

## **Unitarian worship service on 17 October 2010 led by Barry Bell**

### **Science, Faith, and Unitarians**

#### **Introducing the challenge**

There is much scope for challenge between science and faith. I believe that there are also ways of resolving these. The key is a better understanding of what science and faith are, and of their relationship with reason, rationality, and spirituality.

Most Unitarians start out with a better such understanding than most since the relationship between reason and religion is pretty central to Unitarian thinking, and this subject is one we regularly engage with.

I would stress to those new to us that, as always in a Unitarian service, what you get from me as the worship leader are my thoughts and those thoughts of others which I may choose to put in front of you – you are free to agree or disagree, and hopefully to find something of worth and meaning in what is put before you.

Science involves the creation of theories through the application of reason to that which can be identified and measured. It is a purely rational way of “knowing”. Faith involves subscribing to religious or spiritual practices and beliefs which go beyond the rational, which are designed to meet the demands of our spirituality, and which depend upon a different and more subjective way of “knowing”.

It can be difficult for people with a high involvement in one of these ways of knowing to make proper judgement of the other, as it is natural for their view of the other to be distorted. This happens not only through an undue seeking out of those parts of the other which they can claim as supporting what they “know”, but also through a willingness to avoid, belittle, or even dismiss those parts of the other which appear to contradict what they “know”.

This is best illustrated with a concrete example of an encounter between a fundamentalist person of science and a fundamentalist person of faith which you may have seen, and even if not should be able to clearly imagine.

This encounter was first shown in the Channel 4 TV documentary “the root of all evil”, originally screened in two 1-hour parts in 2006, and which was based on the book “the God delusion” by fundamentalist atheist and scientist Richard Dawkins.

It was re-screened in 2010 as a single two-hour documentary under the title “the God delusion”.

The documentary gave us Dawkins' informed and excellent description of how we form and test theories using the scientific process, and his uninformed and flawed view of how we form and test ideas about “the big human questions” using faith. It gave us the uninformed and flawed view of science, and the informed yet (to me) unhelpful view of faith taken by the fundamentalist Christian Ted Haggard, who was then senior pastor of a Baptist megachurch in the USA bible belt.

Take a moment to picture the showpiece - a wonderful face-to-face “discussion” between Dawkins and Haggard about evolution. You may not be surprised that it ended up with each accusing the other of arrogance. For my money each was entirely correct in their claim!

Haggard abused the skepticism which is such a vital part of science, treating the fact that every scientific theory ever posed is held open to be discarded or revised in the light of later evidence as weakness, and as sufficient reason to dismiss any inconvenient scientific theory regardless of supporting evidence. Dawkins for his part simply dismissed the spirituality and openness to “other ways of knowing” which lie at the root of faith.

Haggard insisted on the supremacy of the bible-based Abrahamic view on the grounds both that it has been held for millennia and that it was the literal word of God. Dawkins insisted on the supremacy of the Darwinian theory of evolution on the grounds both of sound reasoning and an unassailable mass of physical evidence.

**They discounted the other’s way of knowing, each believing “their” way of knowing to be fundamentally superior.**

Is such impasse with name-calling at all helpful?

Does it move us forward at all?

Or does it merely show up the unnecessary divisions created by the taking of a fundamentalist stance?

### **Defining human reason and human spirituality**

Most people have a pretty clear understanding of what is meant by the term “human reason”. Clear understanding of what is meant by the term “human spirituality” is much harder to find – the term is commonly used in very different ways to mean very different things, and is often taken as synonymous with other terms such as “soul”. So it is necessary for me to explain what I think of when I use the term human spirituality.

- I mean that within all of us which actually **causes** us to ask the big questions, such as "why am I here?"
- I mean that within all of us which underpins both our need to seek justice and our sense of right and wrong,
- I mean that within all of us which allows us to appreciate a beautiful sunset or a piece of art.
- I mean that within all of us which both makes us seek and allows us to find **worth and meaning in life.**
- I mean that within all of us which allows us to go beyond self-interest in a desire to help our fellow man.
- I mean that within all of us which inspires, maintains, and is reflected **within** religions and spiritual movements.
- I mean that within all of us which gives us a sense of **connectedness** - with each other, with our world, with our universe, and with whatever forces may be inside us, surrounding us, and beyond us
- I mean that within all of us which gives us our sense of something greater than ourselves – our **sense of the divine.**

## **Moving forward**

The Unitarian view provides a useful way to move forward, particularly our insistence upon the right to apply both reason and new knowledge and understanding within religion.

As a Unitarian and spiritual humanist, I see the existence of human spiritual awareness as both real and as a wonderful mystery which goes beyond the merely rational, and which is independent of any answers to the questions which our spirituality drives us to ask. Importantly, I see the secular answer “there **is** only the rational” as being no less speculative than any of the religious answers.

In common with most Unitarians I believe adherence to a particular religion or philosophy to be only one of a number of appropriate ways for an individual to respond to their spirituality. I hold that we are best united through the reality of our shared human spirituality and our **need** for answers rather than through our entirely legitimate personal faith in any one of the different answers we variously “know” to be right.

Let me reiterate so that we are clear. I am saying that all humans have (amongst other things) both reason **and** spirituality. I am saying that science and rationality relate to human reason, and that religions and faith relate to human spirituality.

I am saying that we need to use **both** if we are to move forward.

I am saying that people **can** move beyond divisive insistence on exclusive ownership of the whole truth, and towards uniting in common purpose.

## **What we need to do**

We Unitarians already know a way forward.

We already promote gratitude, wonder, and reverence for our privileged position as the only spiritually-aware species which we yet know of.

We already encourage the constructive combined use of our reason **and** our spirituality.

We already encourage the willingness to revise both reason-based theory **and** spirituality-based faith and practice in the light of new knowledge and understanding.

## **We have a responsibility to make this approach much better known and understood.**

I do not underestimate the challenge for us in seeking to provide leadership in this. Those who are comfortable with a traditional “one god” faith - even those who are seeking broad family - tend to dismiss us as failing Christians and as “unbelievers”. Those who are comfortable with a purely rational worldview are usually put off both by our Protestant Christian trappings and by our openness to other ways of “knowing”.

But surely we need to try.