

Games of Religion and The Game of Knowledge

– An Interview with Dr. Steven Phelps –

Interview taken by Fil Ips on October 16, 2025.

Steven Phelps received dual bachelor's degrees in physics and philosophy from Stanford University and a Ph.D. in physics from Princeton University, specializing in cosmology. He served at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel for 13 years in its Research Department, where he coordinated the indexing and collation of the Bahá'í Sacred Writings and their translation from Persian and Arabic into English. During that period, he concurrently held a research position in the Physics Department at the Technion University in Haifa and published original research on the masses of nearby galaxies.

From his website:

This website is the record of a personal journey to answer two questions that I believe are critical to the future of this planet:

- Can science and religion, reason and faith, be reconciled?
- Can the religions of the world be reconciled between themselves?

I believe that the answer to these questions is yes if and only if religion is reconceived from the ground up.

Introductory reading:

“The Participatory Universe” by Sasha Rozenberg: <https://buddhism-today.org/the-participatory-universe/>

Disclaimer:

From the very beginning this informal dialogue was envisaged as an experimental space. The views expressed serve to map an area of inquiry but outside this primary focus they remain largely susceptible to radical revision by each of the participants.

Interviewer

Dear Steven Phelps, thank you again for joining me. This is the second time you are here. The session today will be about what I call 'games of religion' and, specifically I hope, about 'the game of knowledge'.

I am going to first start with our usual disclaimer and say this informal dialogue is envisaged as an experimental space. The views expressed serve to map an area of inquiry but outside this primary focus they remain largely susceptible to radical revision by each of the participants. Without this freedom we could not have a space of experimentation. So that is why we have that.

So, Steven! What I want to do first, if you would allow me, is to build a sort of picture, to put forward a sort of impermanent, imperfect scheme of thought which I will then refer to you for a full response. This is a bad scheme of thought; it is an imaginary set of concepts just for the purpose of stimulating discussion as a free-flowing experiment. So, please bear with me while I try to set up a sort of context for this discussion.

No matter where one stands on the complex issue of secularization a general feeling that organized religion has lost much of its society-building power is undeniably present in Western society. Notwithstanding some important exceptions and the continued interest in forms of religiosity the issue remains acute. This is the general context for our discussion, for any discussion that involves religion really, and one which demands constant reflexivity.

The scheme of thought I employ to look at religion - and again this is very imperfect and experimental and full of biases - is to assume that religion engages in different games. In particular, the three games I tend to think about are:

1. the game of growth
2. the game of social change/social justice/development
3. and the game of knowledge.

I am going, maybe, to try to share a bit about this. There might be others, but to keep it simple I start my thinking with only these three.

So, what I want to do from here is to offer a few basic observations about the first two games and then provide a more sustained analysis of the game of knowledge which I think will lead us very nicely into your views and your perspective.

I. The Game of Growth

Ok. So, what is the game of growth? Any religion needs numbers, needs members, needs a sort of community in order to implement its programme of social change. In that sense, every religion needs to grow. And it also happens that in this secular age a lot of religious communities are witnessing a decline in their membership. So, for some, the game of growth might be existential because of declining numbers. For others, it might just be the priority because of the evangelizing mission they identify with. In that sense, some may think that success in the evangelizing mission, or the highest display of faith, can be measured, or at least ascertained, through growth.

Clearly, there is also an economic and political dimension to this. The bigger and the richer the membership the bigger the political clout that a religion might have in the world at large. In that sense, religions could also be seen to compete with each-other in a zero-sum game, though of course, I am not suggesting that this is how things tend to be generally perceived.

There are also many ways to maybe measure growth, so definitions of growth also matter (as they do in economics, too). I am not a specialist in the game of growth or in this area of practice so I cannot talk much about it. But what I can say is that growth, of course, is a main concern in secular society, as well. I am thinking here in particular of economic growth, but also, of growth as profit for private and public institutions. It is notions of growth that have contributed to modern forms of management and notions of the firm or the corporation. And these have come to structure our public institutions according to new ideologies which form

almost a sort of secular religion nowadays - what I would like to call **the cult of cost-efficiency**: minimum input leading to maximum output (as profits), or how to do more with less. Everyone that has a job knows about this new ideology (expressed at times through particular micro-ideologies). Why is this important to mention here?

In short, the answer is, because of the rise of audit-cultures. I am going to use here a description from ChatGPT that I find very useful:

“**Audit culture** refers to a social and institutional condition in which **evaluation, measurement, and accountability systems** - such as audits, performance reviews, rankings, and metrics - come to dominate how organizations and individuals operate. Audit culture emerges when methods of **financial auditing** - designed to ensure accountability in business - are extended to **non-financial domains** such as education, healthcare, government, and research, **[and we should add, religion]**¹. In these contexts, people and institutions are continually **measured, ranked, and compared** according to performance indicators, quality metrics, or compliance checklists”.

My point is to state the obvious, which is that such audit cultures begin to enter the game of growth of Western religions during the 1960s and 1970s, and this only increases after the rise of AI. And while coordination and organisation are key aspects of managing a religion, the point can be made that audit cultures do come with a number of negative features, at least in their current form:

1. One of them is **managerialism**: the rise of bureaucratic control and performance management.
2. A second one is **excessive centralization** and governance by dashboard. Because digitalisation (or statistics in the good old days) gives the appearance that everything at every level of an organization is ‘visible’, measurable, and able to be computed in terms of financial value, this centralization of knowledge leads to the perception that decision-making can be completely determined from the centre. So basically, if you have all the data about every aspect of your organisation then you can translate

¹ My emphasis.

everything that happens in the organisation into numbers and then translate that into financial terms. This can make you feel like from the centre you see everything, you see how everything is moving; therefore, you can change everything everywhere, in every location, from the centre, and that is why you have centralization. So, the centralization of knowledge leads to the centralization of operations or authority.

3. A third problem or consequence is that this can lead to **tight social control** in the firm as the targets, parameters, methods, philosophy or ideology and evaluation targets are set from the centre without meaningful feedback. And that may even lead to self-monitoring and even self-censorship where individuals internalize these systems and begin to self-audit or self-censor.
4. Another negative feature of audit cultures is **quantification**: turning complex activities (like teaching quality or research impact) into measurable numbers. Because we can mainly only measure quantitative aspects, we use such measurements as indicators of also qualitative aspects.

Other critiques of audit culture state that they tend to:

- Lead to a loss of organizational trust.
- Undermine trust and professional autonomy.
- Encourage gaming the system.
- Shift focus from intrinsic goals (like learning, care, or creativity) to measurable outputs.
- Establish a culture of compliance.
- Produce anxiety and burnout among workers.

So, what have I said so far? That the rise of digitalisation and now of AI has led to the formation of audit cultures that centralize knowledge and authority and which engender particular forms of bureaucratic social control. Governments, states, firms, and public institutions have all adopted such audit cultures as part of their competitive drive in a world they read as one of zero-sum games, but also because efficiency and cost-cutting frame the secular ideology of the day. This modern feature has also extended or is now being extended to religion - in a very subtle way changing the fundamentals of the culture of religion. This is particularly so for those religions which are involved in the game of growth. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that audit cultures and the rise of performance management and

accountability systems tend to orient or attract religions in the direction of the game of growth. Could a religion adopt and simultaneously democratize and decentralize the use of audit cultures which are based on materialistic ideologies, that is, create a new type of organizational form - one more democratic, participatory and decentralized, and one which produces spirituality, joy and freedom? It remains to be seen but that is the challenge for those who operate exclusively in the game of growth.

Sources:

1. Marilyn Strathern's *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* (2000).
2. *Audit Culture: How Indicators and Rankings are Reshaping the World* by Cris Shore & Susan Wright (2024)

Bahá'í sources for the game of growth are:

1. **Learning about Growth** by the Ruhi Institute – published in 1991 and outlining a methodology for exponential growth.
2. And the books of Louis Venters, especially **No Jim Crow Church: The Origins of South Carolina's Bahá'í Community** (2015), which maps a lot of issues about race and racism but also issues of growth.

So, I have covered, and I think this has taken quite some time, the first game, i.e., the game of growth. Steven, do you want to come in now or can I go on with the second one?

Dr. Steven Phelps

Maybe continue, and I will respond to all these points as one single thought, which I feel is the direction I will take.

II. The Game of Social Change

Interviewer

Thank you. That is great. Okay, so let us quickly go to the second one. The game of social change or social justice or development is both an academic field and a field of practice. To be accepted in this domain I would say that you have to abide by a key principle. And in short, this principle requires that you will not impose your ideology or model of development over a community that is other than yours.

This is really important and has been there as a principle since at least the 1960s or the 1970s and I would say it was formulated in the developing world (or what was called the Third World at the time) but then it gained acceptance in the West. So, in other words, development should be defined and driven by the people themselves, not imposed from the outside. Obviously, such development would be largely self-generated and operating according to the ideologies, culture, traditions, worldviews, decision-making and so on of a particular people. In such an approach, people are experts of their own lives, and the role of outsiders is to facilitate rather than dictate development. In the West, this view is formulated by Robert Chambers, a British development scholar and practitioner who in the 1980s and early 1990s argues for redefining development as a process of empowerment, participation and reversal of power relations between the rich and the poor and between outsiders (experts) and local people.

I think the best illustration of this is given in a Werner Herzog movie called “Where the Green Ants Dream”². And maybe this is something we could discuss later. However, I am

² The story begins when a mining company surveys a remote area in the Australian desert and discovers it contains valuable uranium deposits. However, the local Aboriginal people **refuse to allow mining**, claiming that the site is the **sacred resting and dreaming place of the Green Ants**, mythical beings central to their Dreamtime stories. According to Aboriginal belief, disturbing the ground there would **wake the Green Ants**, bringing about the end of the world. The company dismisses this as superstition and takes the matter to court, arguing for their legal right to mine. During the trial, the Aboriginal elders attempt to explain their worldview - that the land is alive and that their spiritual connection to it is inseparable from their identity - but their beliefs are **incomprehensible to the Western legal system** [I have used ChatGPT here].

going to skip that and just go to what I think are two of the main examples of the game of social change from within religious domains.

1. The first one, I think, is Liberation Theology.

Liberation Theology emerges in Latin America in the 1960s in the context of neocolonial dependency, the institutionalized violence of capitalism, and the failure of Western development projects in that region. The movement starts in 1968, and it has a manifesto in Gustavo Gutierrez's 1971 book **A Theology of Liberation**. The movement generates a lot of enthusiasm and support in favour of a theology which would focus the mission of the Church on solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and on the re-definition of development as liberation, by allowing the poor and marginalized to become in their own right agents of societal change and freedom.

In short, Liberation Theology calls for “a church that is conscious of the necessity of proclaiming and building a peace based on justice for all, but especially for those who today suffer more from despoliation and mistreatment” (Gutierrez 1971, p.31). While initially the focus is with the poor in developing nations in Latin America, the focus soon switches to other developing countries, and to also engaging racial oppression, gender inequality or patriarchy, and later, climate change (for example, in the works of Leonardo Boff). In its methodology, Liberation Theology constitutes a social movement stressing grassroots mobilisation and the decentralization of ecclesiastical forms of organization. So, there is a decentralization tendency as well at the organizational level.

Liberation means “liberation from social situations of oppression and marginalization” (p.xxxviii), engaging in a personal transformation which cultivates inner freedom and the example of Christ in the face of every kind of social injustice and servitude, and liberation from sin - which is seen as the cause of social injustice. Despite its popular appeal and even the martyrdom of several liberation theologians, the movement is sidelined from 1979 onward, mostly “as the result of a concerted effort by an unsympathetic Latin American episcopal leadership” (Bradbury & Geraghty 2025, p.1). So, the movement gets in a sense blocked. Nevertheless, the impact of the movement on the Catholic Church and ecumenism in general has been and continues to be significant, as evinced by some of the speeches, measures, and writings of Pope Francis.

I think that gives an idea about the game of social change as practice, as a sort of movement within religious traditions.

2. The other tradition - which I am not going to go into depth about - is the Social Gospel.

The Social Gospel is a Christian intellectual and social movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily in the United States and Canada, and which emerges in the context of the labour exploitation and poverty brought about by the industrial revolution.

Some of the core beliefs emphasized in that strand of thought are that:

1. Christians have a duty to apply the teachings of Christ (so, compassion, justice, and love) to social problems.
2. Poverty, inequality and exploitation are not just individual failings but systemic moral problems.
3. Many believers think that by reforming society, humanity helps build “The Kingdom of God” here and now and not just in the afterlife.

The famous book on this topic I think, as far as I have been told is **A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture** by Susan Curtis. The book of Gutierrez is called **A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation**. And it is interesting to mention that it is in this context where you also have Orlando Fals-Borda with his work on *participatory action research* and Ivan Ilich with his critique of Western forms - Western forms not only in terms of development, but also, in terms of higher education (so, universities), as being negative impositions on the Third World and in need of being discarded and reinvented from scratch. It is important to mention all these things because Paulo Freire also belongs here and this is the kind of the cultural milieu from which the original FUNDAEC or within which the original FUNDAEC - the Bahá'í agency or Bahá'í-inspired agency forms itself and its program.

Okay. Let us see what else I should be saying here. I do want to go back a little bit to Liberation Theology and just point out one aspect. In his famous book, Gustavo

Gutierrez affirms that Liberation Theology goes hand in hand with the evangelizing mission of the Church.

To be fair to him, his attempt is to show that - and now I am quoting - “liberation, understood as an integral whole, is the central theme of evangelization” (p.34). This can be seen as a sort of re-definition of evangelization. But even in such a case by linking liberation theology with an evangelizing mission it breaks the first rule of the field of development that I had just mentioned at the beginning of the section. So, by linking evangelizing with Liberation Theology you could argue that that kind of first principle of development has been breached. And then, there is a whole discussion of whether this was done in such a way that liberation itself redefines theology and redefines evangelization as a fight against poverty or if actually liberation simply gets to some extent co-opted by the evangelizing mission.

The other thing I would want to say here is that the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony does not, in my view, constitute an acceptable methodology of social change for religion. First, and foremost, that is so because this methodology is based on a conflict or war paradigm. Political revolution, for Gramsci, must be preceded by a “**war of position**” - a slow battle to change minds and culture before seizing power. This, of course, is to be done through attempting to embed one’s ideology within cultural institutions such as the press or mass-media, educational institutions, civil society, religious institutions, and the institution of the family.

Today, a classic example of this are the cultural wars in the West between the Left and the Right, particularly in relationship to higher education and social media. So, I oppose to this idea the Bahá’í notion of social change described by Roshan Danesh³ in his book **Dimensions of Bahá’í Law**. This perspective tends to privilege change at the level of social meanings and then allow for change at the level of social norms and social forms to organically and open-endedly unfold from there - covering a wide range of possibilities depending on particular contexts and timeframes.⁴

³ Nevertheless, one could argue that Danesh himself relies on a weaker form of the Gramscian type of approach.

⁴ The Baha’i methodology for social change is, therefore, “epistemic,” because it privileges the “formation of common understandings and shared meanings” over the development of norms and institutions (i.e., knowledge, virtues and consultation over legalistic and political approaches to social change), which are largely seen as contingent forms whose development could span a wide range of possibilities depending on particular contexts and timeframes (Dimensions of Bahá’í Law, pp.29-30, 54).

Sources:

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5. Illich, Ivan. (1970). **Deschooling Society**. New York: Harper and Row.
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7. Curtis, Susan. (1991). **A consuming faith: The Social Gospel and modern American culture**. Johns Hopkins University Press.

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These are the first two games. Steven, am I fine to go to the third one?

Dr. Steven Phelps

Sure.

III. The Game of Knowledge

Interviewer

Sorry, thank you for your patience. Okay. So, in the context of our discussion today the knowledge game for me spans the positionings assumed by a religion in the field of knowledge and the processes and intellectual contributions that result from that.

First, let me say that, as is the case with the field of development, the Academia and the research world as well as the world of formal educational institutions also have one key principle: and that is the autonomy of scientific or academic or intellectual thought and of the assemblages of methodologies that form the scientific method. One is always welcome to challenge the scientific method, but this has to be done in the scientific way and through the language of the academic disciplines. Also, before I start, let me mention a classic study of the game of knowledge of religion which I have found amazingly inspiring:

Thomas F. O'Dea. **American Catholic Dilemma: An Inquiry into the Intellectual Life.** New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958.

All right. So, what I would like to do now is have a short brief overview of several positions that Bahá'í scholars have taken on a particular question and then I will give the floor entirely to Steven.

The question that I have asked myself - and this emerged out of conversations with a fellow Bahá'í – was the following: **is religion a system of propositional truths or of factual knowledge of the world on the model of the sciences or not?**

And the answers I have seen in the papers or the scholarship of Bahá'í authors can be classified into a number of positions - but just to give a taste - I will offer several examples of this here.

1. So, Franklin Lewis⁵ - in my view, he answers the question in the negative. He basically says no and he also seems to say that religion should not intervene to shape the structure and operations of the modern system of knowledge because it will only distort it. The Bahá'ís, he asserts, cannot produce “a distinctively Bahá'í methodology” in the academic disciplines except perhaps in terms of “the ethics of what we do with what we know and how we consultatively adjudicate conflicting truth claims”.

I think I have this here as well. Yes. `Abdu'l-Bahá would “seem to assert the validity of western academic, or materialist, methodologies”. This is another statement of his.

And he also mentions that `Abdu'l-Bahá several times has “repeated in almost identical words this idea that religion must conform to science, not the other way around”.

I see this as the minimalist position, which is to say that this is the position that ascribes a minimal role to the influence of religion over the sciences.

2. The second position is the one of Bahiyyih Nakhjavani⁶ who I think argues religion is as much if not more about rhetorical truth (in a metaphoric and symbolic sense), fiction and imagination than about a system of factual knowledge, facts and objective truths.

Fiction, she mentions, can be seen at the core of religion. One of the quotes I like from her is the following:

“If the most convincing fictions are constructed on only partially known facts, are the Best Fictions [meaning, the Manifestation of God, for example] based on no facts at all?”

We are in fact constantly mixing fact with fiction at every moment in our lives.

⁵ Lewis, Franklin. “‘First We Speak of Logical Proofs’: Discourse of Knowledge in the Bahá'í Writings’. *Bahá'í Studies Review*, no. 10, 2001, pp. 51–74.

⁶ Nakhjavani, Bahiyyih. ‘Fact and Fiction: Interrelationships between History and Imagination’. *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3–4, Sept. 2000, pp. 1–24. [https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-10.3-4.449\(2000\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-10.3-4.449(2000)).

So, the kind of point she is making here is that literature is so powerful because it creates fictions which are only partially known facts, which are constructed only on partially known facts; but some fictions in religion are maybe even more powerful because they might not be constructed on any facts at all. This position I refer to as *religious fictionalism* although it might not be at all an adequate label, but this is a strand of thought which exists outside the Bahá'í Faith, and it has some similarities here.

3. I would like to mention Julio Savi, as well. So, my understanding again is that he says no, a divine theology already exists in the Bahá'í Writings which Bahá'ís only need to systematize for Bahá'í theology to be in their hands. For him, Bahá'í theology is the combination of dogmatic theology (guided by the UHJ, but with some measure of derivative theology by Bahá'í scholars and other believers) with a mystical theology reminiscent of a Bahá'í tradition of thought that links back to the Sufi School of Illuminationism (Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra).

So, in this view, the divine theology would at the same time constitute a systematized body of theological statements from the Bahá'í Writings and a body of experiential or mystical knowledge, with the Bahá'í Administration having an oversight role in its development.

4. A stronger version of this appears in the work of Udo Schaffer who argues that no, “theology, the *scientia fidei*, is a closed system, based on revelation, which is beyond the reach of scientific discourse” (Schaefer, “Bahá'í Apologetics?”, par. 10).

In this view, theology is understood as a commitment to “the truth of revelation and to the authority of the scripture” (idem), which has primacy over and above reason and individual autonomy, while retaining a scientific methodology and scientific reasoning as supporting mechanisms on issues not theological.

Neither science nor reason, but only the domain of religion can provide that “absolute framework of ultimate values” (Schaefer, “Aspects of Bahá'í Ethics”, p.13) anchored in God's sovereign will, without which no society can be stable.

All right, I am going to skip some names. Okay, so I have covered the ones that say, in my view, ‘no, religion is a separate sphere which does not function on the kind of methodology

of science in the same way; it speaks with a different kind of authority, or it just does not cross into that domain of science directly’.

However, there are other perspectives which argue more in favour of a positive response.

5. So, William Hatcher, in my view, tries to argue the other way around almost that religion itself is scientific and is abiding by the scientific (empirical) method and the procedures of scientific reason. And so, that is why religion can talk to science. And this is so because the phenomenon of revelation and religious experience as experience of the Divine can be studied empirically and validated objectively via the scientific method. And because faith is presented as a similarly critical setting and testing of assumptions about an object of knowledge as scientific reason and no more relative or subjective an exercise. The third point he makes is that religious communities function as the scientific community does in terms of the production and testing of knowledge, for example, through the capacity to consult and reflect on experience.

6. Jean-Marc Lepain proposes - I am not going to go into this as you can read his paper - but basically he is trying to argue that ‘yes, you could have that sort of link between religion and science but it would be at the level of metaphysics where a religious metaphysics could maybe be tested and analyzed to see if it can offer a supportive ontology for the philosophy of science’. And he writes a whole paper on how a Bahá’í metaphysics might be seen to contribute to a philosophy of science at this level of metaphysics and ontology. I am not going to go much into it.

7. The last author I want to cover would be Behrooz Sabet who has spoken in the last interview we have done about this very topic. So, you can refer to that interview but otherwise I would say that, in my view, he represents the maximalist position which is to say that religion not only has things to say to science but really should communicate with science and philosophy fully and completely because that is part of its own development as religion and because that is part of the development of the modern paradigm of knowledge or any paradigm of knowledge in any time in any society.

So, his answer is yes because “religion in its broadest sense represents a complete philosophy with propositions concerning the nature of reality, both physical and metaphysical” and

because “like philosophy again its role is to work as a complimentary force with science”. And, ‘yes’ because the eventual synthesis between the nucleus of the Bahá’í revelation and the core of existent knowledge will result in a new modern system of knowledge. And you know, his presentation covers this position pretty well. So, I am not going to go into all of that.

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Sorry for the time it has taken to go through all of this. Hopefully it was not too long and not too boring. So Steven, I suppose the question I have, and the reason I was trying to bring all of this together, is to arrive at the following point: in the discussion of the game of knowledge, which I have framed in terms of how science and religion fit together, and the various positions explored by other scholars, I think you represent a different perspective - or at least a perspective that has not really been discussed, and perhaps one that even I do not yet fully understand.

So, feel free to answer any of the points raised, but I hope that you will also go into outlining your view on the game of knowledge and where you think religion and science kind of fit together. Thank you.

Dr. Steven Phelps

Well, do not turn on the mute because I hope this will be more a conversation than me responding with an hour-long off the top of my head lecture on all of this. I have to confess at the outset that I am not a sociologist, and I have not read most of the references that you have listed. Many of the Bahá'í references I have been exposed to, but a lot of the ideas in sociology, you know, I only have a very cursory exposure to. And so, my response, my overall response and thoughts about this will hopefully intersect, but very imperfectly and not fully with this group of ideas that you have just presented. However, I hope that the area of intersection will be useful and meaningful as we move along. As I was listening to your presentation the thought in my head predominantly was well, what do we mean when we talk about religion?

What kind of a thing is religion? Because we can talk about it in sociological terms. We can critique it in sociological terms; we can talk about these humanly constructed elements of it. Are we missing something essential when we think about it that way?

And in a related thought, if we think about religion - and this is more related to your third major area - again, what kind of a thing is religion? Is it something that drops essentially out of the sky as a kind of package of information like a blueprint and we open it up and we figure out how to read the blueprint and then we construct the thing that the blueprint has instructed us to build? And maybe it is a portal to another world - I am thinking of Carl Sagan's book **Contact**. Or is it something else?

And my suspicion is that it is something other than that. It is something other than a fully delivered package of knowledge. I think one has to reach for metaphors in discussing it. Any metaphor is going to have limitations.

One metaphor would be, you know, if religion is not a fully formed and delivered system of knowledge that comes down through an act of divine revelation, what are other ways of thinking about it? And one other way of thinking about it is that it is organic, meaning it is something that grows – something whose initial form may be quite different from its final form, while still preserving something essential about it. So, one metaphor would be like a seedling. A lot of seedlings when they sprout there are these two little leaves that come out you know - dicots I think is what they are called. As they grow, other leaves come along and then those initial two leaves get dropped. And initially you might think oh, what is this thing? It has this certain form factor, it has these two leaves to start with, but then, a little while longer, as it grows other leaves and branches those initial two leaves fall away. And so, if you are looking at this seedling at a certain snapshot in time, you may come away just looking at the form factor of it, you may come away with the wrong impression of what the thing is. Not only have you not seen the fruit that it is going to eventually produce, but the whole structure of the thing that you see at that snapshot in time is not in fact essential to what the thing is. There is something else essential to it that is not the structure of those two little leaves.

And maybe an even better analogy would be that of the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. And you know, at a certain early stage, everything about it in the stage of the caterpillar - the form of the thing and what it is doing, how it is moving - is completely different from what it is in

the stage of a butterfly. And it goes through the stage of a chrysalis where there is this hard shell around it. And while this hard shell has been built around it, the interior of it is completely remixing. I mean all the internal organs, the limbs, everything is remixing and then at some point this shell - which was protecting it and allowing it to reach that next stage - has to break and fall away otherwise the organism cannot survive. And then, when it crawls out of the shell, it is a completely different thing. However, in some essential sense, it is exactly the same organism it was at the beginning, but it has had to go through these various stages, including the stage of having this hard shell around it that seems to inhibit it from doing all sorts of things.

I think there are elements of that analogy which can be useful in understanding the growth and progress of religion when viewed organically. You may point to this particular aspect of it, this hard shell and say, 'well, that is not a very useful thing, you know'? That, in fact, it is not just a useless thing, but it is keeping it from moving around. It is enclosing it; it is encasing it in this sort of dogmatic formulation that is not allowing it to grow. But, if you see under the aspect of eternity - to paraphrase Spinoza - you see the whole thing and you realize 'oh, at certain stages it has to be this way'. And things that seem very unconstructive in the scheme of things are then seen as a necessary part of the evolution of something. I think, if one looks at religion in that sense then that changes the way one talks about and critiques elements of that religion at any given point in time.

So, this relates to your point about culture, your point about the sociological dimensions of religion and how, you know, at some point there is centralization, at some point decentralization, and maybe these are in tension with each other. All these different points are great objects of study in themselves, but it is like studying the chrysalis of the butterfly. It is very good to know about it, but it is not necessarily going to get at the essence of what the thing is. You know, the DNA of the thing is consistent throughout. So, a sociologist maybe especially looking at religion as a social structure will be naturally interested in all the details of when it was a butterfly and when it was a caterpillar and when it was in the in-between stage. Other ways of thinking about it may try to identify what that DNA is and, from that perspective, all these different parts and pieces are less interesting. It is not that they are not legitimate objects of study, or that one cannot speak about them productively. Rather, the question is: at what level does one want to have the conversation about this entity?

It also occurs to me that, with religion, even this organic metaphor has its limits, although it has the benefit of being able to look at growth and progress as a kind of messy sequence of steps where what looks like chaos at an earlier stage, you know, becomes clear and is unfolding in a later stage. Still, in the organic metaphor, it had to go through this process. You know, in the case of the caterpillar, it had to have the chrysalis, and it had to have this particular density, and it had to have this particular shape for it to eventually go into the stage of the butterfly. So, there is something already predestined. There is a predestined sequence of outcomes in the organic metaphor that have to occur for it to get to the end point.

And I would suggest religion is even more organic than that. I would suggest that the exact sequence of steps is not necessarily mapped out at the beginning, though overall, I think an organic metaphor is better than the static metaphor of a system of knowledge that drops down from the sky. But I think any organic metaphor we can come up with like the seedling and animals and so forth has its own limits as well because I think the reality of it is that it is ultimately even more flexible. I think the DNA of religion is far more flexible than we give it credit for. And one reason I say that is coming from a Bahá'í perspective which validates and affirms the fundamental truth at the level of DNA of all of the great faith traditions of the world. And you look at them and structurally they are so completely different dogmatically, theologically, in terms of their social principles and laws and so forth - comparing Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism and others.

It is easy to look at those and say these are completely incompatible with each other. You have to identify the oneness behind it. You have to kind of look at the DNA. But even DNA is not the best analogy because DNA already encodes in a very detailed way the sequence of stages that it has to go through. And so, I am talking about more of a spiritual DNA which I believe lies at the heart of what religions are. And then to me the interesting question is identifying what that spiritual DNA is. And that takes me out of the realm of any kind of analysis or critique of a present moment and more into asking a question of 'well, what is really going on in religious history which seems like such a chaotic mess of warring tribes and warring ideologies and dogmas and so forth?' 'What is there an identifiable throughline across religious history?' And to me, that is the question that interests me. It is not the only interesting question to ask, but it is the one that interests me the most. And it interests me, I suppose, because I am interested in how the world works from the perspective of a physicist, one trained in physics, but also as one with some training in philosophy and

asking these big questions about well, what kind of a world do we live in? And I think that is where, you know, I have some thoughts that I can offer off the top of my head.

Your starting point was that religion has lost its power, that religion in the present day seems to have lost its way, lost its ability to be a force for social change. And we can identify what happened through the lens of Western thought and the history of ideas over the last several centuries and the very simple way of reducing this is to say there was a premodern way of thinking about the world which because of the scientific revolution gave way to a modern way of looking at the world, a secular way of looking at the world.

In the premodern way of looking at the world, it was easy to think about the universe ultimately as being guided by teleological principles conceived as spiritual forces and entities, as gods operating in the world in a direct way through miracles, through sending prophets, through doing whatever God or gods wanted to do to execute their will on earth.

That is the way people thought about the world in various ways. There are various flavours of that across cultures throughout human history until a few hundred years ago when we discovered this thing called science which says we do not acknowledge, we do not honour any kind of arguments from authority but we look at how the world actually is, not the way we want it to be. We model it. We test those models and, lo and behold, in the process of doing that we cannot find that teleological principle. We cannot find any evidence through these scientific means of the existence of some invisible spiritual dimension of reality that is acting in the world. In fact, all of the forces, all of the elements of reality that we can identify and measure through this scientific process seem to form a complete system that explains everything around us without any need to appeal to some spiritual layer of reality. And we are still dealing with the consequences of that discovery several centuries on.

And I think it was Alfred North Whitehead who said that the deepest ideas of a society take about a thousand years to work their way down to the general consciousness. And so maybe we are at the halfway point with the scientific revolution since we are about 500 years in. But we can see that still pervasively among those who have not been exposed to real scientific thought it is very natural to fall into a way of thinking in which the world is governed by these invisible teleological forces. So, it seems then, that in the modern day we are left with this stark choice between two options.

Option one is to affirm teleology, to say yes there is some form of God - and if we do not call it God, we can call it some form of ultimate guiding principle behind things that explains progress, that explains life and consciousness and the fact that, at least on this planet, things seem to be getting more and more complex. That, you know, the arrival of humans on the planet a million or a couple million years ago was the result of a progressive stage of something that is unfolding. We can call it consciousness. We can call it spirit. These are just words asserting that there is a throughline of teleology that is behind the emergence of things in this world. You can take that perspective. That is our option A, which is like the premodern one; it is allied, at least, with the premodern way of looking at the world.

Or we can take option B, which is 'well, we have now discovered in several hundred years of using this wonderful scientific method that we do not need teleology to explain the world around us'. As for the idea of teleology, Aristotle was responsible for codifying this idea that there are four different ways of explaining things: through the material cause, through the formal cause, through the efficient cause, and through the final cause. In the case of a chair, you have the chairs made of wood. That is the material cause. The form of it is the shape of the chair. The efficient cause is the carpenter who makes the chair. The final cause is that the chair is a place to sit.

In the modern terms, we have eliminated the need for that final cause. We could explain the world entirely in terms of efficient causes, in terms of material causes. The idea of a form even as something which exists somehow independently outside - in the Platonic sense - has been largely dispensed with. It comes back in the shape of the laws of nature themselves, but the idea of there being some eternal Platonic form corresponding to everything along with the teleological principle have been let go in this option B, in this sort of secular option.

So, the problem I think, or the problematic of the present day is that we are faced with two options neither of which we want to take.

You know, we would like option A because that gives our life a kind of intrinsic meaning that we do not have to build ourselves. It gives us hope for what might happen after death. It gives us hope for human progress in society that there is, you know, something that has been

mapped out that is going to carry us along in spite of our weaknesses and in spite of our human failings. We would like to believe that the world works that way, but the cold rational analysis of the world we actually live in using the tools of science tends to produce option B as the more likely one: that teleology was just a sort of dream of humanity and an early stage of its development that we can dispense with now. It was an aspect of our collective childhood. Now that we are adults, we can say, 'yeah, these gods do not really exist; the spiritual world is just a way of talking about human development that is useful in some ways, but ultimately spirits do not exist, and the soul is just a collective delusion and so forth'.

So, are those, however, our only two options? And that is where I think an interesting line of thinking can be opened up. I will even go back a step and say, well, why would I even want to introduce a third possible way of thinking about it? Why am I not happy with either option A or option B?

And I would say I am not happy with either option because, on the one hand, I am convinced that the world does in fact work according to the operation of physical laws that can be mathematically and precisely defined. And I find no evidence for the literal existence of an invisible dimension of reality that is causally connected to this physical world. If that were the case, one would be able to reduce it to an experiment, a thought experiment, not just a thought experiment, but a laboratory experiment to demonstrate the existence of this invisible layer of reality. And despite many people trying to do that over a great long period of time, it has not been done convincingly. So, on the one hand, I am convinced of the scientific picture of the world. On the other hand, there are I think three great mysteries that are not well explained by a teleology-free universe.

The first is the existence of the universe itself.

The second is the existence and emergence of life.

And the third is the emergence of consciousness.

And on all three of these counts, our best understanding, according to the view of science, is not convincing to me.

Our best understanding of the Big Bang is that this event happened around 14 billion years ago. We have very precise modelling of the universe that can explain almost everything that we observe, but we cannot understand certain questions. Why did this universe happen and not some other universe? Why do we have this particular set of laws of physics and not another set of laws of physics? Why the strength of gravity and electromagnetism is exactly this and not that? There is a kind of arbitrariness to the universe which to my mind demands explanation.

Likewise, the existence of life to me is so vastly improbable that it also seems to demand explanation.

And likewise with consciousness. The best explanation that I have seen offered from option B, from the teleology-free standpoint is that the universe is old enough and big enough to be able to write a blank check on anything you want. It is old enough and big enough that the most wildly improbable things will eventually become certainties. Even the emergence of life, even the emergence of consciousness. It may take an infinitely large universe for this fantastically improbable event to occur. It may take a fantastically large number of planets on which life has emerged to find a planet such as ours - in which intelligent conscious life emerges. But hey, the universe is old enough and big enough that you can sort of check the boxes on that and say that it is in principle explained.

I feel, however, an intellectual unease with that, that something might be missing in that description. I would like to affirm that there is a teleological principle, but I do not want to affirm it in the sense that people normally think of teleology. People normally think about principles of teleology as things that are in some way imposed from the outside. And this can be like a Cartesian dualistic picture in which you have a spiritual layer of reality that is interacting with this material layer of reality. And that is where the teleology comes from, or you know, other variations on that. And I believe they are all going to sound ultimately a bit like dualism and that I find intellectually unsatisfying. And I can only say that that is my own bias, you know. But I would say, well, if there are two fundamental kinds of things, why aren't there three, you know, why aren't there 50, 57? There is a kind of arbitrariness to that.

I think one is ultimately a better final number to come to than two. I think ultimately a world in which we have ways of viewing or dividing things up into this and that (and so on) is an

inevitability and a world in which we talk about mind and matter, also. But I think that can be done within a world that fundamentally is described through a monistic lens as opposed to a dualistic lens, one in which mind and matter are different aspects of one thing rather than two different kinds of thing. But again, I have to confess that that is primarily just a philosophical predisposition more than something I have any direct evidence for.

So, if I want then to talk about teleology and I do not want to allow myself to slip into a dualistic frame of thinking in order to get that teleological principle which ultimately explains in one fell swoop these three great mysteries of existence, life and consciousness - is there a way to do it? Is there an option C in which we live in a world which is purposive, a world in which that which comes next is qualitatively different from that which came before, and that qualitative difference exists in a kind of logical scheme in which it is heading towards something and it came from something. What might that option C look like?

And the simplest one that I can imagine is one in which the thing that the world is heading towards is ultimately the same as that which it came from. In other words, the beginning point and the end point rather than existing on a one-dimensional timeline from beginning to end ultimately exist on a circle where the beginning point and the end point join. And so, time has to wrap around, and creation then is described as a grand circle where that which is the origin point is the same as that which is the end point. And that may sound like a crazy idea. Why would that solve anything?

My intuition tells me that that solves all three of these great mysteries in one fell swoop. It proposes that - and I think you get a lot more out of it besides that - it proposes ultimately that one way of talking about the existence of life and consciousness is to say that it is equivalent to the geometrical statement that you cannot have a circle of radius zero. If you are going to have any kind of structure, and the simplest structure is the circle, then the circle has to have a non-zero radius. The question is what the radius of the circle is. But as long as it is something non-zero, you have a circle and not a point.

And I think that statement, that simple geometric statement can be thought - I claim anyway in an off the top of my head provisional sense - that that geometrical statement is equivalent to explaining the problem of evil. It is equivalent to explaining the existence of consciousness in life and where things are coming from and where things are going. I can switch to a kind

of theological language framework to try to describe this although there are other frameworks in which one could describe it. The theological framework one could use to describe this is ...

Interviewer

Wait, wait one second. So do not forget that you are going to discuss the theological framework. But before you go there, I just want to clarify the scientific framework that you are putting forward in a way or your interpretation of it. It sounds to me a lot like when you say that you think the return to the beginning solves the three problems which were the creation of the universe, the emergence of life and the emergence of consciousness - what you are saying is that the universe appears out of the need of unmanifested consciousness that does not know itself sort of thing. Then that leads to life so that all forms of life can experience - I think I am going to cover your framework, your metaphysical framework, the religious framework by asking this question. So, I am going to just make it short. So, it sounds a lot to me like you are saying that consciousness finds consciousness, finds itself in the physical universe, in the description of the scientific teleology you are proposing. Is that what you are saying or am I reading it from a religious angle?

Dr. Steven Phelps

So yeah, let me set aside the religious angle for a moment and just go to the hard science angle. I will call it the hard science angle. The cosmos hovers between possibility and actuality. And I believe that consciousness is the key mediating factor between the two. So why do I call this a hard scientific fact?

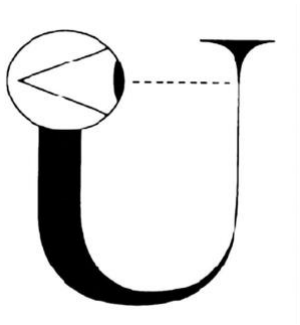
Our best framework for describing reality is quantum mechanics. Quantum mechanics is an incredibly precise and in its own way an elegant way of describing all fundamental interactions in the universe. And it does it in such a counterintuitive way. It does it by describing mathematically a universe of possibility, of all possibilities weighted by their probabilities, which is not the universe we actually inhabit. The universe we actually inhabit is a universe in which there is one thing that is actually happening. As far as we can tell, all these other possibilities are not happening at the same time in some parallel universe.

Now, someone like a Sean Carroll would say, well, actually you can read - and Hugh Everett is the originator of this thought, and it is a bit of a side conversation, so I will just mention it briefly - but one way of understanding the strangeness of quantum mechanics that introduces a world of possibility is to say that all of these possibilities are simultaneously in fact actualities. But we, for whatever reason, only inhabit one branch of this infinitely branching universe where all the other possibilities are forever outside of our view. And I will bracket that for a moment and just say briefly: I do not find that to be a compelling way of looking at the universe. It seems like it maximally violates Occam's razor. Occam's razor would be the simplest explanation is probably the correct one and this takes quantum mechanical possibility, and it solves a problem with quantum mechanics which is the quantum measurement problem by saying there is no problem at all, that what you call possibilities are just actualities for everyone inhabiting a different branch.

So, let me bracket that as a logical possibility. But if that is not the way the universe actually is, then we are left with the quantum measurement problem. And the quantum measurement problem says, how do you get from possibility to actuality? And this problem emerges at, you know, the local level in a laboratory setup where you can set up a Schrödinger's cat in a box kind of a situation where you are asking, well, is the cat alive or dead? Is it a particle or a wave? The quantum measurement can be set up in that sense.

However, certain thinkers and I am thinking particularly of John Wheeler towards the end of his career in the 1980s extended this quantum measurement problem all the way back in time and turned it into a cosmological problem. And he pointed out the fact that our ability to look out in the night sky and observe say distant quasars, you know, the most distant possible things that could be detected in our telescopes at the time which were billions and billions of light years away. These quasars are detected through cameras that collect photons. Photons are quantum mechanical objects. Photons appear, according to quantum theory, in a range of possibilities. And it is only when we observe it that that spectrum of possibilities is reduced to the actuality of that photon landing on a pixel in our CCD camera. But the weird thing is that those photons in getting to our eyes or getting to the camera of the telescope that observes them could have taken many possible paths. They could have gone around a galaxy this way or that way and curved by gravity. And only after we observe it is the actual backwards path of that photon defined. Before we observed it, it existed in a state of potentiality, not actuality.

And Wheeler's insight was, hold on, this goes all the way back. This goes all the way back to that creational moment, to the first moment of the Big Bang. Not until we observe it did it happen, in a way. And so, he had this crazy idea, and it was embodied in this enormous letter "U" which stands for the universe. And he put an eyeball on one end of the "U" looking backwards to the other end of the tip of the "U" sort of creating a closed circuit. And his proposal was that we live in a participatory universe.



And he gets this from just hard science. This is not coming out of a theological or dogmatic set of presuppositions about how the universe ought to be. It does not come from this idea that somehow consciousness is fundamental - so, how do we get to, you know, how do we metaphysically backfill our understanding of things to sort of put consciousness at the center of things?

He got to the centrality of consciousness in a fair way, you know, and in a way that did not have to presuppose it at the beginning. He just started with quantum mechanics and came to the conclusion that something weird is going on observationally and that that might be implicated in the very universe that we inhabit.

So where might one go with this? One might go with this in the direction of - as he concludes - that we live in a participatory universe. What would that mean? It would mean that somehow in the interaction of consciousness with its environment, that realm of possibility is reduced to a smaller subset of a realm of actuality. And the realm of actuality is the realm that we actually inhabit. So that would suggest that our lives - and let me just bring it down to the present moment - our individual lives as expressions of consciousness in their own individual

way are in some way implicated in the shape of the universe itself. We are collectively - let me sort of say it even more boldly - we are collectively engaged in generating the universe. And what do I mean by 'we'? I mean consciousness. We, as elements of consciousness in the universe, are collectively emerged in the process of creating the very universe that we inhabit. That is an insane thing to say but strangely enough you find it all over the place. You find it in the idea of the creative imagination of Sufis like Ibn 'Arabī. You find it in the imagery of the ouroboros, the snake swallowing its tail that you find strangely enough, across various cultures, disconnected in space and time. Many cultures have zeroed in on this symbol as a particularly potent one. The snake swallowing its tail is like that “U” of Wheeler, of the cosmos dreaming itself into being. It is the dream of Maya. You know, it wakes up to its own reality. This has deep connections, I think, to elements of Hindu thought. It is just kind of found everywhere and I think it has partly as a consequence the idea that teleology can actually be a thing within a universe which is fully governed by physics, by the principles of physics, and I think that is the single most important thing that I think you can get out of this.



Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ouroboros#/media/File:Chrysopoea_of_Cleopatra_1.png

Where is that teleology located then? It is not located external to the space-time framework of things. It is not some external God or gods acting in the world in the way we think about it traditionally. It is a teleology that is internal not external. It is a teleology which is produced by the very act of consciousness which itself is the precondition of the universe existing in

the first place and at the same time is the consequence of 5 billion years of evolution on this planet. It is both the Alpha and the Omega. It is, as Christian theology has put it, the Logos principle. You know, Logos is that principle of order, of consciousness that was there at the beginning but which at the same time becomes instantiated here in the present day. You know, the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us - to use the phrase from the Gospel of John.

And I am just starting to throw a bunch of threads together and assume they are going to weave into one picture - that principle of the Logos, the principle of the participatory universe is, I think, also found in the Bahá'í writings and the notion of the Primal Will. The Primal Will is really the Logos. It is that thing which is ultimately self-generating and we are aspects of that self-generation. We are, to use an analogy that many have used - we individual consciousnesses are like either droplets or waves of a great sea of consciousness that have shape and form for a moment of time and when the drop returns to the sea, the water is not lost. Consciousness remains. The idea of individuality existing at a certain point in time and then not existing at a certain point in time I think is a limited way of thinking about it because ultimately one wants to ultimately see this *sub specie aeternitatis* - again to go back to that, to the idea of Spinoza - that if one sees it under the aspect of eternity, then time becomes just one dimension among others like space, and you no longer think about duration in the same way, you no longer think about life and death in the same way. But a life is like a thread in a fabric. An individual life is like a thread in the fabric of a tapestry. And the fact that a thread has a beginning point and an end point does not mean that at any point in that tapestry that thread does not exist. It is part of the tapestry, and it helps give shape and colour and form to the tapestry.

So that is a bunch of ideas that are just kind of thrown together at the moment in a big soup - and I am not sure what comes out of it - but that only really partially and very imperfectly overlaps with the set of ideas you have presented at the beginning. But is it useful? I am not sure. What do you think?

Interviewer

I am wondering what that means practically in terms of the studying of religion and in terms of the studying of science. So, okay, science will continue the same way; I think we are pretty

much agreed on that. So, you know, how would religion study itself in light of this perspective? How would that differ from the other perspectives? Because, I think each perspective I have discussed, and others, imply an educational model or a model of scholarship that emerges out of them if you really synthesize them logically into their consequences.

So, I guess that is one of the questions, and I think there is another question I can ask, if I think of Ney. I think Ney would ask this question immediately which would be - and maybe I am wrong on this - but it would be 'How is that universe is alive and self-conscious idea, a sort of emerging self-consciousness, how is that different from pantheism?' I think he would ask that kind of question, but I am not sure that that is the very important question I want to ask.

I think I would prefer to focus on the first and then another question that interests me even more is 'How do we understand this entity that is this universe, that is this sort of emerging self-consciousness and then how do we then understand notions of divinity in relationship to it?' I think that is an interesting further avenue to explore.

Dr. Steven Phelps

Am I talking about pantheism? I would say no, because - to use theological language - the Logos principle is not the same as capital G God. And what does that mean? It is one way of saying - and I think 'Abdu'l-Bahá quotes a hadith in his Tablet of the Universe where he says that God took all the stars and planets and everything and put it all together into one lamp. And you can imagine these lamps, these mosque lamps hanging in the mosques. And you know, you go inside a mosque, and you have like dozens of mosque lamps hanging from the ceiling, you know, just over your head. And I think that is the imagery that this hadith calls to mind that God put all the stars and planets inside one lamp. And God only knows what is in the other lamps.

And I think of that as a way of imagining the bigger picture because what I have described as a participatory universe where consciousness is in some way implicated in its own emergence still begs a question. And the question it begs is, well, why that universe? Why is it this

universe that we inhabit? Why does it have the structure that it has? Three dimensions of space, one dimension of time, this particular array of forces with all the structure to it, which seems so arbitrary given our current understanding of it. Despite massive effort to simplify it to something that is inevitable and fundamentally simple, there is a kind of structure to it. It is this sprawling thing that has all sorts of different components: the weak nuclear force, strong nuclear force, you know. Some things are left-handed but not right-handed⁷. There are just weird arbitrary things about our universe, which begs the question as to why this universe and not some other universe.

And maybe the answer is that hadith. Maybe the answer is that the explanation for this universe that we inhabit is that ultimately consciousness is implicated in its creation. And therefore, we individuals are participating not just in building a better civilization in the immediate term but in a more cosmic sense we are participating in the generation of our own universe. Such might also be the case in an infinite number of other mosque lamps, you know, in an infinite number of other universes. Consciousness may be dreaming itself into being in different ways.

This is currently a trendy idea in cosmology: that you might have parallel universes. And so, this is one way of imagining parallel universes, and in all these different universes, consciousness may be dreaming itself up in different ways. And so those universes may be fundamentally different from ours. They may be just as vast, they also have trillions of habitable planets and beyond, but because the laws of physics in those parallel universes are different, it is all going to be very different - constrained only by the fundamental constraint that there is a consciousness that participates in its generation. **Because without consciousness possibility does not become actuality.** Without that act of measurement, without that act of observation, possibility does not become actuality. So, what is then suggested, I think, if we follow this way of thinking, is that Wheeler's "U" of that participatory universe is just one letter among an infinite number of letters out there, each of which represents a different configuration of consciousness participating itself into being.

⁷ According to Gemini 3: "In physics, certain subatomic particles and molecular structures are left-handed (chiral) but not right-handed, representing a fundamental asymmetry in nature. The most prominent example is that neutrinos are only observed to be left-handed, while their antineutrinos are right-handed. This 'chiral asymmetry' means the weak force distinguishes between left and right, unlike other forces".

But all of those ways then of consciousness dreaming itself into being still leave open the question: why is there something rather than nothing? And I think the answer to that - let's call it God. You know, let's find a word for it; we might as well call it God. And that is what differentiates pantheism from this view of things. Because in pantheism, God is the sum total of all things; God is not outside the sum total of all things. Whereas in this way of thinking consciousness generates itself but still leaves open and still begs the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' And I think the ultimate answer to that will be a principle which lies beyond whatever principle might explain the particular configuration of elements in this universe because that 'why is there something rather than nothing?' covers that infinity of parallel worlds. That is a half thought out idea, but that is how I would answer a charge of pantheism.

But why, you know, why do I have to answer a charge of pantheism? Yeah. Why is pantheism necessarily the wrong way of looking at the world? You know, there are different ways, there are different schools of thought. You know, there is a tablet of Bahá'u'lláh where He addresses this in detail having been asked this question by a friend of His who was a Zoroastrian. And so, He is being asked not by one of his own followers but by someone standing outside - so to speak - and saying, 'well, what about all these problems?' And one of the problems that was raised and which Bahá'u'lláh was asked about was 'well, tell me about the relationship between God and the universe'. Is it pantheism? Is it deism? Is it theism or atheism? Basically, he gives four options which sound very modern and Bahá'u'lláh does not say that pantheism is incorrect. He actually says that for each of these schools of thought - they all have something going for them. A justification, he says, can be provided for each of these different schools of thought. And the one that he selects as the superior one seems to be done more on pragmatic considerations than anything else. The pragmatic consideration is that which gives rise to the fear of God. He says 'one of these is more conducive to the fear of God', which sounds to me like a pragmatic argument rather than a fundamental philosophical argument. I could be wrong.

So, that was an answer to the second question about which I like to go more metaphysical, but the first question was more practical like 'okay, so if you are going to look at things in this way, what kind of implications does that have for an educational system, for, you know, how you go about being a member of an organized body on this planet that has a particular

plan and that executes that plan in the world? How does looking at things in this way change the way one might operate within such a collection of humans differently?

And I can only answer very generally that you would navigate such a religious body with perhaps a finer sense of the true value of diversity of opinion and thought, with a sense of truly embracing the different kinds of minds and ways of looking at and answering questions. You would navigate it with a greater appreciation of the different needs of various kinds of minds as they progress on this journey from unconsciousness to consciousness. And in that process from the one returning to the one, in this intermediate step where we are in the realm of the many - I think the great thing that the Bahá'í faith brings into the world is a sense of this seemingly impossible but ultimately inevitable unity at the level of the spiritual DNA between these different warring theological systems. There is something ultimately behind them which they share, which is far far more important than that which divides them. And that is the pragmatic need of the day. That is the remedy for the day.

It is a viewpoint which is, I think, supremely comfortable with diversity and which finds a way of getting at unity which is the direction of things. That is the internal teleology of the universe: it is moving from unity towards unity. So, the thing that one can count on is that ultimately things are going in that direction. But what it does is it gives a sense that one can get in the direction of unity while preserving a much higher degree of diversity than we might have thought possible, which would have real implications for, you know, a program of study, for example. You know, one would not want to reduce it to a single thread, with a single lens of approach. That has benefits. It has the benefit of creating a kind of unity at one level, but the drawbacks are also immense. The drawbacks are you have many kinds of minds which are not going to resonate with that particular lens through which you are seeing things.

Interviewer

Okay. Sorry, thank you. I do not want to stop you. I am just thinking of maybe adding some comments. I will start with some comments about religion then I will come back to what you have discussed.

So, on the science side, I am thinking that one of the things that maybe distinguishes the premodern era from the modern era and religious knowledge from modern scientific

knowledge is that religion in a sense does not really run in terms of the writings of religion on authority, but it runs - from my perspective - more on enticing the reader through literary forms. And I think that to some extent you could say the biggest difference is that religion gives an integral perspective on life, on all things, and modern science does not.

Science is just different theories in different areas and many times there is a lack of synthesis in any one discipline. Scientists might agree on a model, an explanatory model or on a paradigm but that paradigm does not cover things outside a specific kind of area of investigation even within that discipline. So, it does not translate into giving you a full frame of reference in life on all things, while the metaphysics of religions - they do that, they link the formation of the universe to the soul (or whatever the human being is), to the rise of civilizations, to history and so on. Everywhere you look it is all connected into one pretty unitary scheme of thought. And that differs from religion to religion but if you look at all the religions, I would say that at that metaphysical level there is a lot in common. I mean that when it comes to the applications of how the metaphysical framework applies to social historical realities there are lots of differences, but when you look at the commonalities of metaphysical frameworks maybe there is a lot in common.

And some of those metaphysical frameworks do communicate - it seems from what you have discussed - potentially quite well maybe with metaphysical questions or assumptions that scientists might also have or might be developing in the sense that they provide an alternative model that somebody has constructed outside of science and the scientific endeavour, but which still has some kind of explanatory power and can be used as a metaphoric device. So, from that angle I could say that the appeal of religion does not reside in authority - although, you know, social institutions can behave that way - but religion is embodying a metaphysics, or dreamworld, or utopia in an illustrative narrative or literary form, sometimes for a discourse of love, sometimes for a discourse of wisdom, sometimes for a discourse of authority and asking for the features of those discourses to be mirrored in one's life or rather enticing one, courting one to respond to what is being described as this act of universal love with moral courage for social transformation, something like that.

So, I am kind of saying that the appeal is first that there is a metaphysics or dreamworld that connects everything and that has very practical appeal because a lot of your questions receive purpose and direction.

And, on the other hand, there is a subconscious, emotional and motivational aspect to it because of the ideals that are being highlighted and the loving manner and the invocation of love that comes with it and the emotions that are being involved and so forth. So when you remove someone from that environment into the universe of modern physics, they effectively lose a lot. You know what I mean? So, I think that is what disenchantment looks like. And so, you can see why religious people want to hold on to something like that or bring it back and why scientists think ‘well, this is unsubstantiated really based on what we are working with, and you should have the courage to exit models from 2,000 years ago and think in a new way’.

But what I was trying to highlight is primarily the fact that there is a commonality. So, your response to me seems to sound a little bit like Jean-Marc Lepain in the sense that there is a discussion to be had at the level of metaphysics: the metaphysics of religion and the metaphysics of science. Not in the sense that there are both equally systems of knowledge with equal rights but in the sense that there are models that in their interconnections are interesting to each side. So, that is, I think what I take from it. But then I have a question which is different. So now it is the science question...

Dr. Steven Phelps

But let me say something on that before you say more. And maybe this is just rephrasing a lot of what you have just said in slightly different terms, but Joseph Campbell just immediately comes to mind as having said something I think very insightful about the nature of mythology and sacred mythology and one can map that very much onto a conversation about religion which is really fundamentally no different.

And he said that mythologies fulfil different functions. You know, a mythology does not have one aim. At one level, yes, it is a cosmology; it gives us a map of the universe which locates us somewhere within a particular structure of things. In that sense, it is an explanatory framework that can be useful to create a sense of social identity. There is a sociological dimension to it connected to human evolution as tribes of people that need to work together in some coherent way for individuals to survive. So, there is that dimension of it, you know.

But, at the same time, for a mythology to be living and not dead, for it to actually be a living force in the world that is continuing and actively helping to shape the movement of things forward it also has to connect with individuals at this level of love, at this level of connecting individuals to the infinite. If a mythology does not do that, it can have all the right ideas in the world about social organization, about community building, about how to self-organize and propagate its influence into the world and grow its influence in the world, all of which are good things. If it hits that dimension perfectly but does not connect the individual to the transcendent sufficiently then it will not be able to accomplish its purpose. There are a collective dimension and an individual dimension it has to touch on. It has to be able to hit both of those simultaneously.

That is why we have living and dead religions, you know, religions that are still living as things people are still working within and acting and moving and creating in some collective way. That does not describe every religion that has ever existed. That only describes a subset.

And as social conditions change, as human evolution progresses physically, as our brains develop and evolve and all these sorts of complicated things happen on this planet, certain systems of thought go through their life cycles - and they are living for a certain period of time and then they grow old and they die just like individuals, you know, - recapitulating at various levels that overall “U” of the universe bringing itself into consciousness. That cyclical process I think is seen at every level down - in the life and death of individuals, the life and death of societies, the life and death of religious systems, of nations and civilizations, and so forth. And how one looks at religion I think has to be through that lens of both of these things (the individual and the collective), at least, if not even more.

I have just named, you know, two dimensions. That is a difficult thing because what a particular individual will resonate with, what a particular individual will draw spiritual sustenance from and feel a connection to the infinite through is not going to be the same as every other individual on the planet. And so somehow a religion of the modern age is faced with an impossible task of at the same time being a form of coherent organization for all the billions of people on the planet to act within a kind of common framework of what is now, I think, increasingly and undeniably a global civilization despite all of the tribalistic forces which may have the upper hand in certain places on the planet at this time.

I think one can delay but not inevitably and not indefinitely postpone the inevitable process of the planetification of the earth into a single interconnected civilization. That being the overall collective process which requires a collective effort and a kind of unity of effort at some level cannot succeed if only a small fraction of individuals working within that collective are really connecting to the divine through this process.

And it is an impossible task because every religion that has come in the past is packaged in a particular kind of theological packaging and a dogmatic packaging and sets of do's and don'ts, and what you can and cannot eat, and who you can and cannot marry and all of those sorts of details which have never been universally applicable.

Individuals are individuals and they are who they are, and they will relate to the divine sometimes through the mode of a dualistic framework and sometimes through the mode of a monistic framework. You know, for many individuals, what I have described in our conversation, this very metaphysical big picture of a circle of creation and so forth, will leave them cold. And for them, the warm, loving, personal God that hears and answers prayers is always going to be the way that they connect to the divine. And I am not going to say that one way of connecting to the divine is fundamentally better than the other. All I can say is that my own intellectual and spiritual journey leads me more in the direction of these monistic strains of thinking about it than in dualistic strains of thinking about it. And I do not know of any precedents of religious systems of the past that have truly made space for the real diversity of the human spiritual experience while at the same time being coherent enough at the collective level to accomplish its mission.

I think the Bahá'í faith is the first religious system that truly has the theological toolkit to enable that to happen. Just as a starting point, it unites East and West. Yeah, it is 'the tree which is neither of the East nor of the West'⁸. And that is actually quoting from the Quran. But the Bahá'í view of progressive revelation I think makes this clearer and embraces more clearly the Eastern as well as Western modes of thinking. And, of course, there are not just those two modes of thinking in the world, but it most explicitly, I think, says that all of these are pathways towards the Creator. And I think that has and ought to have tremendous implications for individual journeys as well. And I think there ought to be a multitude of

⁸ Surah An-Nur 24:35.

pathways through which we can still maintain the collective action that is needed at the global level. It is perfectly represented in the shape of the Bahá'í temples which have nine sides, you know, where people can come in from any direction. Because the temple has nine sides. It is not just opening to the East. It is opening to the West and the North and the South. And that is such a perfect representation in stone, in the very tangible sense of a truly profound spiritual approach that sees all directions as being avenues of approach.

Interviewer

I have to say a few things quickly. First, just in passing, I think some of the non-essentialism or even anti-essentialism that you can see in some of the Bahá'í writings do have strong correspondence in Ibn 'Arabī and especially Taoism and those are just few examples I can think of very quickly. So, I think this has existed before, this kind of inbuilt flexibility to a surprising extent.

The second thing I need to clarify for the viewers and I do get asked eventually whenever I discuss 'the game of knowledge' and discuss the Bahá'í scholars - which has not happened many times - but I do get the question of, you know, 'why do I not mention the main approach of the Bahá'í community which is really that science and religion are two complimentary systems of knowledge? So, I am saying that now: the reason I have not included that in the research is because that is now the dominant, official view and therefore it sits above and outside the research discussions. But I have said it now. And there is more concreteness to the models currently being developed than I might have suggested - there have been more specific attempts put forward - which face more and more the challenge of engaging concrete realities and engaging with the resulting feedback.

And then, there are just two questions that I have. One is more on the science side. One is, and I do not know enough about quantum mechanics to really formulate this question the right way - so, you are going to have to take a leap of imagination and see if what I say is not absolute nonsense. But, when you interpret the fact that an observer sees certain things appear that would not have appeared there without the observer - so I am observing something and I assume that because I am the only one who sees this when I observe it, that this reality does not seem to exist there unless I am observing it - I take that to mean that the universe is emerging in self-consciousness. So, the universe is looking at itself in a sort of

way; it is realizing what it is; it responds to the consciousness that is looking at it in a particular way.

But there is, I think, another epistemological view that maybe you can take here. I do not know enough. And the question is: can one not also look at this and say the universe has a particular way of hiding what it is?

It is not very helpful in terms of where you want to go in terms of metaphysical assumptions. But maybe there is a barrier, like a sort of cognitive barrier beyond which you cannot go. So, you can see things and interpret things and then at a certain scale you just cannot go beyond. And you just get whatever - whoever goes and observes just gets something but, in a way, it is not the real thing, it is just an impression, it is the result of hitting the limit and that looks in a particular way to you because you are hitting that limit. And if somebody else hits that limit - that looks in a particular way to them. And I do not know what the implications of that kind of thinking would be, but I guess what I am saying is that there are potential ways to interpret this as suggesting a great uncertainty about a lot of these questions. And then, what that means - I do not know. I do not know how to take it further from here. So that is one part and the other part...

Dr. Steven Phelps

That is actually a great way to wrap up this conversation.

Interviewer

Okay. So, I will just let you answer this one. I will just let you answer this one and we end that way.

Dr. Steven Phelps

Yeah. And I think that yeah, that is a great way to end it.

I am following from my point about quantum mechanics and, you know, possibility and actuality. You know, an observation resolves the possibility into actuality but well, whose observation?

By me observing this particular quantum mechanical system I may get a different observation than you. Well, what happens when our observations, when the ways we model reality are different?

We have to realize that, as far as we observers within this universe are concerned, there is no way to write out a sort of a model of how things are which is true for all observers equally - which is a really hard thing. It is a hard conclusion to come to because it flies a bit in the face of the whole scientific project - which is to develop, objectively, a correct model of reality that everyone can sign on to.

But one of the consequences of the measurement problem in quantum mechanics is that not everyone sees the same reality. And I think a great consequence of that in this other sphere of, you know, thinking about spiritual things, thinking about religious things is likewise realizing that our own perspectives - however clear and distinct they may seem to us - may be totally incoherent to someone else. And that is the way the world is, you know? It is like a sphere and the hemisphere that is facing me is in the light and on the other side it is in the darkness, and I cannot see what is going on that side. And if I try to map out the sphere on two dimensions, I cannot do it without stretching, warping, or tearing it in some fundamental way. I mean, look at any map of the earth and it is so warped at the poles as to be unrecognizable. And I think that is the way it is with these sorts of questions. You know, coming at it from certain premises certain questions take on a kind of crystalline clarity which is very comforting and very helpful in its own way. And, for someone else starting from a different set of premises it can be total meaninglessness - which may sound like a recipe for just total failure in these conversations.

But I do not think that it is. What it is, I think, a recipe for is a realization that we will, I think, I believe, ultimately have an irreducible diversity of ways of approach, of ways of thinking. And I think that irreducible diversity is a feature and not a bug of the human experience. And to try to circumvent that by imposing a single monolithic lens through which

to see everything, I think is not only destined to failure, but will end up alienating a large part of people who simply will not see through that lens.

Interviewer

Thank you. Thank you for today. I think we are going to end here. And yeah, that was really exciting. I think at least for me.

Dr. Steven Phelps

It was fun.

Interviewer

Thank you so much.