BOOK REVIEW

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If you want to know what a real “new paradigm” scientific worldview might look like, as contrasted to the old-hat pseudoscientific worldviews that often sail under the “new paradigm” flag, read this book by Frank Tipler, a Professor of Physics at Tulane University. I do not mean read it as something to be believed; nothing scientific ever asks that. Only time and experiment can show whether or not Tipler’s specific ideas are viable, as he himself repeatedly insists. Toward that end, this book includes a 120-page Appendix for Scientists, with the equations to be examined and tested.

I mean rather read this book to have your horizons expanded and some age-old prejudices blown apart, particularly prejudices about the supposedly necessary oppositions between materialism and spirit, technology and “small is beautiful,” economic rationality and social altruism, progress and the here-and-now, and perhaps most important of all, reductionism and holism. Whereas most contemporary spiritual, ecological, and New Age thinkers start out by deploring scientific reductionism and end up calling for loyalty to Planet Earth, Tipler takes the reductionist bull by the horns and rides it all the way to the heaven of eternal life, in which infinite love has “put all things under Its feet.”

He makes this intention clear right from his very first paragraph, which should win some kind of prize for audacity, even if he does not get

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the Nobel Prize, as he well might, for his coauthorship with John Barrow of the so-called Strong Anthropic Principle in relativistic cosmology. Tipler begins daringly:

This book is a description of the Omega Point Theory, which is a testable physical theory for an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God who will . . . resurrect every single one of us to live forever in an abode which is in all essentials the Judeo-Christian Heaven . . . . I shall make no appeal, anywhere, to revelation. I shall appeal instead to the solid results of modern physical science . . . . I shall show exactly how physics will permit the resurrection to eternal life of everyone who has ever lived, is living, or will live. I shall show exactly why this power to resurrect which modern physics allows . . . will in fact be used. (p. 1)

Tipler is completely serious about all these claims, and gives detailed calculations to back them up. Yet he is not trying to square science with any prior Christian belief, for he himself is not a Christian. He gives cogent reasons towards the end of the book why he cannot personally accept formal Christianity, boiling down to the fact that Christianity is too exclusive to encompass the sheer generosity, power, and wonder of the Omega Point Theory. Rather, he draws on top scholarly authorities on African and Native American shamanism, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to argue that all these religions are humanity’s prescientific intuitions of a potential in the physical universe that science is at long last beginning to recognize: namely, the potential for eternal conscious life; that is, conscious life not subject to “the thousand natural shocks the flesh is heir to” in organic life as it has evolved so far on Planet Earth. He takes his term “Omega Point” from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, but considers Teilhard’s attempts to reconcile Christianity with evolutionary science flawed by the fact that Teilhard’s mid-20th-century science was a very primitive affair in the light of subsequent advances.

And here, speaking as a former scientist and, since my near-death experience in 1983, a born-again mystic, I would say that both the weakness and the strength of Tipler’s book are that he takes no account of the fact, and indeed seems largely unaware, that mystics through the ages, including Teilhard, have actually experienced a timeless “dimension” of aliveness in and through the transience of organic human life, and have thereby been able to experience that transience without suffering. But I think the strength outweighs the weakness as far as the book’s value is concerned, because my own extensive studies since being reborn into eternity-consciousness have led me to the conclusion that almost all of what is taught about mysticism is pie-in-the-sky fantasy,