Richard Maurice Bucke and the idea of Cosmic Consciousness

Glenn F. Chesnut

The sense of the divine Presence: Richard Maurice Bucke’s Cosmic Consciousness

Mel Barger, the principal author of Pass It On (the official biography of Bill W.), interviewed hundreds of people who had known Bill and gained an intimate knowledge of his thinking. Even more importantly, Mel also lived in the New York City area during one period of his life, and while residing there, sat on the editorial committee of the AA Grapevine. This enabled him to participate in the regular meetings of that committee, which were presided over by Bill W., and this in turn allowed him opportunity to talk with Bill one-on-one and get to know him personally. Mel told me that he asked Bill to tell him more about what had happened in his famous Vision of Light at Towns Hospital, and that Bill had told him to go read Richard Maurice Bucke’s Cosmic Consciousness, an important book which had been published back in 1901, and that this would explain it all. Mel read the book, saw what Bill was talking about, and many years later encouraged me also, as strongly as he could, to go read the book too, because he believed that I also would discover
that Bucke’s work did in fact provide the key to understanding Bill Wilson’s experience of the divine Presence, not only at Towns Hospital, but also elsewhere in his life.

It is also important to note, in this regard, that Bucke was a trained psychiatrist. He earned his medical degree from McGill University’s medical school in Montreal, decided to specialize in psychiatry, and went to do his internship at the University College Hospital in London, England. In 1877 he became head of the provincial Asylum for the Insane in London, Ontario, where he remained until his death twenty-five years later. He knew the difference between sanity and insanity, and also the difference between (a) the hallucinations brought on by drugs and (b) the quite different structure of the visions which illumined the minds of the world great religious, philosophical, and literary geniuses: people like Buddha, Jesus, and St. John of the Cross, the philosopher Plotinus, and poets like Dante and Walt Whitman. Bill Wilson’s experience at Towns Hospital passed the psychiatric test and matched up with the experiences of the geniuses whom Bucke discussed in his book.

The new science and Darwin’s theory of evolution

The rise of modern science had a strong effect on Richard Maurice Bucke and other educated people of his era. Even as a child, Bucke believed that if a conscious personal God existed—and that in itself was a big “if” for him—he was willing to believe that God “meant well in the end to all,” but he still remained almost totally skeptical about whether human consciousness and personal identity could survive death. Modern science based its findings on things we could experience directly for ourselves, or on the first-hand experiences of dependable observers whose superior intelligence, honesty, observational skills, and ability to see through fraud and deception, were all well established. If as the young Bucke believed, there was no way we could directly experience the world beyond
(the realm in which our souls would reside after death), so that we could see it and feel it for ourselves, there was no point in appealing to the Bible. The Judeo-Christian Bible was no longer a believable source of information on issues of this sort. No intellectually honest person who had any education at all—not even a young child like Bucke still was at that time—could believe in a completely infallible Bible. And only a Bible which was absolutely infallible down to the last word and phrase could provide strong enough evidence all by itself for believing in an idea like everlasting life.

Later on, while he was in college in the late 1850’s and early 1860’s, Bucke was enormously impressed by Charles Darwin’s newly published book On the Origin of Species (which came out at the end of 1859) and also read deeply in the writings of the famous physicist John Tyndall (1820-1893), who was one of Darwin’s major British defenders. Here again, one could see that the Bible was just plain wrong. All the living species of the earth were not created in a few days’ time in 4004 B.C., but over thousands of millions of years. We could see the fossils with our own eyes, and the stratified layers of rock from different geological eras displayed in rocky hillsides and cliffs.

Darwin did however give Bucke an important clue into a new and different way the young man could start looking for answers to his spiritual questions. If there has been a process of evolution among the species inhabiting the planet Earth, involving massive changes in physical attributes such as the evolution of gills, fins, legs, lungs, hair, feathers, horns and antlers, wings, brain size, and the like, why could there not also be an evolution going on among the creatures living here on this planet Earth in the fundamental way their thinking processes are carried out? And this belief was to lie at the heart of Bucke’s work, where the subtitle of his book revealed the guiding Darwinian principle of his approach—Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind. Evolution is still at work, Bucke believed, and the small but increasing number of human minds which have developed the ability to sense the divine Presence is an evolutionary advance taking place
right now among a tiny exceptional class of people. Such a mind is as far superior to the mind of an ordinary human being, as the ordinary human being’s mind is superior to that of a chimpanzee.

Influence on Bucke of the English Romantic poets and New England Transcendentalists

Richard Maurice Bucke did not devise his idea of Cosmic Consciousness totally out of the blue. The new awareness that the Judeo-Christian Bible was a very human book, filled with numerous contradictions and historical errors, and hence not very dependable as a source of information about God and the life to come, had begun to affect a number of educated people in Europe and America during the latter eighteenth century. This was roughly the time of the American and French revolutions, and the basic strategy of tossing the Bible to one side, and appealing instead to some sort of direct human awareness of the divine, began appearing very early, among the English Romantic poets on one side of the Atlantic, and among the New England Transcendentalists on the American side.

Now the belief that the human mind could have some kind of direct experience of God was affirmed by many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers during the ancient and medieval period. Modern religious scholars call these people “mystics.” It was a way of looking at the relationship between God and the world which originally came out of the pagan Neo-Platonic tradition, which meant that there was a deep suspicion of anything having to do with material things, or the human body, or the world of sense perception. When ancient and medieval Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox spiritual writers attempted to explain how to have a direct mystical experience of God, they characteristically spoke about the need to abandon the physical world of the five senses and block it completely out of the mind. We then had to devise techniques, these writers said, for shutting off our imaginations and the continuous inner dialogue which usually went on in the human mind, so that we ceased thinking about worldly things and stopped the flow of the stream of consciousness which had us continually worrying over all
our fears and resentments and plotting how to do this and that. A work by St. Bonaventure (1221-1274) called the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (The Mind’s Pathway to God) is a good example of medieval Catholic beliefs about how to obtain a mystical experience of God. And as St. Bonaventure explains, we had to go beyond even the level of abstract thought, because in the ultimate vision of God our minds contacted something far greater than intellectual ideas and concepts.

But in the new understanding which we see in the English Romantic poets, there is no attempt to block off the world of sense impressions. The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) referred to this in *My Heart Leaps Up* as “natural piety,” that is, the feeling of awe and reverence which sometimes came upon us when we were beholding a scene of great natural beauty and magnificence, a powerful feeling of the infinite hidden within the finite, which made us aware that the hand of an all-powerful divine Creator lay behind the beauty that so entralls us. Wordsworth’s poetry was filled with numerous attempts to describe this feeling. In his *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*, for example, he began with the lines:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

Or in his poem, *The Excursion*, Wordsworth gave a more specific description (Book I, lines 198-200, 203-207, 211-213), involving a scene very similar to Bill Wilson’s account of his awareness of the divine Presence when he was approaching the coast of England and witnessed the sunrise at sea:

What soul was his, when from the naked top  
Of some bold headland, he beheld the sun  
Rise up, and bathe the world in light! He looked—
Beneath him:—Far and wide the clouds were touched,
And in their silent faces could he read
Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
Nor any voice of joy; his spirit drank
The spectacle .....

In such access of mind, in such high hour
Of visitation from the living God,
Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired.

Richard Maurice Bucke, in his book on *Cosmic Consciousness*, nevertheless did not regard Wordsworth as having obtained the fullness of this consciousness, and gave him only a brief mention in Part V (a subsidiary section at the end of the book). He admits that Wordsworth’s “mind ... in his loftier moods attained a very close neighborhood to Cosmic Consciousness, if he did not actually enter the magic territory of the kingdom of heaven, no one will deny.” But Bucke insisted that Wordsworth portrayed the “mental condition, which may be properly called the twilight of Cosmic Consciousness,” not its full dawning. He cited a passage from Wordsworth’s “Lines written above Tintern Abbey” (written in 1798) as an example:

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I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thought; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man—
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.
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Bucke believed that Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), one of the great New England Transcendentalists, did better than the English Romantic poets. “He was perhaps as near Cosmic Consciousness as it is possible to be without actually entering that
realm. He lived in the light of the great day, but there is no evidence that its sun for him actually rose.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson published his famous essay on “Nature” in 1836, laying out the foundation of the Transcendentalist movement. The divine is diffused through all of nature, he said, and human beings must learn to feel this spirit of nature, and recognize it as the Universal Being. Emerson told his readers that if they wished to think of nature in terms of some kind of visual metaphor, they should think of her as being like a woman standing in solemn prayer: “The aspect of nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.” Nevertheless, nature’s spirit by itself is mute. It must express itself in and through the emotional response of human beings who stand in awe before her. “Therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us.”

Bucke seems to have liked Emerson’s essay on “The Over-Soul” (1841) best of all, a piece in which Emerson expanded further on his ideas about the divine power which is immanent in nature. “That great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere” is in fact, Emerson proclaimed, “that Unity, that Over-
soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other.\textsuperscript{10}

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.

Richard Maurice Bucke gave a more carefully thought out and systematic account of this vision of the divine shining through the natural world. But Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists (a group which included such other famous authors as Henry David Thoreau, Amos Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, William Henry Channing, George Ripley, and Emily Dickinson) had already worked out many of the underlying ideas.

It is especially important to note, in this regard, that Richard Maurice Bucke’s book on \textit{Cosmic Consciousness} was not an aberrant or idiosyncratic work which could be written off as a historically insignificant piece of eccentricity. It was a logical development of one of the most important cultural themes of the nineteenth-century English-speaking world. He stood on the shoulders of both the English Romantic tradition and the New England Transcendentalists. And the influence on him of Goethe and nineteenth-century German idealism made his work an understandable development of contemporary continental European ideas as well.

It is vitally necessary to fit the history of the early Alcoholics Anonymous movement into its proper place within the major cultural currents of that era. This is not always being done at present. When some contemporary Alcoholics Anonymous historians attempt to describe the nature of Bill Wilson’s and Dr. Bob Smith’s religious
roots in New England, they talk exclusively about the most conservative parts of the religion of that area: early New England Congregationalism and the colonial Puritan tradition, the Christian Endeavor youth movement of the 1880’s, and so on. But Dr. Bob (who went to college at Dartmouth), his wife Anne (who went to college at Wellesley), Bill W., and Richmond Walker (the second most-published AA author, who graduated second in his class from exclusive Williams College in Massachusetts) in fact came from a world of expensive private schools and Ivy League colleges, where religious discussion regularly involved the New England Transcendentalists, Goethe, nineteenth-century German idealism, Unitarianism, and the atheistic ideas of the First Humanist Manifesto.

And in particular, if you do not reach a good understanding of the New England Transcendentalists, you will never understand important dimensions of the religious milieu in which Bill W., Dr. Bob, Anne Smith, and Richmond Walker were raised.

**Cosmic consciousness and human evolution**

Richard Maurice Bucke saw the development of consciousness in strongly evolutionary and developmental terms. He explained the three basic stages at the beginning of his famous book, which we remember was subtitled *A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*.

(1) “Simple consciousness” was the first form to develop, first appearing on the planet Earth many millions of years ago. Dogs and horses are modern creatures who have a strongly developed simple consciousness. They are clearly aware of various objects in the world about them, and react to them in logical fashion. They can reason things out, and adapt means to ends, sometimes in quite devious fashion. They also are conscious of the various parts of their bodies—legs, tails, ears, and so on—and react strongly to anything that touches these or affects these.11

(2) “Self consciousness” was a higher form of consciousness which did not appear until much more recently in biological history,
during the course of the last few million years, as part of the evolution of the modern human species. Human beings are not only conscious of their external environment and their own bodies, but are also capable of standing back, as it were, within their own minds, and regarding their own mental states as objects of consciousness. We human beings evolved as creatures which are capable of self-transcendence. That is, we can think reflectively about our own thought processes and ask ourselves questions such as “how could I have thought about that differently?” and “what would happen if I did such-and-such instead?” Human language is the form in which our minds engage in higher forms of self-reflection and self-transcendence. Our minds, when we are thinking at this level, think by means of words and conscious concepts arranged into complicated sentences and statements. I wrote an entire chapter on this topic in my book on *God and Spirituality*, because it is so important, especially because it provides the key to understanding the true nature of human free will (which is not opposed to the realm of scientific explanation but builds upon it in ways which permit these scientific explanations to be put to concrete, practical use).

The famous Swiss learning psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) carried out years of careful studies showing how this kind of higher consciousness developed over the course of our childhood. With the very bright Swiss children whom he observed, the process took place over the following age ranges, with what Bucke called “self-consciousness” developing fully by age eleven (although we, alas, had some students at Indiana University where I taught who, in spite of being young adults, still had difficulty at times in analyzing situations where two different causes or dimensions had to be balanced against one another):

Sensorimotor stage: birth to age 2 (children experience the world through movement, manipulation of objects, and sense perception, and learn object permanence)

Preoperational stage: ages 2 to 7 (acquisition of a sophisticated understanding of space and an elementary understanding of causality, but initially in a totally preverbal
way, and throughout without any strong self-analytical capability)

Concrete operational stage: ages 7 to 11 (children learn to think more logically about concrete events, but still in an oversimplified way, where they have difficulty in analyzing situations in which two different causes or two different dimensions of the situation are affecting the outcome)

Formal operational stage: after age 11 (full development of abstract reasoning)

(3) “Cosmic consciousness” was a further evolutionary advance which, Bucke believed, had only begun to appear among a few exceptional human beings during the past 2,500 to 3,000 years. As Bucke describes this new and higher way of perceiving: 15

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is, as its name implies, a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe .... To this is added a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense .... With these come, what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that he shall have this, but the consciousness that he has it already.

It came in an act of inner illumination which in its strongest forms would be accompanied by what Bucke called the “subjective light,” an overpowering sense of standing in a great light or gazing at a powerful light, which might sometimes appear to be outside the self, but was in fact inside oneself. Bucke usually only labeled his case studies as authentic experiences of the full cosmic consciousness if the subjective light was perceived. But he did list a number of cases where no light appeared to the subject, which he nevertheless regarded as near-instances or partial instances of the full consciousness.
He began his book with a third-person narrative describing how he himself first experienced this cosmic consciousness in a very vivid fashion during a visit to England in 1873:

It was in the early spring, at the beginning of his thirty-sixth year. He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman. They parted at midnight, and he had a long drive in a hansom (it was in an English city). His mind, deeply under the influence of the ideas, images and emotions called up by the reading and talk of the evening, was calm and peaceful. He was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment.

All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next, he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven.

Among other things he did not come to believe, he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of every one is in the long run absolutely certain.

He claims that he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could ever have taught. The illumination itself continued not more than a few moments, but its effects proved ineffaceable; it was impossible for him ever to forget what he at that time saw and knew; neither did he, or could he, ever doubt the truth of what was then presented to his mind.
After many further years of study, Bucke says that he finally came to understand that Darwinian evolution was still taking place, and that the first representatives had now appeared of a new race of beings whose bodies still looked like human bodies, but whose minds had evolved into something far higher than human beings possessed:

There exists a family sprung from, living among, but scarcely forming a part of ordinary humanity, whose members are spread abroad throughout the advanced races of mankind and throughout the last forty centuries of the world's history.

The trait that distinguishes these people from other men is this: Their spiritual eyes have been opened and they have seen. The better known members of this group who, were they collected together, could be accommodated all at one time in a modern drawing-room, have created all the great modern religions, beginning with Taoism and Buddhism, and speaking generally, have created, through religion and literature, modern civilization .... These men dominate the last twenty-five, especially the last five, centuries as stars of the first magnitude dominate the midnight sky.

A man is identified as a member of this family by the fact that at a certain age he has passed through a new birth and risen to a higher spiritual plane .... The object of the present volume is to teach others what little the writer himself has been able to learn of the spiritual status of this new race.

As a skilled psychiatrist, Bucke was of course aware that human beings can have hallucinations, and imagine that they have seen things that were not real. But as he explained, in the case of a hallucination, the only person who can see it is the one having the hallucination. That is the way a psychiatrist can tell if a patient is having a hallucination, and it is extremely simple and not hard to understand.

If several people, on the other hand, all said that they had seen a tree standing half a mile off in the middle of a field, and the descriptions of the tree which they gave afterward all matched in
general outline we would judge that the tree actually existed, even though some of the details in their accounts were different. “Just in the same way,” Bucke explained, “do the reports of those who have had cosmic consciousness correspond in all essentials.”¹⁸ I might add that if the tree were at a great enough distance, that only those few observers who had the sharpest sight might be able to see it. It would be easy to establish however, that these few had keener eyes than other people, were consistently able to spot things that other people had missed, and that closer investigation invariably showed that if they said they could see something off at an enormous distance, anyone who was willing to walk there and check it out, would discover that they were right.

**Cosmic consciousness: seven characteristics**

In his book, Bucke studied a number of people who had developed this kind of cosmic consciousness—people living at many different eras of history, and in many different parts of the globe—and developed a list of characteristics which regularly appeared in their accounts of this experience. If I might put his list of attributes partly into my own words:¹⁹

1. Suddenly and without warning, they experience the *subjective light* and feel themselves to be standing in front of a flame or great light, or they feel themselves to be standing in a cloud or filled with a haze or mist.
2. They are filled with an enormous sense of *ecstasy*: They are overwhelmed by joy, assurance, and what they may describe as a sense of salvation. But this word is not quite correct, because what they feel is not some sense of being freed at last from condemnation, but an awareness that they and everyone else are already accepted. “It is not that the person escapes from sin; but he no longer sees that there is any sin in the world from which to escape.”
3. An intellectual *illumination* sweeps over their minds: The cosmos is not a collection of dead matter with occasional life
forms here and there, but is in its totality a living presence, “an infinite ocean of life.”

4. They suddenly see and understand that they are immortal, “that the life which is in man is eternal, as all life is eternal; that the soul of man is as immortal as God is.” This does not come to them in the form of a rational proof or convincing argument. It is rather that they suddenly sense at first hand that the core of their own being is an intrinsic part of the same realm as the eternal Godhead, and made of the same deathless substance. Or to put it another way, as long as they can sense themselves standing in that divine light and immortal presence, the fear of death completely vanishes.

5. They sense a cosmic order built on love, which provides for all things to “work together for the good of each and all” in such a way that the true “happiness of every individual is in the long run absolutely certain.”

6. People who have achieved this cosmic consciousness will usually have a powerfully charismatic effect on the other people around them. Without understanding why, other people will be charmed by them and want to be around them. They will automatically turn to them for leadership, reassurance, or consolation. They will sense at some level that these people who radiate the illumination of their cosmic consciousness have a wisdom and knowledge that can guide others.

7. The one who has achieved cosmic consciousness may sometimes appear to have actually been transfigured or transhumanized into a divine being.

**Bill Wilson’s use of these ideas: losing the fear of death**

With respect to the fourth item—realizing that they are themselves immortal beings and feeling their fear of death somehow drop away—one must note how Bill Wilson made a point of that when he described the sense of the divine Presence, both when talking about his own experiences and when talking about his
grandfather. The influence of Bucke on Bill W. was quite clear. So for example, he emphasized his grandfather’s fearlessness (the grandfather who could hear the music of the spheres) as he faced his own approaching death. When he remembered how his fear that he might die at sea was lifted when he saw the sun rise over the coast of England, the major portion of this release from fear came from seeing land up ahead. But as he reminisced about it later, there was also a sense that the dawning of the physical sunlight somehow pointed symbolically to a different kind of dawning of the light—a dawn which he could somehow sense (down at some deep, mostly subliminal level of his mind) had not yet arrived but was out there waiting for him. When he visited Winchester Cathedral not long afterward, the fear that he might die in battle over in France was threatening to overwhelm him until, seeing the shaft of sunlight coming through the stained glass window, he came even closer to seeing the inner light at a fully conscious level. This hint of the true divine light—still not fully separable in his mind from the physical sensation of the English sunlight coming through the top of the window-glass—was nevertheless enough to instantly wash away all of his death-fear.

Ebby’s visit to his apartment sixteen years later prompted Bill to remember all those feelings once again, but this time there was the sense that the blockage had suddenly dropped away: the barrier, that is, which had kept Bill from becoming fully and consciously aware of the eternal realm. It turned out that it was an overwhelming fear of God which was blocking him from seeing the divine light which would lift away his fear of death. But fear of God and fear of death are closely related in most people’s minds, so this is totally understandable. For many people (particularly back in earlier centuries) the fear of God arises from the terrifying belief that God will condemn us because of all the sins that we have committed. In Bill Wilson’s case, however, he was being paralyzed by an overwhelming terror whenever he realized that he would have to break with so many orthodox and conventional beliefs about God in order to become true to his own vision. At any rate, just a short
period later he checked himself into Towns Hospital and experienced the fullness of the vision of the eternal light, the one which sweeps away the fear of death, for as Bill phrased it later, as he beheld that divine light he realized that “even though a pilgrim upon an uncertain highway, I need be concerned no more, for I had glimpsed the great beyond.”

The sixth item in the list above points to the fact that those who have achieved cosmic consciousness are so often powerfully charismatic figures. Other people are charmed and fascinated by them. They want to listen to them, be with them, and follow them. Even brief contacts with these charismatic individuals remain unforgettable years later. This is the source of the power of a number of major religious and literary figures. Some—like Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, and the Apostle Paul—were founding figures of great world religions. Others—like St. John of the Cross (Juan de Yepes Álvarez), the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus, and Walt Whitman—set a powerful mark on the thought world of many following generations.

Even the less famous members of this group have some portion of this charismatic power, which can be seen in their strong effect on other people. From the way that Bill Wilson described his first meeting with Father Ed Dowling in 1940, it seems clear that he believed the good priest was one of those special people who had attained cosmic consciousness. In terms of its effect on Bill, he commented that it was like undergoing “a second conversion experience.” The priest’s impact on him was completely overwhelming:

He brushed back a shock of white hair and looked at me through the most remarkable pair of eyes I have ever seen. We talked about a lot of things, and my spirits kept on rising, and presently I began to realize that this man radiated a grace
that filled the room with a sense of presence. I felt this with great intensity; it was a moving and mysterious experience. In years since I have seen much of this great friend, and whether I was in joy or in pain he always brought to me the same sense of grace and the presence of God. My case is no exception. Many who meet Father Ed experience this touch of the eternal.

One of the things that we need to remember, of course, is that if Bill Wilson had himself already attained the fullness of cosmic consciousness on December 14, 1934, this visit was a powerful meeting of like with like. This helps us to understand how Father Ed, during the course of just one evening’s talk with Bill, became totally committed to the AA cause, and convinced that God had called Bill to perform a divine task that no one other than him would be able to carry out.

**Cosmic consciousness: transhumanization and discovering the divine within ourselves**

The seventh item on the list of characteristics of cosmic consciousness involved the rather startling claim that the one who has achieved cosmic consciousness may appear to have actually been transfigured or transhumanized into a divine being. To begin with, let us remember that Bucke included men like Jesus and Buddha in his list of famous people who had attained cosmic consciousness, and countless men and women throughout history have regarded those two religious figures as divine beings.

But Bucke also cited figures like Dante, who was clearly an ordinary human being, who lived during the Italian Renaissance and was the author (during the early 1300’s) of a great epic poem called the *Divine Comedy*. In the last part of that work, the *Paradiso*, Dante spoke in Canto 1 of his “transhumanization” or divinization when the eternal light shone upon him.

Now to explain the role played by the figure of Beatrice in this passage, it should be noted that the process through which the
eternal light was able to shine forth and illuminate us in the depths of our minds was often personified, with the agent or messenger or process being portrayed as a heavenly figure who was given a name and a distinct character. For the Apostle Paul, it was Christ who appeared to him on the road to Damascus; for Muhammad it was the angel Gabriel who spoke to him. For other authors the messenger or source was pictured as a divine double: a sort of second self who dwelt in heaven, or was born within our hearts and spoke to us from within our hearts.

At the beginning of Canto 1 of the *Paradiso*, Dante personified the bringer of light as a symbolic figure named Beatrice. There had been a real person by that name—Beatrice di Folco Portinari (1266-1290)—but Dante had only met her twice, the first time when he was nine years old and she was eight, and the second time nine years later. She was only 24 when she died. When Dante began writing his great epic some twenty years or so later, he turned her into a completely symbolic figure. In a play on her name Beatrice, he portrayed her as the incarnation of beatific love, who led the poet into the *beatific vision*, the heavenly vision (in Catholic and Orthodox theology) in which human souls no longer need to rely on faith, but are allowed to see God face to face.

In the beatific vision which he described, Dante said that he found himself standing at the entrance to the heavenly realm which stood above the earth. Up above shone the sun, and staring at the sun was the figure of Beatrice (*Paradiso* 1.46-63). Suddenly the heavenly fire and light leapt from the sun to Beatrice, and then Dante also looked at the sun, and then the three of them were linked together—the sun, Beatrice, and Dante—in coruscating sparks of liquid, burning fiery light (1.58-60):

\[Io nol soffersi molto, né sì poco,\]
\[Ch’io nol vedessi sfavillar dintorno,\]
\[Com’ferro che bogliente esce del fogo.\]

I could not bear it much, just for a brief moment, in which I could see sparks fly around it, like droplets of molten iron thrown out from the fire.
And suddenly the sun was turned into the Eternal Wheels of Light (God as the Unmoved Mover who caused everything else to happen in the universe) and Beatrice was transformed into a second heavenly sun or Second God. And then Dante found himself also being transfigured and being turned into a divine being. He referred in *Paradiso* 1.67-69 to the Greek myth of Glaucus, a fisherman who was turned into a sea-god by eating a magic herb (there is a famous modern statue of Glaucus in the middle of the Fountain of the Naiads in the Piazza della Repubblica in Rome). Dante said that he found himself also being turned into a god (1.70-71) in an experience which surpassed all human language: *Trasumanar significar per verba non si poria*, “being transhumanized cannot be described in words.”

Pantheism or panentheism: God as the life and order of the universe

Bucke’s book on *Cosmic Consciousness* influenced some of the top thinkers of the early twentieth century. Albert Einstein, in an article he wrote in 1930, developed a version of Bucke’s ideas centered on what he called “cosmic religious feeling.” But in that article Einstein rejected any kind of anthropomorphic conception of a personal God as being unscientific: the idea of gods who acted like human beings was no more than primitive superstition. In his interpretation, we could stand in awe at the sublime grandeur of the universe and its order, without trying to turn it into a deity made in the human image. And going even further, Einstein’s God was certainly not “alive” in the sense in which human beings were alive.24

Bucke in similar manner clearly rejected any notion of a highly personified God who thought and reacted like a human being. Bucke certainly never talked about God becoming angry with a particular human being, or feeling jealous, or deciding to strike someone with a lightning bolt or anything like that. Bucke also never suggested
praying to God to try to get him to change the course of events or work a miracle.

In my reading of Bucke, however, he also completely rejected the idea that either God or the universe were something dead and mechanical. In fact, the vision or illumination of which he spoke revealed the exact opposite:\(^{25}\)

This consciousness shows the cosmos to consist not of dead matter governed by unconscious, rigid, and unintending law; it shows it on the contrary as entirely immaterial, entirely spiritual and entirely alive … it shows that the universe is God and that God is the universe ….

The belief that “that the universe is God and that God is the universe” is called pantheism or panentheism, from the Greek words \(pan\) = “all,” \(theos\) = “God,” and \(en\) = “in.” Those terms refers to a variety of different philosophical positions, but in this case, I believe that Bucke held that the universe itself was a living being of some sort, and that God was simply another name for that marvelous universe. Although Bucke sometimes expressed this idea in slightly more complicated form, he more frequently simply equated God and in the universe in fairly naive fashion, as in the above quotation.

**Bill Wilson: a Catholic God instead of Bucke’s pantheism**

In the Big Book, Bill Wilson broke with Bucke on this point, and avoided any kind of simple minded pantheism. He sometimes spoke of the higher power as the “Spirit of the Universe” or “Spirit of Nature,” a kind of phraseology which could be interpreted as the panentheistic doctrine that God was to the material universe as the human soul was to the human body.\(^{26}\) But one of Bill W.’s commonest names for God was “Creator,” a term which implied a fundamental ontological and metaphysical difference between God (the creator) and the universe (that which was created).\(^ {27}\) When using that language, the universe could still be construed as a derivative part of God, but God would clearly be the all-powerful
and active partner, while the universe was seen as comparatively less powerful and the passive object of God’s actions. Furthermore, Bill W. continually stressed that it was God who miraculously removed the compulsion to drink and produced the psychic change in the alcoholic’s character, not the universe or any natural force. God and nature were not simply two different terms for the same thing.

Even more importantly, modern scientists have calculated that the universe we live in came into existence in the Big Bang some 13.7 billion years ago. Before that time, the universe did not exist. So if God was simply the World Soul or Spirit of the Universe in a simplistic sense, we would have to have God also being created 13.7 billion years ago. This kind of God—a so-called God who had a beginning in time—would no longer be either the Creator or the eternal ground of all reality. Bill W. clearly did not believe in that kind of God: as he said on page 10 of the Big Book, God was a being “who knew neither time nor limitation.”

Bill Wilson’s God had a strongly intellectual aspect (at one level) which was very different from Bucke’s God. The chemists, astronomers, and biologists were among Wilson’s great heroes. They portrayed a universe built on a foundation of immutable laws of nature: “The prosaic steel girder is a mass of electrons whirling around each other at incredible speed. These tiny bodies are governed by precise laws, and these laws hold true throughout the material world.” But natural laws which were basically ideas necessitated a Creator which was a source, not just of matter, but also of ideas which could be fit together into a rationally coherent system of thought. This implied a God who was some sort of “Creative Intelligence,” as Bill Wilson termed it. Or in other words, even though he believed that human beings could sense the divine Presence in the way that Bucke had described, Bill Wilson’s God was a Catholic God in a way that Bucke’s God was not, the kind of God whose existence was demonstrated in the traditional Argument from Design: that is, God was some kind of pre-existent ground of all reality, which existed before the physical universe came into being, and which had something analogous to a human
mind or human intelligence. By the word analogous, I mean that the Being of God was able to generate purely intellectual concepts in some fashion where they had meaning. A purely impersonal source could be used to obtain phrases and equations which were simply words and numerical relationships: one could draw slips of paper out of a box, for example. But these words and numbers would have no meaning, that is, there would be no way of learning how to apply them to anything real.

The ownmost Being of the God whom Bill Wilson talked about in the Big Book dwelt in a totally different realm from that in which our present physical universe was located. Bill described this divine realm twice as a kind of fourth dimension and he said that it could not be perceived directly by the ordinary five senses, but could only be perceived by a sort of sixth sense. We cannot take either of these phrases literally. In Einstein’s special theory of relativity there were three spatial dimensions, connected to a fourth dimension which was time, but Bill W. was not referring to time. Likewise, whatever the faculty was whereby we could sense the divine Presence, it was not simply another kind of physical sense. Homing pigeons are able to find their way home because they have something in their brains which is sensitive to the earth’s magnetic field and functions like a tiny compass, and electric eels are able to detect the presence of other objects around them by sensing changes in the electrical fields which their bodies generate, but Bill Wilson was not referring to an alternate way of sensing things in the material universe.

He referred to this divine world as “the Realm of Spirit” in one place, and in another well-known passage in the Big Book described it as “a New Land” which we could cross over to (at least part of the way) via “the Bridge of Reason.” That bridge did not reach all of the way however, so at the end of the bridge we had to take a leap of faith and (metaphorically speaking) jump out over the void which separated that world from ours.

This “Realm of Spirit” was what traditional Catholic Christianity calls the heavenly realm, and Bill Wilson stood with Emmet Fox
(and the Christian tradition as a whole) in regarding that heavenly region as a realm of supernatural light (not this-worldly physical light) which continually coexisted as a kind of parallel universe running along above and behind the material universe. Metaphorically speaking, we in fact lived in a kind of two-story universe, a lower story built of ordinary material things, and an upper story filled with divine light, angels, and human spirits (including the spirits of those human beings who had died and were no longer living on this physical earth).

Along with Emmet Fox and some passages in Bucke’s book, Bill Wilson also seems to have believed that each this-worldly self had a kind of divine double: a sort of second self who dwelt in heaven. Or perhaps, to use the same metaphor, he believed in two-story human beings: on the upper level lived a being of light who was immortal and would never die, while down on the lower level a shadow or image or this-worldly double of that being of light would be born and live a material existence for a while, and then eventually die and be no more, while the immortal being of light continued on forever. That did not mean that our brief earthly existence was unimportant: God sent us to this planet Earth to carry out goals that were of vital importance to him, and our earthly responsibilities should not be neglected. Or as Bill W. put it on page 130 of the Big Book, “We have come to believe He would like us to keep our heads in the clouds with Him, but that our feet ought to be firmly planted on earth.”
NOTE


8 Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* 290-291.

9 The full text of Emerson’s essay on “Nature” is available online at http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/emerson/nature-emerson-a.html#Introduction.

10 Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* 291. Quotations from Emerson’s essay on “The Over-Soul” are taken from the online version at http://www.emersoncentral.com/oversoul.htm.

11 Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* 1-2.

12 Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* 1-2.


15 Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* 2-3.


17 Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* 11.

18 Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* 71.
19 Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness 72-75.

20 Thomsen, Bill W. 116-119. Alcoholics Anonymous 1, 10, 12.


22 “Second conversion experience” in Pass It On 242; Bill Wilson’s long account is in Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age 38.

23 See for example Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness 61, “The duplex personality of men having cosmic consciousness will appear many times as we proceed and will be seen to be a constant and prominent phenomenon” and 63-64, his long quotation from William Sharpe, The Dual Image (London: H. A. Copley, 1896).


25 Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness 17.

26 Alcoholics Anonymous 10, 12, and 46.

27 Alcoholics Anonymous 13, 25, 28, 56, 68, 72, 75, 80, 83, 158, and 161.

28 Alcoholics Anonymous 25.

29 Alcoholics Anonymous 10 and 48-49.

30 Alcoholics Anonymous 12, 46, and 49.

31 Alcoholics Anonymous 8, 25, and 85.

32 Alcoholics Anonymous 46 and 53.