

Wilhelm Reich: Transcending the Dichotomy Between Science and Spirit

By Michael Mannion

“There is this infinite energy, the power of God, forever working - toward what purpose?”

-Robinson Jeffers

Each age has a story that captures its essence, though its story may not be told until a later era. Over time, such true stories may evolve into legends, or further, into myths. These tales, then, blur the specific elements of the lives of the men and women involved and take on the general characteristics of the culture that creates them, as either lessons or warnings. In this way, factual narratives can be transformed into allegories. The Christ story is a powerful example of how, over time, a factual story becomes a cultural and religious myth and its protagonist an icon.

The story of Wilhelm Reich captures the essence of Western culture in the 20th century. It offers both an inspiring lesson—and an instructive warning—for those who seek a deeper understanding of our world and, even more so, for those who would change the status quo. Conflict was prominent in Reich's life, as was great courage.

In the 1920s, he came into conflict with Freud in his inner circle. In the 1930s, as a political and social activist fighting for human freedom, he battled both Hitler and Stalin, each of whom put Reich on their death lists. In the 1940s, Reich was an early critic of the domination of American medicine by the pharmaceutical industry. He suffered greatly, personally and professionally, for his courageous public stands.

Reich was a Promethean figure in the truest sense. He was boldly creative and defiantly original. As Prometheus stole fire from Olympus and gave it to humankind, so Reich took the concept of Life Energy out of the realm of metaphysical and scientific hypothesis and gave mankind a fundamentally new understanding of Life Energy as physical, demonstrable, measurable and usable. For him, Life Energy was no longer a philosophical premise but a practical tool to be used in comprehending Life itself, within and without the human organism.

Even a cursory examination of Reich's life reveals that he was driven by something extraordinarily powerful, something beyond ambition, ego, altruism or any of the other personal factors that motivate people. His passionate commitment to the integrity of his work as a physician, psychoanalyst, scientist and social activist is rare indeed. Was it a “divine spark” of some sort that inspired him? Was it some sense of purpose? The answer to both of these is a resounding “Yes!” if we define the “divine spark” as the Life Energy and the sense of purpose as the spontaneous, meaningful expression of that Life Energy. For Reich, the vital functioning of Life is the “purpose” or “meaning.”

Reich performed ground-breaking medical and scientific work in such fields as psychoanalysis, sexology, biogenesis, physiology, energy medicine, physics, meteorology,

and cosmology. How could he have been active in such diverse disciplines? To follow the direction of his scientific activities, it is necessary to follow the energy. The Life Energy knows no boundaries. It functions beyond all artificial human classifications, academic, scientific or otherwise. Reich went where the Life Energy led him.

With an open mind, and rigorous scientific methodology, Reich investigated the Life Energy in a manner unlike anyone before him. Three decades of painstaking endeavor led to the creation of a new scientific discipline which overcomes the dichotomy of science and spirit that has existed in our culture since the inception of written records.

Many today seek to “bridge” the gap between, or advocate a “marriage” of, science and spirit. Reich transcended both. The body of knowledge he left for the world to evaluate is not a fusion or an amalgam of the most relevant aspects of these worldviews. Rather, it is a new body of knowledge, more akin to a newborn than a marriage. As with a child, when one examines this new discipline, it is evident which traits were inherited from which parent (science and spirit). But also, as with a child, Reich's science is an independent body of knowledge which will follow its own course of development.

Wilhelm Reich's Life and Work

Wilhelm Reich was born in 1897 in the easternmost region of Austria. The foundation for Reich's revolutionary discoveries in medicine, psychoanalysis, biology and physics was laid in the early years of his life when he lived close to nature.

The study of energy functions in man and nature—from libido through bioenergy to orgone energy—is the consistent theme that runs throughout Reich's work, beginning with his 1923 paper *Concerning the Energy of Drives* (1) and continuing through his last work on cosmic energy in 1957, *Contact with Space* (2).

Reich's energy studies put him inside a stream of life-positive thought that has flowed through human thinking all over the world for thousands of years. Since antiquity, people have been aware of the life energy functions Reich later studied. It has had many names, such as chi; pneuma; prana; mana; and baraka; Reich called it orgone.

Body-Mind Medicine

In the late 1920s, many in psychoanalysis considered Wilhelm Reich to be the “heir apparent” to Sigmund Freud because of his valuable contributions to psychoanalytic technique. But Reich broke with psychoanalysis. In the 1930s in Europe and the 1940s in the United States, he developed a new “body-mind” therapy. Much of what is now variously called body work or energy medicine can trace its origins to Reich's therapeutic breakthrough into the biological realm from the psychoanalytical.

During the 1930s, Reich also experimentally investigated a working hypothesis—that

Freud's libido was not merely a metaphor or philosophical principle, but a real biological energy. He undertook a series of experiments designed to study the exact nature of sexual excitation. His experiments showed that there is a measurable energy charge at the surface of the skin which increases during pleasure and decreases during anxiety. Reich's energy investigations into the functions of sexuality and anxiety had profound clinical implications which influenced his emerging "bodymind" therapy.

Bions — Insight into the Origin of Life

In the 1930s, continuing his energy research, Reich entered into a hotly debated area of research-biogenesis. He conducted his bion research (bion is a Greek word meaning "living") in Oslo. Bions are microscopically visible energy vesicles on the borderline between the living and non-living. The experiments, which were captured on motion picture film (Reich was a pioneer in microscopic cinematography) showed living, motile protozoan formations organizing from decaying matter. In 1937, Prof. Roger du Teil of the Centre Universitaire Mediterranean in Nice, France confirmed Reich's bion experiments.

Most scientists of the day interpreted Pasteur's experiments to mean that living things can come only from other living things and ignored Reich's work. In his bion research, Reich has made a contribution that is not yet appreciated. He provided experimental microbiological evidence that life is being created in nature all the time, not just billions of years ago.

Stuart A. Kauffman, asked in his 1993 work, *The Origins of Order: Self-Organization and Selection in Evolution*, "How hard is it to obtain self-reproducing systems...capable of further evolution? Contrary to our expectations, the answer, I think, is that it may be surprisingly easy." (3) A re-evaluation of Reich's bion research seems warranted.

The Discovery of Orgone Energy

Between 1938 and 1940, Reich discovered a new form of energy which he called "orgone" (because the energy was discovered through his study of the orgasm and because it charged organic matter). This is the most controversial aspect of his work. The functional method of thinking Reich employed as a natural scientist led him to the discovery of the life energy. In contrast, Western, mechanistic, reductionistic science has either missed or "explained away" life energy functions whenever they were encountered.

These investigations profoundly changed his work in therapy and medicine. He was no longer dealing with only words and ideas in therapy or with secondary physical symptoms in medicine—he was working with the life energy itself. In the 1950s, Reich's research extended beyond the living organism to nonliving nature with investigations of atmospheric energy and cosmic energy. The foundation was being laid for a new paradigm in physics, in which mass-free energy, and not matter, is primary.

A Pioneer of the Paradigm Shift

Reich was not an “arm-chair” academician or “ivory tower” scientist. He was actively engaged in the great social upheavals of his time. In Europe, in the 1920s and 1930s, Reich brought psychotherapy to working and poor people, using his own funds to found mental health clinics. He fought for women's abortion rights; was an advocate for sexual education and access to contraceptives; and held mass sexual education rallies to discuss these issues. Reich was a leader in the struggle to protect the sexual rights of the young. He described the damage done by routine circumcision; by the prohibitions against natural infantile and childhood masturbation; and by the lack of social support for, and understanding of, healthy adolescent sexual expression. He coined the term “sexual revolution” to describe the development of natural human sexuality. Reich openly confronted the fascism of Hitler and Stalin and worked with anti-Nazi elements in Germany.

In America, Reich was among the first to speak against pharmaceutical companies and the medical industry promoting drug therapies and disparaging all other medical approaches. He warned of the nuclear threat and about the adulteration of our foods. An early “ecologist,” he focused on the deterioration of the environment, the dying of the forests, desertification and the climate change he saw worldwide in the early 1950s.

Reich's ideas were distorted by the establishment and he was maligned personally. The FDA conducted a ten-year campaign against him which culminated in a trial in Portland, Maine in May 1956. A jury found Reich guilty of disobeying a 1954 court injunction against his medical and scientific work. He was sentenced to two years in prison and fined \$10,000. The U.S. court ordered the burning of Reich's books. (4)

In the 1930s, the Nazis burned Wilhelm Reich's books and targeted him for death. He escaped the Nazis. In 1956 and 1960, the U.S. government conducted four book burnings. On November 3, 1957, Reich died in a Federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

Reich was clearly too far ahead of his time. But, however slowly, times do change. In his best-selling book, *The Turning Point*, Fritjof Capra wrote of Reich, “...Wilhelm Reich was a pioneer of the paradigm shift. He has brilliant ideas, a cosmic perspective, and a holistic and dynamic worldview that far surpassed the science of his time and was not appreciated by his contemporaries.” (5)

James S. Gordon, MD, one of the leaders in the creation of the Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine and the NIH, said “Reich was a giant...the first to make explicit the connections among political oppression, emotional illness and disturbed biological functioning and was for years a leader in movements to alleviate all of them. Equally important, Reich was courageous.”

Wilhelm Reich left a legacy for a new generation to claim, a wealth of scientific and medical discoveries that remains to be seriously studied, developed and applied for the betterment of human society, among them:

- microbiological work in biogenesis (6)
- studies of the bioenergetic nature of sexuality and anxiety (7)
- a new medical approach to preventing cancer and other diseases (8)
- a theory of disease based on the presence of stagnant, immobilized life energy and a medical device to remove that deadly energy from rigid musculature (9)
- investigations of the antinuclear properties of orgone energy (10)
- an astrophysical hypothesis of the superimposition of cosmic orgone energy streams as the basis of galaxy formation (11)
- orgone energy weather modification experiments (2, 12)
- advanced mathematical gravity and antigravity equations relating to extraterrestrial space ships and human space travel (2, 12)

Transcending Science and Spirit

In Reich's view, human beings have created two basic, comprehensive thought systems. One is metaphysical and centers around the concept of "God." The other is scientific, focusing on the physical world, asserting that a physical force, usually called the "ether," penetrates everything.

"God" and "ether" are at the heart of religion and science, opposite, independent, self-contained, logical systems. God is subjective, the ether objective. God explains human spiritual existence; ether explains material existence.

Despite the fact that religion and science present contradictory worldviews, they have surprising basic features in common. Both God and ether are unprovable; unknowable; universal; eternal; static; the origin of all matter and energy; and the prime mover and creator of all celestial bodies. God is omniscient, ether the source of consciousness. Both are considered nonexistent in the materialist worldview.

Reich thought the great number of common attributes for God and ether suggested a common origin for these conceptual system. Could orgone energy be a physical reality underlying these concepts? Reich proposed this because orgone energy revealed itself through scientific investigation to have many of the qualities ascribed to both God and ether.

It must be stressed that Reich was not claiming to have discovered God or ether. He believed that he had found a force of nature with many characteristics attributed to both. Orgone energy appeared to be primordial, universally existent, all-permeating, the origin of all energy or motion, and the origin of all matter. It functioned in living organisms as bioenergy and in the universe as cosmic energy.

By the early 1950s, Reich found himself outside the conceptual framework of our mechanistic-mystical civilization of the past 5,000 years. His work had led him to a new

functional realm of thought. In his determined quest to understand the basic question, “What is Life?” Reich was forced to abandon mechanistic and metaphysical thinking, which could not apprehend the “thing in itself,” that is, Life. They were inadequate for the job.

He did not set out to devise a new thought technique. Rather, the effort to understand life necessitated the creation of a new tool—which Reich called orgonomic functionalism. This way of knowing was developed and sharpened in the course of his practical work as a physician and scientist. He struggled to achieve a more accurate understanding of living matter than mechanism or metaphysics had arrived at.

It was this functionalism in thinking that enabled Reich to transcend scientifically the ancient dichotomy between God and ether, subjective and objective, religion and science. The discovery of the cosmic primordial energy revealed a common functioning principle in nature. After a decade of orgone research, Reich began to understand why many of the great physicists, particularly those who studied the ether, had an intense interest in the question of the existence and nature of God: the primordial cosmic energy was at the foundation of both concepts.

Is There Purpose of Design in Nature?

In his research, Reich found a logic in the connections between various natural phenomena. At times, it seemed to him that there is “reason” in the universe. He wondered if the beginnings of religious thought could be traced back to the first successful attempts by humans to observe nature, and reason about it in such a manner that consistent, objective logic emerged. He also proposed that “objective natural science,” at any given time in history, could be viewed as the totality of the logical connections that exist in nature beyond ourselves.

If some process like this does not exist, how can we explain the fact that abstract mathematics can predict objective natural events? How can we comprehend the connections between deep intuition and clear intellectual understanding of natural functions?

Reich came to see that there are objective functions in nature that are rational. His encounter with the reality of an objective rational logic in nature stunned him. In fact, he rejected this insight for years, refusing to believe that there could be a rational core to religion. It was difficult for him to admit that there was validity to the idea of an objective, rational power governing the universe. He did not, however, believe that a personified being or absolute spirit governed creation. He did come to accept that there is scientific confirmation for the existence of a physical power in the universe at the root of all being.

When Reich experienced the existence of an objective functional logic in nature beyond his personal being, it had a profound emotional and intellectual impact that helped him begin to understand the necessity of the idea of “God” among almost all peoples of all times. To Reich, God appeared to be the logical result of human awareness of an objective natural

function in nature.

What distinguishes Reich's "God" from the metaphysical idea of God and the physical concept of ether? In metaphysics and mysticism, God is unknowable by definition. In physics, the ether is unprovable and, therefore, unknowable, or nonexistent. In Reich's view, with the discovery of the primordial cosmic energy, humanity actually had discovered its "God." He believed human beings can learn to know their God practically, through scientific investigation of the Life Energy.

Reich thought that to investigate nature scientifically, one had to literally love the object of investigation. He intuited that an awareness of the law of love leads to an awareness of the law of life. And the awareness of the law of life brings one to an awareness of God.

Reich discovered the orgone energy in his effort to understand the enigma of love. He made scientific observations of the Life Energy, which brought him to the phenomenon called God. In studying the cosmic orgone energy, one needs to love the Life Energy being investigated to understand the lawful functioning of Life. By learning to comprehend Life, one comes into contact with, and begins to know and love, the objective natural power that governs the universe (which some call God).

Through the science of orgonomy, he could investigate and begin to know, as well as to love, the cosmic power at the source of our being, an achievement which has eluded science and religion for millennia.

Conclusion

The "purpose" that drove Wilhelm Reich was the vital functioning of the unimpeded life energy in his organism, which expressed itself in love, work and an intense yearning to know ever more deeply. Reich functioned at a level that few human beings reach. Between 1934-39, the turbulent politics of his era forced him to move five times, leaving behind family, colleagues, students, possessions and livelihood. In 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II, Reich fled for his life from Europe to the United States. There he encountered further fierce opposition, which ended tragically for him.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Reich's views, it is difficult to deny that he accomplished an enormous amount during this tumultuous period. It was a powerful sense of purpose in life that allowed him to accomplish so much under extremely difficult social circumstances. He pioneered new forms of medicine and science; wrote and published many influential books and articles, and continued to investigate nature, blazing trails others now walk. He was determined to pursue his own truth despite opposition from those in power seeking to maintain the status quo. Fifty years after his death, the story of his courageous life and passionate search for truth still inspires many women and men all across our planet

In 1968, this author first encountered the work of Wilhelm Reich through his book, The

Murder of Christ, an investigation into the origin of the emotional power of the Jesus story for people on all five continents over the past 2000 years, a story of passion, courage and truth. A quotation from *The Murder of Christ* captures something essential in Reich the man that seems a fitting way to close:

“There is only one common rule valid in finding the special truth valid for you. That is to learn to listen patiently into yourself, to give yourself a chance to find your own way which is yours and nobody else's way. This leads not into chaos and wild anarchism but ultimately into the realm where the common truth for all is rooted...the basic truth in all teachings of mankind are alike and amount to only one common thing: To find your way to the thing you feel when you love dearly, or when you create, or when you build your home, or when you give birth to your children or when you look at the stars at night. (13)

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