

John Griffith's "A View of Consciousness"

Introduction

In June of 2013, at age 90, I was asked to have a discussion with the children who attend Penn Valley Meeting of Friends (Quaker) in Kansas City, Missouri, about why I refused to register for conscription in World War II. Kristina Winholtz Pearson was asked to act as facilitator for this discussion. Kristina is a mother of three young children, and it was thought she could help guide the discussion in a way most helpful for the children. In the discussion, I relied mostly on childhood experiences that shaped my thinking at the time.

I was kindly told the interview with the children went well, but afterwards I confided to Kristina that I found it frustrating to try to talk about my core religious beliefs in terms that children would understand. Kristina's response was to ask, "John, when is the last time you shared your core religious beliefs with the adults in the Meeting?" The answer is "never," at least in any systematic way.

However, the question did make me think. What if the Meeting asked me to share with the adults as I had been asked to share with the children? What would I say? Kristina's question motivated me to make the effort to write down thoughts that I had processed long ago but had never written down in any organized manner.

In offering to share the resulting document, I hope that it may be seen not as propaganda but rather a sharing of information by one very imperfect spiritual seeker in a community of spiritual seekers. I value the Buddha's sermon on "self-reliance" in which he tells his fellow seekers not to look to any person for truth but to "be a lamp unto thy self." With that bit of Buddhist advice, I offer the following:

Arriving at my core religious beliefs

There are several ways that one may arrive at a view of God and religious belief. The majority of people choose an established religion such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam or Taoism and accept, on faith, the doctrines of that religion as Truth. Another approach is to decide that one's view of Reality will be determined by what can be verified by observation. A middle approach is to study the lives of those in history who seem to speak with spiritual authority and to see how closely their views resonate with one's own life experiences.

The following narrative reflects this middle approach. Beginning in my early twenties I discovered, after making allowance for cultural differences, that the mystics of the major religions were reporting very similar mystical experiences. I also discovered that their discoveries seemed to resonate with my own experience. My current core religious beliefs (always subject to modification) have been molded by this combination of personal experience and the insights of the mystics of the major religions.

(The similarities of the findings of the mystics of the major world religions have been noted by many religious and philosophical writers — one good example being the book *The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley.)

The vocabulary used in this document may seem strange to the reader accustomed to the Judeo-Christian terms of God, Christ, soul, spirit, heaven and hell. It is a vocabulary that has become meaningful to me and has been freely borrowed from several different religious traditions. Hopefully, the reader will be able to see the relationship of the terminology used to her/his own preferred religious vocabulary.

A working hypothesis view of Ultimate Reality

First, I accept, as a working hypothesis, that Ultimate Reality is Mind and that Mind is transcendent to, as well as immanently in, creation. I accept that the physical universe and all matter, both animate and inanimate, have a secondary reality but cannot exist separate from Mind. I accept this view as a hypothesis as it seems, based on my study and experience, to make the most sense to me. But I have not verified it personally as Truth.

“Mind” is a Buddhist term for Ultimate Reality but I am not a Buddhist. The term appeals to me because it is free of anthropomorphic overtones, which I have from childhood conditioning associated with the term God. In Chinese culture, the term Tao has a similar non-anthropomorphic appeal for me. And while I am not a Taoist, I often end my daily meditation period with a “prayer” addressed both to Mind and the brain that the brain may be more mindful of being in better harmony with Tao. In Judaism and Christian theology, the word “Godhead” probably comes closest to reflecting how I view Ultimate Reality. “Logos,” as used in the Christian Gospel of John comes close. The term “Mind” is simply a personal choice, and I am comfortable with others using God, Brahman, Allah, etc., if that best represents their view of Ultimate Reality. I believe that Ultimate Reality is unfathomable to the human brain and any words we use to describe Ultimate Reality can do no more than reflect an understanding that is limited by our culture and conditioning in time. No “word” can adequately represent Timeless Truth.

Second, I believe that consciousness is a non-physical reality that exists independently of matter. This is a critical difference from the materialistic view (currently prevalent in scientific thought) that humans (and all animate life) are composed of matter alone and that when the brain cells die consciousness ceases to exist.

Third, I believe that consciousness, as with all material existence, is bound in Oneness with Mind. But in some way consciousness has separated or divided itself off from Mind in a descending order of “separate awareness.”

Human beings who see Reality most clearly (saints) are aware both of their apparent physical separateness from Mind and their Oneness with Mind. They can say with words ascribed to Jesus, “I and the Father (God) are one,” or to paraphrase words ascribed to Buddha, “Those influences whose non-destruction would have individualized me as a man, I have completely annihilated. Know, therefore, I am Buddha” (Mind).

Human beings who are totally unaware of any connection with other beings or with Mind can say: “I could kill my brother and be as free of a sense of guilt as I would for killing a fly.”

Most human beings, in the spectrum of human consciousness, fall between these two extremes of “connection awareness.” The phenomenon of consciousness dividing itself off from Mind is reflected in the biblical story of the “fall from grace” of Adam and Eve whose “sin” was that they desired the knowledge that they were separate from God. Even though I consider the Adam and Eve story a myth, I think it reflects a psychological fact in the human experience. At the same time I admit that I can think of no logical reason for a “fall” from Mind to have occurred in the first place. I cannot conceive of Mind just wanting to play games with a secondary reality in the form of living beings. I simply accept that so long as we think we are separate from Mind we are not seeing Reality and that the purpose of life is a return to the Oneness of Mind.

Fourth, I accept that the challenge for consciousness is to be liberated from the illusion of separateness and to know experientially its Oneness with Mind.

But what if there is death of the body before there is a realization of Oneness?

Traditional Christian thought is that each human soul is either saved or damned, in eternity, depending upon how it has lived its human existence. Hinduism allows for multiple chances for “enlightenment,” even after death of the body. Buddha denied the existence of an individual soul that survives death. So there seems to be no consensus among the major religions on the nature of existence following the death of the body.

Paradoxically, although the Buddha is reported to have denied the existence of an individual soul, he seems to have accepted the concept of reincarnation. I can only make sense of this, if the “content” of the individual consciousness is seen as being assimilated (at death of the body) into a common consciousness “pool” from which another individual consciousness, inheriting “characteristics” of the previous existence, is “reincarnated.” I do not know how Buddhist scholars account for this apparent contradiction.

I reconcile these differences between Western and Eastern beliefs with a personal view that if the desire to be a separate self is present at death of the body, it is logical that the desire may continue in the nonphysical state. Consistency with this view and the view of the essential Oneness of

Ultimate Reality would suggest that there is no eternal “damnation” for consciousness that craves a separate existence. There are only endless attempts to know Reality until an eventual return, of all consciousness, to the original state of “at Oneness” with Mind.

The individual self feeling separate from other selves

The references to “separateness” in this document have, so far, been of the individual consciousness feeling separate from Mind. However, perhaps even more important, in terms of human behavior, is the individual self feeling separate from other selves. My experience tends to support the view of a common consciousness as well as individual consciousnesses.

An example of the implication, in terms of human behavior, of a common human consciousness, is provided by the saintly 18th century Quaker, John Woolman. (Quakers don’t have saints but Woolman was clearly “saintly.”) Woolman wrote of a vision he experienced:

“I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy colour between the North and the East, and was informed that this mass was human beings, in as great misery as they could be, and live; and that I was mixed up with them and henceforth I must not consider myself as a distinct or separate being.”

Woolman was especially sensitive to the evil nature of the institution of slavery and that, no doubt, colored his vision; the “dull gloomy colour” being slaves. However, the vision was, I believe, accurate in that the consciousness that had the vision was seen as “mixed up with” and not separate from other individual consciousnesses. And Woolman became, perhaps, the most effective Quaker advocate for freedom and equality for those in bondage to slavery.

Validation

“You will say, Christ saith this, and the Apostles say this, but what canst thou say?”

— George Fox, 17th century mystic and founder of The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), responding to his religious critics who insisted on the interpretation of Scripture, rather than mystical experience, for discerning Truth.

I confess that I have had no experience that could serve as validation of the above stated belief system for anyone other than myself. I do not actually “see” the Truth of this picture of Reality. It is simply an attempt to reconcile my own experiences with the insights of others whose insights resonate with me and who I believe have seen Reality most clearly.

However, I will attempt an answer to Fox’s question “What canst thou say?”

This approach has dangers that I cannot reconcile. For in dwelling on one’s personal experience, there is a strengthening of the very concept of I, me, mine, which is, I believe, a barrier to realizing one’s connection with other human beings and with Mind. It definitely is detrimental to deeper levels of meditation. So it is an exercise entered into with some reluctance.

Personal experiences of validation; near-death experience

Perhaps the personal experience that has had the most powerful influence on my thinking is the result of a near-death experience (drowning) when I was not quite eight years old. That was an experience of a very clear shift of consciousness from one in which I was fighting for my life (I was aware of repeatedly going under, then struggling to the surface for air) into one of being united with a Living Light in which there was a sense of indescribable well-being. During this experience I was aware of being myself but at the same time it seemed that the Light and I were one.

I, of course, am aware that the reporting of an eight-year-old is normally suspect. I can only say that upon regaining normal consciousness the awareness of what I had experienced was, to me, vivid and unquestionable fact. It has remained so to the present.

I am also aware of the usual arguments that near-death experience can be explained by chemical reactions within the brain. For example, chemical reactions that evolved to counter the fear of imminent death by stimulating areas of the brain involved with tranquility and a sense of well-being and blocking areas that have to do with fear and the urge to fight or flight. I know of no way to prove that near-death experience is not simply due to chemical reactions. I can only say that it was a profoundly real experience for me and that I believe it altered some of the inherited, or conditioned, patterns of the brain.

For one example, I have been in several life threatening situations over the years and each time there has been an absence of a sense of fear. Two of those experiences were in group situations where everyone else reacted with what I would consider normal panic. There also seems to be an awareness, in lesser crises, that in the eternal scheme of things "all is well." These are reactions that I have not "achieved" by study or training, but simply happen. I attribute them to what happened to my brain (being rewired or reconditioned) in the near-death experience. I also attribute the near-death experience to a conviction that consciousness does not die when the body dies.

Validation from processing the experience of my mother's death

The second life experience that indirectly led to the acceptance of the belief system described above was the death of my mother when I was 12 years old. At the time of her death there was an indescribable pain. When dirt was being shoveled onto the casket in my mother's grave, I struggled with a powerful impulse to jump into the grave and be buried with my mother. Yet I was aware that I would only be pulled out and that I would have to live through the pain. Shortly after my mother's death I began experiencing periods of silent reflection during which there was a sense of mystery and of my mother's presence. There was never either visual or auditory experiences of my mother during these periods of silent reflection but they were formative in establishing a life long practice of periods of silent reflection. And silent reflection has been an integral part of how I have come to view Reality.

In addition to the belief that my mother's death contributed significantly to the practice of silent reflection and meditation, I have also concluded that in some unknown way there was a transfer of compassion from the content of my mother's consciousness to the content of my consciousness. This is something more direct and profound than just remembering what a wonderful woman my mother was.

Anonymous Sufi aphorism: "When the heart weeps for what it has lost, the spirit laughs for what it has found."

Silent reflection (prayer and meditation) a source of validation

These periods of silent reflection became more frequent as World War II approached and I pondered how to respond to that human tragedy in which millions of human beings were intent on killing each other.

An estimated 45 million human beings, a majority of whom were civilians, were killed by the time the war ended. This behavior seemed abhorrent to me especially as Gandhi was demonstrating, at that very time, the power of non-violence as an alternative to war. In comparison to loss of life in conventional war, India gained independence from England over a period of about 30 years of non-violent struggle with the death of an estimated 7,000 non-violent Indian resisters. One can only speculate what the carnage would have been had the Indians taken up arms against the British. At age 19, I was going through a period of intense struggle with how I should respond to the social and legal pressures of World War II. In one period of sitting silently, with no movement of thought in the brain, I had an experience that convinced me that I had to protest the human acceptance of the necessity of war as well as the very concept that the state had the right to conscript its citizens to kill other human beings. This earned me a 30-month prison sentence for refusing to register for conscription. (Statement to the court is appended at the end of this document. I think the statement reflects my core religious beliefs at the time.)

In prison I began a regular practice of daily meditation and the study of the writings of religious mystics as well as a critical study of my own religious tradition (Christianity).

Occasionally, in following years, there have been experiences that seem to hint at what Christian mystics have referred to as "contemplative prayer." An inadequate explanation of this state of "prayer" is that the brain becomes quiet (the random thought process stops), yet the brain remains alertly passive. Instead of the self making an effort to "pray" it suddenly discovers that it is being "prayed" by a power other than itself. It seems to me that this experience has the effect, independently of study or logic, of increasing one's sense of compassion and of one being connected to all Life.

My son, Jonathan, who I asked to edit this document, informed me that Dr. Richard Davidson, a world-renowned neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin, has done research, using Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) on the brains of people trained in meditation, and discovered that meditation changes the structure of the brain and increases the function of the areas of the brain involved with empathy and understanding others. This research appears to give scientific validation to my own intuitive sense of this effect, of meditation, on the brain.)

I also believe there is a relationship between this experience (alert passivity, with no thought) and the near-death experience I had when I almost drowned. Although the experiences during meditation have never been as powerful as the near-death experience, both types of personal experience have had the effect of reinforcing the conviction for me that those mystics who have written of their experience in contemplative prayer, as a Oneness with God or Ultimate Reality may very well be “seeing” Reality most clearly. In varying degrees, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, etc., many of these mystics have articulated a picture of Ultimate Reality that closely resembles (albeit with different terminologies) the general outline of the core beliefs stated in the segment of this document titled “A working hypothesis view of Ultimate Reality.”

Extrasensory perception as validation

On a personal level, I have had several experiences of thought transference from one brain to another that were independent of any vocal or visual mechanism and, for me, beyond the chance of coincidence. (From the “materialist” point of view, this is impossible.) I am also aware of at least one family experience, which happened over a distance of several thousand miles, that meets the criteria, for me, of “beyond the chance of coincidence.” These experiences in extra sensory perception have reinforced, for me, the concept that we are connected in a common field of consciousness.

This view has also been reinforced by a modest knowledge of research in parapsychology. Telepathy as well as the ability to perceive future events has been demonstrated under laboratory conditions, within the discipline of mathematical probabilities (J. B. Rhine and/or Rhine Research Center, Duke University). Again, from the materialist point of view, this is impossible.

Creation as further validation of Oneness

Science tells us that the universe is a continuum. The atoms of our bodies are the same atoms that resulted from the Big Bang that created our universe some 14 billion years ago. We are just temporary custodians of those atoms, and they will continue to exist in other forms after our bodies “die.”

My hand is not “my hand.” The genetic material that shapes “my hand” is directly descended — passed on — from the “hand” of the first amphibian whose fin mutated into a feeling appendage millions of years ago. That creature and I share the same genetic material. The same connections exist for all organs of our bodies, including the brain cells. It is an illusion to think it is “my brain.” Every cell of our brains contains (or has the ability to access) knowledge that would take a library of books to record, “knowledge” gained over millions of years, both pre-human as well as human. Physically, our bodies look different and we are conditioned to think that we are “separate selves,” but in reality all human bodies contain over 99 percent the same genetic material. It is illusionary — and somewhat egotistical — to think that our bodies are “ours.” They are the gifts of millions of years of the Life Experiment. At the physical, as well as the level of consciousness, we are all connected in a continuum of existence.

A quote from the writings of Jalal ad Din Rumi is an example of the acceptance of the continuum view. Rumi was a Sufi mystic who was born in Prussia in 1273, more than five hundred years before Darwin, who was born in 1809 and is generally recognized as the architect of evolutionary theory.

Rumi wrote:

“I died a mineral and became a plant.

I died a plant and became an animal.

I died an animal and I was man.

Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?

Yet once more I shall die as man, to soar
With the blessed angels; but even from angelhood
I must pass on. All except God perishes.
When I have sacrificed my angel soul,
I shall become that which no mind ever conceived.
O, let me not exit! For Non-Existence proclaims,
To Him we shall return.”

While it is true that our brains may be conditioned to know and do things that other brains do not know and cannot do, the differences are superficial differences that result from our conditioning. Our brains are all fundamentally grounded in the same genetic material and the continuum component of existence. This, not the perception of separateness, is fundamental. Thus, for me, the scientific explanation of creation also points to the validity of Oneness.

Ethical implications of the view of a common consciousness

If it is true that humankind shares a common consciousness, it naturally follows that each of us has an immense responsibility as to the content of that consciousness. Just as the separate ego-centric self (the self that has separated itself from our common consciousness and Mind) is the content of its consciousness, even so our common consciousness (which has also separated itself from Mind) is its collective content.

It logically follows that when a human being is violent that violence is registered by our common consciousness, and all of human consciousness is contaminated by that violence. When a human being is compassionate, all of human consciousness is blessed by that compassion. To do violence to one, we do violence to all. To be compassionate to one, we are compassionate to all. In the words ascribed to Jesus: “In as much as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.” (The “me” being the eternal Logos, not the temporal Jesus.)

These are insights shared in common by the Buddha and by Jesus — both insisting, according to written records of their lives, on the necessity of compassionate behavior even when suffering violence from others — and any number of mystics in both the East and West.

One example of this shared responsibility is found in the writing of William Law, an 18th century Anglican priest and mystic who wrote from mystical experience: “Thou hast the height and depth of eternity in thee and therefore, be doing what thy wilt, either in the closet, the field, the shop or church, thou art sowing that which grows and must be reaped in eternity.”

These are insights into the nature of human connections that have revolutionary implications as guides to ethical behavior.

The sense of separateness as the root cause of violence

The insistence on separateness would appear to be the root cause of violence between individuals, groups and nations. The craving for security for the self, the tribe, or the nation ends up breeding conflict when contact is made with other selves, other tribes, and other nations who also are conditioned to crave security for their selfness — to see their separateness as reality. It follows that the way out of violence is to break the cycle of violence by answering violence with compassion — combined, I believe, with an insistence on justice. It also follows that the extent to which we can sense our connectedness will determine, in large measure, our ability to truly forgive and respond to hostility with compassion. When one sees truly, one can say with words ascribed to Jesus, “Father, forgive these violent people for they don’t know what they are doing” — i.e., they are blind to the universal nature of things.

A final disclosure

As stated in the section titled “A working hypothesis view of Ultimate Reality,” human thought, which is the result of human experience in time, is unable to speak Timeless Truth. That certainly applies to this document. I have no desire to pretend otherwise. This document simply represents the attempt of one person, lacking a clear perception of Reality, to make sense of things. The reader is encouraged to undertake his/her own attempt to do the same.

Two quotes from Meister Eckhart, a 14th century German theologian, philosopher and mystic, provide a fitting meditation with which to close this document.

“When I came out of the Godhead into multiplicity, then all things proclaimed, ‘There is a God’ (the personal Creator in time). Now this cannot make me blessed, for hereby I realize myself as creature, but in the breaking through (the mystic vision perceived in selfless contemplation) I am more than all creatures; I am neither God nor creature; I am that which I was and shall remain, now and forever more. There I receive a thrust which carries me above all angels. By this thrust I become so rich that God is not sufficient for me, in so far as He is only God in his divine works. For in thus breaking through, I perceive what God and I are in common. There I am what I was. There I neither increase nor decrease. For there I am the immovable which moves all things. Here man has won again what he is eternally and ever shall be.”

Although I regard the near-death experience and the later experiences of “alert passivity” as momentary and imperfect glimpses into the nature of Mind, Eckhart’s description of the awareness in “breaking through” the illusion of “multiplicity” resonates, for me, in respect to both of those experiences, but especially the near-death experience.

And as for writers, like the author of this document, who expound on the mysteries of Reality without a clear perception of that Reality, Eckhart has this warning: “Why dost thou prate of God? Whatever thou sayest of Him is untrue.” And I confess that in writing about these things, I am haunted by a sense of both ignorance and hypocrisy. But there is a hunger in the brain to understand the source of creation, who we are and why we are here. This document simply reflects one very imperfect attempt to satisfy that hunger. It is not Truth.

Appended

Statement in Federal court in November 1942 as explanation for my refusing to register for conscription during World War II. The statement can also be thought of as representing my core religious beliefs at that time. Although a similar statement 70 plus years later (2014) would reflect more of the content of the current document, I feel no need to “correct” anything in the 1942 statement.

United States of America

– vs. –

John H. Griffith

Refusal to register under the Selective Training & Service Act
U.S.D.C. for E.D. of S.C. Sitting at Columbia

STATEMENT OF JOHN H. GRIFFITH TO THE COURT

I do not care to argue the righteousness of my position, neither do I desire to defend it with rationalities. There are certain convictions so real that they go deeper than rationalities. I must live by these convictions if I am to live by the dictates of my highest spiritual being, not losing my faith in God. The act of following any other dictates would not only be a denial of the Democracy I love, but to me an outright denial that the God I love is Supreme.

The following points are only brief basic statements of my convictions.

1. I cannot reconcile the way of war with the way of Christ, nor am I free to support any law which does not give the individual freedom in deciding what God would have him do, especially when faced with the problem of killing his fellowmen.
2. There is another method which is Christian, efficient, and less costly by which we may settle international, political, social and economic problems. It is the way taught by Jesus, and I feel that sooner or later the people of the world must adopt this method if a durable peace is to be realized. A modern example of the practical application of this method is found in India’s fight for freedom under the leadership of Mohandas K. Gandhi.
3. I feel that, at present at least, my greatest contribution toward the ultimate adoption of the non-violent method, and the abolishment of international violence, is to refuse to comply with the system of violence at its beginning, namely registration for compulsory service.

4. Though at present conscientious objectors to war constitute a small minority, I feel that in not complying with the wishes of the majority I am one more protest against man's inhumanity to man. For that I will accept cheerfully, and without hate, any penalty imposed by this court.
November 2, 1942 John H. Griffith

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John Griffith, 2014