

**From the Worthship service at Glasgow Unitarian Church 23 March 2014, led by
Barry Bell**

Religiosity or Spirituality? – does it matter what we call it?

I will be addressing – as I usually do in one way or another - the “good” or “god-like” part of “being human” which lies within all human beings, as I ask this question.

Today I will be suggesting that this wonderful thing - which I am happy to call human spirituality - is the root of that which those with a different worldview and personal faith from mine call by different names - names such as divinity, religiosity, humanity, conscience, ethics.

I will be suggesting that we need to look beyond the divisions which differing worldviews and names can and do create, and that we need to look to that which we human beings **share** when wrestling with the big questions which the spiritual part of “being human” brings, questions about ourselves and how we relate to the cosmos – questions such as How do we come to be here? Why are we as we are? Do we have some kind of “higher purpose”? What happens when we die?, and that we need to do both these things if we are to find an intrinsically uniting, rather than an intrinsically dividing, way of responding to, using, and growing the good parts of “being human”.

A major purpose here is to address the fact that many – even within this very liberal movement – see the term spirituality as disconcertingly unclear and “airy-fairy”, and to offer a positive way of engaging better with the term.

As we do this let’s not lose sight of the fact that the term “religion” is also less than fully clear, as evidenced in part of a relatively recent ruling of Britain’s Supreme Court that Scientology is a religion.

Lord Toulson, giving the judgement, wrote that “religion should not be confined to religions which recognise a supreme deity”, and went on to describe religion as “a spiritual or non-secular belief system, held by a group of adherents, which claims to explain mankind's place in the universe and relationship with the infinite”.

Before going further I should perhaps share something with you.

My primary insight from a life-changing spiritual awakening nine years ago – an experience which others might call a mystic encounter, one not entirely dissimilar to what evangelical Christians would call “taking Jesus into my heart” - was to see religion as secondary to spirituality, and **not** the other way round.

I continue to see traditional religion as being neither the only nor necessarily the best way to respond to the simple reality of human spirituality, and also as being inherently divisive when, as it commonly does, it includes the requirement to hold dogmatic shared faith in the certain truth of **their view** of “mankind's place in the universe and relationship with the infinite”.

On the plus side of religion, I do however also keep finding within established religious practices more and more which does actually enable spiritual growth.

Let's look now at “what it is to be human” from a less religion-centred worldview - that of spiritual humanism.

The “spiritual humanist” hypothesis – one I believe to be true as part of my personal faith – is that spirituality is an innate part of us, and ultimately responsible for many of the “good” parts of “being human”.

I, and a growing number of others, think that what we **do** with our human spirituality is ultimately more important than what we variously may believe to lie behind the existence of such spirituality.

I'll put that a slightly different way. I think that pretty much all Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists as well as a growing number of others believe that if we are to create a better world then it is the actual **enabling** of human beings to respond more fully to this spiritual part of being human which is of primary importance, and not what we may variously believe to be the how's and why's of human spirituality or the tools we use to achieve such enablement.

This not only relegates into second place the divisive issue of the ultimate truth - or otherwise - of the various answers offered to the “big” questions we ask about what it is to be human and our relationship to the cosmos but also allows us to hold, and be driven by, non-dogmatic personal faith in our own choice of answers to these questions from within spiritual, religious, scientific, political and secular world-views.

“Spirituality” then is for me a wide term representing the entirety of the very real “good” or “god-like” part of being human which sits within us **alongside** other parts such as intellect and emotion, with humanitarianism, a sense of the divine, religiosity, conscience, ethics, compassion, and love as parts of this, each with their own range of positive ways in which we can respond to them.

There are of course considerable overlaps here, and some will use one of these words to describe pretty much the same part of being human for which others will use a different word.

As we consider the different ways in which we can respond to the “good” part of being human, and the terms we may use for this, I bring you now my thoughts on the subject of “strong agnosticism”.

It seems to me that agnostics are usually dismissed, both by the committed theist and the committed atheist, as fence-sitters, as people who are simply unable to make up their minds.

There are however a growing number of us – including I would think most current Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists - whose agnosticism is of the "strong" variety, and lies at the heart of our personal faith.

We have made up our mind that not only do **we** not know the absolute truth behind that part of being human which is our sense of the divine but also that **no-one** can know this with certainty.

We echo the view of André Comte-Sponville (author of “The Book of Atheist Spirituality”) that in these matters "people should know that they believe and not believe that they know".

It is perfectly compatible to be agnostic in this sense and also to be theist or atheist in the sense of **believing** in the probable existence, or the probable absence, of the sort of supernatural interventionist deity which the word “God” is usually used to represent.

This sort of non-dogmatic theism and non-dogmatic atheism is an entirely legitimate response to the reality which is human spirituality and human spiritual awareness. It is much less divisive than what is usually required of the “believer” by traditional “shared faith” religions.

Central to this world-view is the way in which we **hold** our personal faith. A way which allows us to hold, and to be driven by, our own worldview of the cosmos and of life within it – whatever that may be – whilst not falling into the inherently divisive fundamentalist practice of dogmatically claiming certainty for what is ultimately an unverifiable view.

I believe that this inclusive way of holding personal faith lies at the heart of all Unitarian communities, and also that of many other spiritual, religious, and ethical communities.

Religiosity or spirituality – does it matter what we call it?

It is really important to appreciate the relationship between our “sense of the divine” and the “good” or “god-like” part of being human.

In my worldview and personal faith, the good (or god-like) part of being human - the part I call human spirituality - is wider than, and inclusive of, our sense of the divine.

I, and virtually all of the Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists I know, agree that when responding to our spirituality we need to avoid the unacceptable divisiveness of dogmatic fundamentalism of all kinds.

We hold our diverse personal faiths about the nature of what it is to be human and our relationship to the cosmos non-dogmatically, whilst allowing it to drive us.

In answer then to the question “Religiosity or Spirituality – does it matter what we call it?” my answer is “No – and yes!”

This does **not** however mean that I am unable to make up my mind.

When I say “no, it doesn’t”, what I mean is that it really doesn’t matter that people with different worldviews call these things by different names so long as all respond well to them.

When I say “yes, it does” what I mean is that it really does matter that people with different worldviews call these things by different names when this either prevents people from responding in a uniting and positive way to these parts of being human or encourages them to think less of, and do damage to, one another, to other life forms, or to our planet.

Barry Bell