast majority of humanity (95%), across all boundaries, believe that there is something bigger than themselves at work in the universe. In short, they profess spirituality.
- Do you believe that religion and science must coexist to attain the fullest possible understanding of ourselves and the universe? Why or why not?

5. The New Cosmic Story

Core Insights

Our ever-expanding gargantuan universe tells a story, a New Cosmic Story, an ancient narrative drama 13.8B years in the writing. We humans occupy a unique vantage point within its pages, smack in the middle of its smallest to largest cosmic dimensionality, and we possess an “inner plenty” sufficient to uncover the tools needed to sift its seemingly impenetrable secrets. Evolutionary novelty has crafted a creative, complexifying plot, culminating in three emergent epochs: the origins of the universe, the origins of life, and the origins of mind.

Questions

- Have you ever thought of the unfolding universe as a story, a New Cosmic Story, with a beginning 13.8B years ago, but no end? How does that make you feel?
- “Our stories orient us, they help us make better sense of ourselves, our lives, and especially help us answer the BIG Questions that challenge our understanding of meaning and existence. We yearn for these answers, to make sense of it all. Stories provide those answers, even when they may challenge our long-held beliefs.” How does this strike you?
- The universe is so large and so old as to be beyond human comprehension, but so is our “inner plenty”? How does that make you feel?
- Humans lie at the center of the universe’s dimensionality, at the center of the Cosmic Uroboros. Does that strike you as profound? Why or why not?
- Emergence is the great creative means by which creativity enters the evolving universe. Which of the example of emergence strike you as especially important?
- Were you aware that all living things on Earth possess DNA, strongly suggesting that everything began from the same organism, likely a creative cyanobacterium. Do you find that fact comforting or troubling? Why?
- What is your reaction to the three long-term possibilities for our species? Which seems most likely? Can you think of other possibilities?

II. Exploring Our Mysterious Universe Through the Eyes of Science

6. The Journey Outward: Our Cosmos

Core Insights

The cosmos is more than it appears to be. Processes, not things, are foundational, and the myriads of emergent processes that the cosmos embodies are profoundly interconnected and inherently relational. Within our cosmos lie fertile grounds for deepening your awe of creation and your own spirituality.

Questions

- Have you ever spent time alone looking up into a brilliant night sky, your heart filled with wonder and awe? Go back there. What did it feel like? Was your memory of the night sky from your childhood different from what it is today? Have you ever seen the spilled milk of our Milky Way in all its glory? Where? When?
- Would the discovery of intelligent extraterrestrial life threaten your worldview? Why or why not? Would the discovery of microbial life on other worlds (e.g., Mars or Europa) be different from discovering intelligent life?
- Time slows down in the presence of both high speeds and massive objects. A fact. Time is not as simple as we think. How does this relativistic finding of science strike you?
- We are all made of stardust. Literally. Most of the history of our universe consisted of generating the elements in stardust and then violently dispersing it through the cosmos, ultimately seeding life on Earth. Do you find this fact comforting or threatening? How so?
- Does it bother you that we presently have no real clue what “Dark Matter” is, even though it makes up 27 percent of the universe’s mass? How about Dark Energy, which is inexorably driving an accelerating expansion of the universe.
- What do you make of Cosmic Fine Tuning and the Anthropic Principle? Are they comforting? Threatening? Which explanation most appeals to you? Why? How would your worldview change if science is able to prove an explanation different from the one that seems most reasonable to you?
- Is there narrative drama unfolding in the evolving universe, this New Cosmic Story? Said, another way, is there meaning to be found in our 13.8B-year evolutionary journey as a species?

7. The Journey Inward: The Quantum Realm

Core Insights

The quantum realm is more than it appears to be. Processes, not things, are foundational, and the myriads of emergent processes that the quantum realm embodies are profoundly interconnected and inherently relational. Within those unseen depths lie fertile grounds for deepening your awe of creation and your own spirituality.

Questions

- Have you ever thought of your smartphone as a hotbed of quantum processes? How does that make you feel?
- What do you make of the highly counterintuitive implications of the quantum realm? If your worldview bends spiritual, what does it say about the Creator, if anything?
- Waves surround us, bounding virtually every aspect of our macroscopic existence. What, if anything, does this suggest about the quantum nature of reality?
- Do you find it comforting or disturbing that some of the best scientific minds to ever walk the Earth spent most of their lives searching for a satisfying interpretation of quantum mechanics ... and came up empty?
- Have you ever been moved to tears by a song or a piece of music? What was the song, and what was the context in which it moved you?

- Are there types of music or sound collections (whale song, birdsong) you consider spiritual or sacred? How would you describe those sounds and why they affect you spiritually.
- How does it strike you that music, in essence complex waves, has an exceptionally deep grounding in the quantum fabric of the universe?

8. The Journey into Nature: Our Magical Earth and Its Majestic Trees

Core Insights

Nature is more than it appears to be. Processes, not things, are foundational, and the myriads of emergent processes that nature embodies are profoundly interconnected and inherently relational. Within those unseen depths lie fertile grounds for deepening your awe of creation and your own spirituality.

Questions

- Were you aware that the Earth previously cycled through multiple periods of hothouse and snowball epochs? Does that change your view of our present climate crisis? How so?
- Did you previously think about water as a magical super-solvent and must-have life enabler?
- Did you know that rocks and minerals have their own emergent evolutionary trajectory, one which is inextricably linked to living things?
- How comfortable are you with being alone in the forest encountering nature in all its glory? Whether your experience is comfortable or uncomfortable, spend a moment tracing the origins of your feelings.
- Have you ever thought of the forest as a community of trees? Did you know that trees communicate with each other? Did you know that trees live in symbiosis with mycorrhizal fungi? How does this new knowledge affect your view of nature?
- Did you know that trees possess eerily humanlike behavior? Were you aware that there is nonhuman intelligence at work below ground in the forest? The next time you are sautéing some button mushrooms, or see a wild Chanterelle in the forest, imagine the unseen mycelium that spawned them.
- Where do you sit regarding the climate crisis? Deeply concerned? Ignorant? Depressed? Resentful? How do you feel about deforestation in light of what you just learned about forest communities?
- Do you have a favorite tree species? Have you ever laid your hand upon an old Grandmother tree and greeted her? Ever hugged a tree? It is never too late to start!
- Do you consider the Earth, a collective entity of interwoven system of systems, to be sacred? Earth, in this context, is usually referred to as Gaia, the personification of Earth in Greek mythology. Are living things, animal and plant and fungal, sacred? How about inanimate objects such as rocks and mountains and trout streams?

9. The Journey into Us: The Human Mind and Heart

Core Insights

Humans are more than we appear to be. Processes, not things, are foundational, and the myriads of emergent processes that humans embody are profoundly interconnected and inherently relational. Within those unseen depths lie fertile grounds for deepening your awe of creation and your own spirituality.

Questions

- Does the scientific fact of human evolution threaten your understanding of a God? Of a Creator? Why or why not?
- Have you ever considered that the human evolutionary story began with the Big Bang singularity event, 13.8B years ago? What does it mean to you that the universe took so ridiculously long to craft us?

- Were you aware that all of our oldest ancestors were Black and came from the heart of Africa? How does that influence your perspective on racism in contemporary society?
- Race has no genetic basis. Does that strike you as an important finding? Why or why not?
- Did you know that around 1–4 percent of your DNA is not human, but Neanderthal? Consider how we might have prevailed over our ancient cousins. How does that feel?
- Did you know that around 2–8 percent of your DNA has a viral origin? And mothers could not easily carry babies to term without it?
- Were you aware that you have two brains? That your microbiome plays a key role in your immune system, health, and overall well-being?
- Does the fact that we now can practice gene editing in our own genome disturb you? Should it be permissible to use CRISPR on germline cells, where changes become permanent, percolating down to all subsequent generations of offspring without their consent? Why or why not?
- Do you see the brain as a marvelous machine, or a product of divine creation, or both? Do you think it is possible to develop a complete understanding of consciousness, or is it an example of cognitive closure?
- Is love a simple evolutionary innovation, or does it bear the marks of divine origin?
- In what sense is love a foundational concept underlying the universe and its emergent creativity?

III. Making Sense of Our Journeys

10. The Process Perspective: Toward a Satisfying Worldview

Core Insights

In this final chapter I offer an invitation to reflect, contemplate, and further explore—a quest, if you will, to make sense of these journeys from a spiritual perspective. What I seek, what many of us seek, is a satisfying worldview that does not demand that we either cast aside our spirituality in order to fully embrace the unfolding marvels of science or that we ignore these scientific discoveries to maintain peace with our spirituality. Since each distinct journey offers markers of the spiritual as a consideration, as part of a deeper unitive universe, these dualistic options are unacceptable alternatives. The central thesis of this book is that a deeper and more complete understanding of ourselves and our place in our universe requires a satisfying synthesis of *both* science and spirituality, the material *and* the spiritual. And that the sciences point to a universe containing both, without compromising the integrity and truth of either. If to meaningfully move in that direction requires an encounter with unfamiliar and challenging ideas, then so be it. Let's be brave. Be bold.

Questions

- Have you ever thought of the universe as a unfolding tapestry? What would your conception of that tapestry look like?
- I shared my wish list for a satisfying worldview. What would yours include? Are there items in mine that are not in yours? If so, what are they, and why?
- If you are from an Abrahamic faith tradition, how does it strike you that your conception of God is prescientific? Does that matter?
- Do you struggle with the “problem of suffering”? If so, how so?
- Are you open to reimagining your conception of the Divine, or do you find that notion challenging?
- What is your overall impression of process theology? Appealing? Threatening?
- Within process theology, “God’s essential attribute is to affect, and to be affected by, the temporal processes and events unfolding in our universe.” How does it strike you that our actions can change God?
- What aspect of the “pillars” of process theology do you find to be the most appealing? Least appealing? Why?

- What aspect of the “elements” of process theology do you find to be the most appealing? Least appealing? Why?
- What aspect of the “implications” of process theology do you find to be the most appealing? Least appealing? Why?
- As you think about the book you have read, on the whole, did you find its perspective useful? Challenging? Inspiring?