

## **Thoughts on Reading:**

### ***The Disappearance of God, A Divine Mystery***

**Richard Elliott Friedman (Little, Brown and  
Company, Boston, 1995)**

**This book is one I read some time ago, and in looking over it once again I now realize there were things in it I never caught before, things relevant to my current quest.**

**One of the book's main themes is that God appears at the beginning period of a new religion and then wanes. New religions come periodically. The waning is as if there is a progression in human self-governance capability and the direct intervention by God is no longer needed.**

**The Old Testament is a good example with Adam and Eve visited by God, then moving on to the prophets, etc. Same with religions that, like Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism, were established by revelation and then came to rely on a book or books and inspiration of a lesser sort. That is way too simple, and does not even do the book justice, but my point is that though this is the main theme of the book (though it never mentions Mormonism as I just did), it is of no interest to me right now.**

**What is of interest to me are several side observations made by Friedman that play directly into my current topical quest.**

On pages 114 through 117, for example, Friedman notes the imminence of God in the Garden, the separation that follows, and then focuses on the promise of "a future reunion with God." It is of interest to me that Friedman notes that "deity may be responsible for the shift in the divine-human balance." He adds that we "cannot easily say *how* responsible" but the point is well made.

Friedman goes on to suggest on his page 116 that it is the very knowledge of good and evil that caused the tree of life and the garden to become inaccessible to us, that in turn makes it possible to arrive at wisdom and restoration. I never realized before that in Proverbs 3:18 it says, as Friedman points out with some italics and an exclamation mark, that: "The fruit of the righteous is a *Tree of Life!*" I found this of interest, since it suggests there is a human role in re-achieving the divine nature, whatever that may be.

Friedman addresses the nature of God on page 117 and uses words like "enigma" and "extreme mystery" and "unspoken, pervasive mystery." He suggests the whole purpose of the Torah is not to explain God's nature, but to explain "what humans have to do, here in this world." Interesting. In that context he cites Moses' saying that "The hidden things belong to Yahweh our God," . . . (Deut 29:28)

I recall some time ago being quite interested in his chapter called "Big Bang and Kabbalah." The theme here is that the Big Bang/Big Crunch theory lines up nicely with the words of the Kabbalah. He admits it may be coincidence, but his point, made on his page 221, is that people are looking for science to reveal God to them, physicists and astrophysicists in particular, but also biologists. On this page he makes a

**statement that made me smile broadly because I am very much in agreement with it:**

**. . . in a very public way, from a variety of quarters, people are looking to physicists – seriously, hopefully – for answers about God. I have learned from physicists . . . that physicists in this era do not generally concern themselves with this theological element. One does not find it in their published papers in the field or in their exchange at professional conferences. It appears that a number of them have come to introduce the theology into their popular books and lectures and statements to the media for a variety of motives, noble and ignoble, ranging from the influence of the media upon them to a desire for fame and wealth.**

**Friedman continues by saying something I also agree with, which is that when the physicist's work legitimately addresses the "origin of the universe" it legitimately addresses "the concerns of religion." So the overlap is a natural one.**

**On his pages 240 through 253 Friedman delves into this 'origins' and 'God' subject in depth and with obvious enthusiasm. This is where it really gets interesting. Friedman explains the Hartle-Hawking model of a Big Bang and a Big Crunch. He then shows some disappointment with Hawking's speculations about God, namely that he pushes away the normative personal God concept as inadequate. But he adds on page 242:**

**In fairness to Hawking, I should say that at other points he sounds as if he means [by God] something more complex than a classical religious view. He speaks more of whether the creator had any choice in the laws by**

**which the universe runs, as opposed to a choice of the initial conditions of the universe. But it still seems to me like a problematic formulation of the question. The deity still sounds like a person, a choosing being, still somewhere else. The deity is still perceived as over there, "but," as Gertrude Stein said to Ernest Hemingway, "there is no there there."**

**Friedman's solution? To look at the Kabbalah which in its physical description of the origin of the universe at a single point, and its eventual collapse into that same point, is very similar to the Hartle-Hawking model. But it also characterizes the creator, and as Friedman explains on page 243:**

**The deity is not simply the sum of the parts of the universe. Rather, the creation is something that takes place within God. The creation involves the emanation of vessels, which are the outward, perceivable garments of the unperceivable actual substance of the deity, but "it is necessary to distinguish between the substance of the Emanator, which clothes itself in vessels, and the substance of the emanated." The deity is not someplace else, as far as humans are concerned, because there *is* no place else that is knowable by us. But at the same time, the universe that we know is an outward, emanated expression of the hidden deity.**

**His bottom line on this chain of thought is deserving of being called out separately:**

**The Big Bang theory tells us that we are literally made of stardust. Kabbalah suggests that it is literally divine stardust.**

**Friedman quotes "cosmologist Alan Sandage" as saying in this very context (pages 243-244):**

**"The world is incredible — just the fact that you and I are here, that the atoms were once part of stars. They say I'm on some sort of a religious quest, looking for God, but *God is the way it's put together.*"**

**Friedman cites Einstein as claiming "a cosmic religious feeling" and notes he did not reject belief in God, "but he did not accept a traditional, personal concept of God."**

**On page 245 Friedman cites one of my personal favorites, Leon Lederman, physicist, poking fun at "works that compare science and Eastern mysticism" by poking at their tendency "to conclude rapturously that we are all part of the cosmos and the cosmos is part of us." Friedman cites this to suggest that the foregoing is not going in that direction. But then he says again that all of the matter we are made of was present at the Big Bang. I think he means potentially present, of course, since the energy did not coalesce into matter until after the Big Bang, and some of it is still being cooked up by stars. The process does not end in our imagined expanse of time.**

**Pages 245 through 247 were of interest to me because of my dabblings into the popular literature on physics and the New Age, and Friedman readily admits on page 247 that "there may, or may not be something to Capra, Zukav, or Castaneda, to the teachings of the Sufis or other mystical traditions." He cites there being differences in the teachings of different mystical schools and individuals, and suggests they may be looking at different aspects of the same thing or they may just be wrong.**

**There is a lot of "rationalization" of "crackpot" schemes involving comparisons between science and mystical insights, says Friedman on page 247. He says he fears this comparison between the Big Bang/Big Crunch and Kabbalah may be thought to fall into this bin by some. However, he suggests that when science and mystical tradition are claimed to correspond, there are three things to consider, the "degree of parallel," the "character of the persons and processes involved" in establishing these parallels, and "the quality of the scholarship involved."**

**I agreed with this at the time I first read it. Since then, however, one of the two pillars of comparison has come crashing down. Later information suggests that the Big Crunch will never happen, the universe will expand forever and cool, and that will be the end. This hurts my feelings because I have always felt that the statement that the universe is Atman breathing out, and that he will again breath in, was a neat encapsulation of the Big Bang/Big Crunch model. So, Atman had better know this, and Friedman needs to redo this part of his book.**

**However, is having the cycle become open ended really calling into question the rather intriguing description of God contained in the Kabbalah? I think not. It just means that God is cooling off and expanding back into the nothing out of which it chose to explode. Since we know nothing, absolutely nothing, about anything before the Big Bang, we can't rule out a cyclic coming and going of the universe yet. It is only the way too understandable and appealing notion of a collapse back into singularity that is lost to us now (if the latest calculations and observations are correct that is—there is always a chance for revision after further observation in science).**

**Friedman goes into some of the same matter as I just read about in Jean Houston's book. She talks about the expansion of a person beyond their normal abilities under certain circumstances, and so does Friedman on page 248. Friedman calls it the experience of God in us, in so many words. But then he launches into human existence as "The Galaxy's Way OF Evolving a Brain" (a quote from science writer Timothy Ferris).**

**Under this quote I expected to read about the connections between consciousness and quantum physics and was not disappointed. However, Friedman cautions that (page 249):**

**The idea of a connection between quantum physics and consciousness is extremely speculative, and we must acknowledge this as well. My concern for now, in a very limited and tentative way, is to note that it has been suggested, notably by Roger Penrose, that this may be the province where the jump from the material realm and human consciousness takes place.**

**Nicely caveatted! Can't disagree that this is a possibility. In fact it fits my own speculations of what lies in those several dozen orders of magnitude of distance between the Planck constant and the smallest measurement yet made. But that is pure speculation, thank you Mr. Friedman for appropriately and correctly pointing this out for yourself as well as for me and Charles Penrose (important coworker of Hawking).**

**Where Friedman is going with this Kabbalah-cosmology-consciousness-quantum-physics connection was hinted at on page 114 where he discusses the Biblical promise of a return to Eden and God's presence. On page 252 he concludes that the human task is to work at that restoration, and his last line in**

**this on page 253 refers to " the possibility of a reunion with God." His whole next chapter is on this topic, but I want to dwell on some thoughts that bridge pages 252 and 253 for a moment. The thought is that by doing and thinking and praying good things we mend the world and create cosmic harmony. This in turn leads to restitution, "bringing the universe back to its unity."**

**Friedman says rightly that:**

**I am not sure that everyone would find this restoration to be an attractive goal since it means the end of this world, the world that we know, the collapse of history. But the comfort is that it means the arrival of something better, the ultimate return into the oneness of the deity.**

**If this still no comfort, continues Friedman, think of this:**

**. . . the ultimate return to unity (corresponding to the Big Crunch?) Would be estimated to be, at the very least, over fifteen billion years away.**

**So if returning into a singularity called God, residing in absolute nothingness, does not inspire you, don't worry. It is scheduled a long time from now. OK. I am comforted.**

**Friedman's next chapter on the "Divine-Human Reunion" assumes a cyclic birth and death of the universe. On page 258 he suggests that as we mature we may come to appreciate the Bible a bit more since it does suggest humanity is created in the divine image, and this may well be what the Kabbalah suggests it to be: a sharing of divinity through consciousness:**

**In this conception, it is through consciousness that some quantities of matter rise toward oneness with the divine. And, from this perspective, one might view human consciousness as the element through which humans could be quintessentially in the image of God.**

**He further suggests that human beings hold:**

**the pivotal element – awareness – that enables them to participate in a unique way in the ongoing divine activity.**

**As part of a discussion of the contributions of science, Friedman observes (page 263):**

**The stunning fact that has been impressing itself upon us in the last decade is that scientific inquiry is a possible path back to our source, which may (or may not) turn out to be what people call God. It is ironic but appropriate that science should be the possible path back. Science probably did more than anything else to take away the wonder in nature that we associated with the divine, as I discussed earlier, and now it is through science that we are getting it back.**

**Friedman continues by observing that science took away awe and mystery, both integral to religious experience, and thus eroded the foundation for morality for many. Friedman turns to the morality problem under a new view of God on his pages 277-280, but I do not want to get into that part of his book. He basically suggests an altruistic species loyalty might do well to replace awe and fear of God and. I would agree, knowing he has already established that species loyalty includes treating the earth and all creation properly.**

**On pages 268 and 269 he suggests that the removal of an imminent God means the growing up of humanity, and he suggests there is a great urgency to this growing up because we are making the boat in which we ride unable to sustain life. In this context he cites a Martin Rees who said that: . . . "one could properly regard the preservation of our biosphere as a matter of cosmic importance. . . . *If we snuffed ourselves out, we'd be destroying genuine cosmic potentialities.*" A rather startling statement, I thought.**

**He likens the cyclical appearance of God to start a developmental change, followed by a disappearance, to the movie *2001* on pages 267 and 268. I found this of interest because in the past I had thought of the symbolism used in that movie as suggestive of a divinely guided evolution.**

**On pages 270 through 274 Friedman goes through an interesting historical overview of human-divine relations and comes up with several observations I found of particular merit. First, on page 272:**

**The phenomenon of the disappearance of God has thus brought with it this great stress, this phobic age.**

**It seems to me that part of the solution lies in the fact that the disappearance of God also involves the growing up of humankind. There is some security in the thought that we are coming of age and in recognizing how far we have come. In the first place, we should have some confidence because we have *made it* through about two millennia with a vague sense – and through the last century with an explicit concept – of being on our own.**

**Friedman then lists some of our accomplishments as a species, and suggests we did this collectively. Bearing in mind, of course, the consciousness-divine connection discussed before.**

**In fact, Friedman makes this point on page 274 as another reason to have confidence, and adds in the idea that as we work toward our goals of healing the cosmos we will perhaps re-encounter "the deity." Worthy goals in harmony with our divine-human consciousness help us "become worthy" of this reunion and fortify us "against a good deal of human fear" suggests Friedman. I'll quote Friedman on this point (page 274):**

**. . . the very possibility of a link between our consciousness and the universe of which we are a part, a new and more complex form of what we sought early in our religious development, offers encouragement and excitement in opposition to fears that have been with us since antiquity.**

**Friedman is on to something here. Obviously. Because I have had these same thoughts in a more rudimentary form. First as I realized my personal God ideas were fictions I felt deflated until I realized that all the good I did in the name of that God, all the good I did period, came from within me. That was a very uplifting realization. The Power was within me all along to do the things I did. It just took trusting an entity outside myself, one to whom I surrendered my fears and self to a great degree, to give me the courage to risk tapping those powers and potentials within me.**

**And what if there is a life beyond this one, how am I prepared for it? By living in harmony with that part of me that is**

**connected with a greater power than myself, the cosmic-consciousness, perhaps, or the impersonal force that is God.**

**And what if there is no life beyond this one? It makes me happy to be alive every minute of its duration. It weighs on me that it is very possible that I am experiencing, for the one and only time that I will exist, the double miracle that is being both alive and aware of it! A miracle as yet unexplained by science.**