

Fairy Stories, Faith, and Inclusive Spirituality

Taken from a Worthship service led by Barry Bell on 26 August 2012 at Glasgow Unitarian Church

We will be considering here the reality that some people dismiss the holding of any faith in religious speculation as belief in fairy stories whilst some others regard the holding of faith in their particular religious speculations as giving them the right to control what those currently outside of their faith do, and we will consider less divisive ways of responding to “being human” than either of these extreme positions.

We start with a statement from Stephen Hawking the cosmologist, who appears to fall into the first category.

“I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken-down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.”

Stephen Hawking

This got me thinking, as I hope it has you, and my first thoughts were that the whole "heaven and hell" thing certainly does relate to fear. What follows are my thoughts on **why** it may be that human beings have tended to have faith in things like heaven and hell.

It is widely held that we are the only self-aware and spiritually-aware life-form of which we can be certain, and we may indeed be unique in the universe (or should that be universes?) in that we, through our ability to use our reason and experience, have escaped from living only in the present and operating essentially by genetically-programmed response or instinct into being able to make reasoned response and into being able to contemplate both our past and our future.

Both of these results of evolution are quite wonderful, but the latter is also very scary. I don't think that it should surprise us then that we have historically envisaged various forms of outside help – higher powers - both to help us deal with our fears and as a response to the big questions about our very existence which our spirituality forces us to ask – How did we get here? What is our purpose? What happens when we die?

This view of why we have been happy to place our faith in religious concepts of “higher powers” is not just mine. It is a view which others including Bishop John Shelby Spong and other Progressive Christians have also reached, and one which I feel sure many more will reach given our current and growing knowledge of ourselves, our planet, and our universe.

I think that there is however another reason why we have been happy to place faith in religious concepts such as “higher powers”, “heaven and hell”, “salvation”, and “re-incarnation”. This is that they bring some sort of ultimate justice to a world which we recognise to be fundamentally unjust, justice which we desire at a very basic level indeed.

These understandings of why we have felt driven to hold personal faith in various religious concepts do not preclude the possible existence of such powers or forces or of the various speculated mechanisms through which we relate to them.

They do however give grounds to question the wisdom of dogmatically holding the existence of any one particular defined higher power – and any defined relationship of human beings to it – as certainty.

More importantly, they give grounds to question the wisdom of allowing some to demand - on the “authority” of such higher power - that all must live in accordance with dogmatic definitions of what that power requires of us or face the consequences.

For me, “sense of justice”, “conscience”, “ethics” and “the desire to be less selfish and more caring human beings” are all positive responses to a very real, and not in the least speculative, part of being human – that part which I and many others are happy to call spirituality, and which yet more people are happy to see and respect simply as the “good” part of our humanity.

In addition, I see our sense of awe and wonder, our sense of beauty, our sense of connectedness, of the divine, of some power greater than our individual selves as similarly positive responses to our spirituality, and deserving of the same respect.

These senses, and our responses to them, deserve much more than to be sneered at as superstition, illusion, or delusion by those who place their faith entirely in human reason, or to be dismissed as “the heresy of infidels” by those of other faiths just because our responses don’t align with their faith in the certain truth of their particular speculation about the nature of such possibly-existent “higher power” and of our relationship with it.

These senses, which seem to me to be to be a very real part of being human, do not feel like “fairy stories” to me.

So where does this take us? Is there value in engaging with our spirituality outside the straightjacket usually imposed through creed and dogma upon believers of religious and other speculations, in a form of engagement sometimes referred to as Inclusive Spirituality? I certainly think so, and so – for the most part - do Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, who claim to practice “creedless religion”.

I have no problem whatsoever with people holding personal faith in spiritual or religious speculations which hold worth and meaning for them. I see this as a legitimate response to spirituality, indeed one which really chooses us rather than the other way round.

I, and every Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist I know, do however have a very real problem with such speculations being dogmatically represented as certainties which others must accept and live their lives by.

I would like to suggest a way forward which might help. Let’s first look at the world-views of “one-source” religions and of rationalists, and then at an alternative.

In the worldview of “one source” religions, “their” speculated higher power is always seen as coming first, and so our spirituality is necessarily seen as both given by, and secondary to, that particular power. In a secular variation of this worldview as taken by rationalists, the speculated “power” is simply the supremacy of human reason – the touchstone of the Enlightenment - with spirituality and religiosity often seen as illusory, irrelevant, or infantile.

In the worldview of Inclusive Spirituality, the primary “power” is collective human spirituality. Self-awareness and then spiritual awareness are seen as evolving within human beings and our diverse speculations of other possibly-existing “higher powers” coming later, both as an outcome of this awareness and as a response to our spirituality.

This worldview enables us to be united in responding to our spirituality and enabling spiritual growth whilst remaining free to hold other personal faiths and beliefs which may or may not include faith in a particular higher power as the ultimate source of our spirituality, or faith in a particular force surrounding us and with which we interact through our spirituality.

Where this is leading us is to no small thing. It is to considering this different worldview of the spiritual part of being human.

Engaging with our spirituality in this more open way – what Unitarians, Unitarian Universalists, and others have started to call Inclusive Spirituality - feels good to me.

Engaging in a way which allows us to remain open to the possibility of something our spirituality may be connecting us with and to the possibility that our spirituality exists because of such a power, but which does not depend either upon one particular definition of such power or force and of our relationship to it which all must accept, or indeed even upon the certain existence of any such defined power or force, feels good to me.

Engaging positively with our quite unavoidable holding of diverse personal faiths and beliefs in response to both our spirituality and our reason – personal faiths and beliefs which quite properly drive us - feels good to me.

Engaging In a way which encourages us to focus on expanding the good within us through enabling spiritual growth in a more open way - one free of dogmatic belief in the certain truth of only one particular set of speculations, religious or otherwise – feels good to me.

I feel that this is a good and very uniting way of engaging with being human, and one which fits in well with our current knowledge of ourselves, of our planet, and of our universe. It is certainly one which enables us to work together with others in what I like to call a “Kindom of Good”.

Those familiar with the with the 19th Century writings of Thomas Starr King – in a time when virtually all Unitarians and Universalists identified as God-fearing Christians - will perhaps hear in what I am about to say an echo of his famous statement - “Universalists think God is too good not to save all human beings, whilst Unitarians think all human beings are too good for God not to save”

Unitarians and Universalists across the pond have moved on. I am very much in line with the open position most Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists over there now take – one of Inclusive Spirituality and of holding their various personal faiths and beliefs non-dogmatically.

I would suggest to you that an appropriate representation of this position would be "holding shared faith in the power of collective human spirituality – the good in humankind - whilst supporting the right of all to hold personal faith without persecution"

I think this is a very powerful and very positive description of exactly what our community is all about.

It differentiates us from "faith only in human reason" as held by rationalists (who appear to view "spirituality" as superstition, illusion, or delusion) and from "faith in the certain existence of, and certain defined relationship of us to, a particular higher power" as held by our various religions (who appear to view spirituality as subservient to their particular speculation and to dismiss as lesser beings those infidels who do not believe in the truth of "their" certainty).

At the same time it allows us to see our unity with all humanity through our shared human spirituality.

It's an exciting and inclusive way of looking at human spirituality, perhaps better described as "an approach to what it is to be human" than as a religion, and is completely in line both with 21st Century knowledge and values and with the past experience of humankind.

It's a way which might enable otherwise good people to escape from the dogmatic ways of holding faith and beliefs which lead – amongst other and much worse things - to atheists being sneered at by some theists in exactly the same way that some atheists sneer at theists, each arrogantly calling the others' beliefs stupid or misguided, and being respectively castigated for "being non-believers" or for "believing in fairy stories".

We could I think do much worse than to describe our Unitarian communities as "holding shared faith in the power of collective human spirituality – the good in mankind - whilst supporting the right of all to hold personal faith without persecution"

Barry Bell