

## Hamilton Talk

Friends, I don't know how this talk has been advertised. It is about religion and spirituality and if that is not what you are expecting, I assure you, I would not be at all offended if you left now. I don't want you to feel bored or uncomfortable.

I called this talk „Christian spirituality for people who are nervous about words like God and Sin and Salvation“ because it seems to me that those words set up obstacles for many people in this country. I get the impression that people describe themselves as agnostic or atheist by default. They are rejecting definitions of the „god“ word that you and I would also find unacceptable. It's what I would call the kindergarten image of the divine, God in human image that is somewhere between a giant Superman and Santa Claus. At the same time many of people who claim to be agnostic, are trying to define the mystery they encounter in the depths of human experience. So what is the problem? Richard Dawkin would have us believe that all religion is delusion. Is it?

Let us imagine for a moment, a situation in which all the world's religions cease to exist. There is no religion at all. Richard Dawkin prayed for it to vanish and it did.

So now - where do people place their sense of wonder? Their moments of sacred awe? How do we explain abstract values that don't fit material survival? Beauty, for example. The fullness of the heart we call love. And what about our desire for perfection? It seems that we all have some notion of perfection wired into us. Because nothing in nature is perfect, it was once thought that our knowledge of perfection came from the womb experience. These days, we know that the time in the womb is far from peaceful. It is a part of the life struggle and has tension and moments of trauma. So how do we know perfection? Did we bring it with us from a pre-womb state? Why do we lean towards it? Is it our destiny?

If some giant broom swept away all religion, we'd immediately start inventing new religious rituals to satisfy the longing that exists beyond our basic human needs.

I'm reminded of statements from two friends, both honestly agnostic. One says she does not believe in God but she does believe in a spirit world. She says she has experience of that spirit world. Well, I would not call that friend agnostic but I respect her right to wear that label if she so chooses.

Another friend sees life as accidental and he once challenged me to prove the objective existence of God. I replied that I couldn't do that. Human knowledge comes from perception through a limited

sensate system, so everything is subjective. I know the universe through what I can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and that too, is the way we measure scientific evidence. Our knowledge of the world has been opened wide with space probes and electron microscopes, but we still access this information through our senses. If we had a different set of senses, reality would probably appear very different. So for us all, reality is subjective. When we say the universe is this or the universe is that, what we really mean is – we perceive the universe to be this, we perceive it to be that. It is impossible to objectively define anything.

My friend said okay, state your case for God through your perception. So I sided with computer mathematics, because I knew he would respect such an answer. We deduce from the visible echo of the big bang, that the age of the universe is approximately 15 billion years. Physicists have worked out that it would be impossible in that time, for the universe to have developed in a random fashion. I then asked this friend, „Do you believe in an intelligent universe?“

He replied. „Yes, but that’s not – ” and then he stopped. That’s when I realised that what he was rejecting was a fundamentalist faith that he had outgrown.

What I could not share with him, was the experience of the mystery we call God. Negative experience had created in him a certain deafness, so talking about spirituality, prayer, transcendence, would have been like trying to describe a bellbird’s song to someone physically without hearing. But he was clearly seeking. What I could suggest to him was that he might discover more about the divine spark in himself and in others, if he spent a little time each day, reflecting on his existence and the pattern of events in his life.

These two friends had this in common; they had rejected religion at an early stage of faith and now, in mid life, they imagined that the kindergarten class represented the entire school of spiritual experience.

In a Hindu tradition there is a statement: „It is impossible to know God; but God is not unknown.“ Think about that for a moment. It’s the paradox at the heart of all faith. Jewish mystics put it another way. They say that we live in 1% of reality, knowing only what we perceive through out limited senses. The other 99%, the spiritual realm is all around us. In the Christian mystical traditions we could probably say something like this: It is not possible to know absolute Truth by the ordinary workings of the human mind. Truth can only be known by the heart, and the way to the heart is the path of devotion.

That is an open statement and I would not put too narrow a definition on that word 'devotion' except to say that it's about love. People who give themselves away in love come close to that boundary between the 1% and the 99% per cent. They tap into the greater reality. They find themselves in a certain Presence of Light and Peace that works like a yeast in their lives. Often, they are reluctant to call it by name and choose words like the Numinous or the Ineffable, but the simplest way to talk about this greater reality is to call it God. Poetry, Religion and Quantum Physics come together when we say, this greater reality is all there is. The huge diversity of creation flows out of it and returns to it. Nothing is separate from it. It is a seamless whole.

Both my agnostic friends had started out on Christian paths and come to a standstill over some problem of belief. This happens. To use the analogy of journey, we begin our faith pilgrimage on a narrow path; but that path grows wider as we travel, until we find ourselves in a place of oneness where there are no fences, indeed, no horizons. Spiritual journey is always to a wider place. Religion is not the journey. The function of Religion is to provide maps and signposts and food, to help us on our way. At the early stage of travel, we all have a tendency to sit on the road and worship the signposts. Some of our fellow pilgrims expect us to do just that.

Mistaking the signpost for the road, the map for the journey, belongs to first stage spirituality. For Christians, most of the road signs come from the Bible. They are valuable, they offer excellent guidance, but in early journey, we do have that tendency to make an idol of Scripture.

The Jesuit teacher Anthony de Mello was very fond of parables. He told this story. 'A man was going to Bombay which was three days journey from his home. He said goodbye to his neighbour and set off with a stick and a bundle on his back. To the neighbour's great surprise, the man returned that same afternoon.

'I thought you were going to Bombay!' the neighbour said.

'Yes, yes, I went to Bombay,' the man said.

'That's impossible!' the neighbour replied.

But the man insisted that he had indeed, been to Bombay.

'What did it look like?' the neighbour demanded.

The man said, 'It was yellow, on a pole and it had a bird sitting on top.'

Anthony de Mello was reminding us that while we should never underestimate the value of signposts, we should not see them as substitute for the journey.

So what is the journey? I'd describe it as life experience with awareness – awareness of self, awareness of the interconnectedness of all things, awareness of the layers of mystery that underline our experience, and awareness of the way love unlocks the secrets of these mysteries.

An anonymous 15<sup>th</sup> Century monk described it this way: „Find thyself, tis half the path to God; then lose thyself and the rest of the way is trod.“

In this second stage of journey, the losing of self, we discover that our relationship to the divine is the relationship of the wave to the ocean.

If some people are nervous about the word God, even more feel uncomfortable about the word sin. Sin has occupied a place in Christianity that is different from other world religions and this has come about through atonement theology – attempts to make sense of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, whom we see as God incarnate.

I'm not a fan of atonement theology. I view it as part of that kindergarten stage of faith which divides our existence, labelling one part good and the other evil according to our personal and social notions of comfort or discomfort. Atonement theology reinforces that divided view of ourselves, a divided view of the world. It tends to create and maintain attitudes of „us“ and „them“. For centuries it has fed our natural fears.

So how did we get landed with all this guilt? Well, it's in Scripture of course, but Scripture is faith story, and it reveals what people thought about themselves and their relationship to the mystery of the divine. So we can't dismiss this aspect of Scripture. It is authentic in its depiction of the human struggle. But in Scripture there are also magnificent passages about wholeness, celebrations of mature spirituality.

The Biblical story of The Fall is a powerful myth that attempts to describe the reason for human struggle with good and evil. Although it's in Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, it was not written until the time of the Babylonian exile, when the Hebrews were literally a fallen people, faced with the possibility of extinction. The serpent, revered by Moses and the Israelites in the desert, is the symbol of evil in the Garden of Eden. Why? Maybe it was because the Babylonians, the great enemy, worshipped the serpent because it represented wisdom. I guess you all know that story of Adam and Eve, how they disobeyed God by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, and were cast out of Paradise. The Hebrews in exile believed that they were in an alien land because they hadn't been faithful to God. We read that in their laments.

So while we understand that, we still recognise that there is more to the myth of The Fall, than a parable of history. I mentioned earlier that we have a notion of perfection in us - memory of our own Garden of Eden. At a deep level we also have a sense of loss and a desire to return to that blissful state. This is something which seems to be a part of all people, regardless of culture and tradition.

As we get older, life seems to become simpler. At this stage I could state my beliefs quite simply. I believe that we come from a greater reality – which we call God – and we return to that reality, and our little time of incarnation is for the growth of the soul – or spirit or consciousness, whatever term you prefer. I believe that the so-called ‘fall’ is our incarnation, our birth into this world. It is a law of the natural world that there can be no growth without tension, and life school is not easy. It is messy, painful, glorious – and hard work. Let’s look at the rich symbols offered in the story of The Fall. Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. There were not two trees or two fruits on one tree. Awareness of good and evil are contained in the one fruit. To know one, we must know the other. Isn’t that so?

I have no doubt that historically, notions of heaven and hell were used to manipulate and control people through their ultimate fear – the fear of death. For me, heaven and hell are states of mind that we carry with us through the doorway of death, and I believe that there is no judgement, simply a return home to the state we’ve always known.

A knowledge of good and evil accompanies our journey. As the child becomes socialised, he or she learns the rules of social good and understands failure to obey those rules, as evil. That’s at the surface of understanding. Beneath that we recognise that we are not perfect, and in kindergarten Christianity, we try to reject that part of ourselves – mostly by projecting it out on other people – us and them. Further down the road, we cautiously entertain the Jungian view of the shadow and our need to own it. It is only in mature faith that we recognise the shadow as spiritual gift. It is our darkness that always holds the seed of light for future growth. If I don’t own my shadow, I miss that transcendence.

Mother Teresa was once asked by a reporter, why she chose to look after the dying and destitute. She shocked the reporter with her answer. She said, „I do it to combat the Hitler in me.“

Isn’t that a wonderful statement? In utter simplicity, it contains volumes of theology and psychology.

We belong to a world where nothing is perfect; everything is in a state of change. In this natural world the strongest instinct is the instinct for survival. That instinct functions as the ego and its tool is fear. Fear has its uses. It keeps us safe, especially when we are young. The „me first“ aspect of the ego, also nourishes and protects the young. But as we near mid-life we are called into the mystery of paradox. We feel the need to break out of the small prison of self, into a wider existence. We see the tooth and claw instinct for animal survival as the shadow in our lives. It has potential for evil. If we use it for transcendence it has potential for growth.

So does Christianity place too much emphasis on sin? Perhaps not enough. By that, I mean that the traditional understanding of sin has been that it's the result of temptation by a mythic being. Sin is something to be projected and rejected. That understanding can be dangerous. We end up trying to reject an aspect of ourselves. That „me first“ instinct which can become distorted, violent, greedy, contains the gift of potential growth. It is connected to a strength that can be developed for the greater good. Good and evil are contained in the same fruit.

God and sin - both of those words can have shallow meaning. The last of the three words is 'salvation' and that has a lot of people running for cover. It has connotation of „rescue“, of having to do as we are told in order to avoid the flames of hell. I suppose there is a whiff of truth about that. We are social animals. If heaven and hell are states of mind, then living and working for the greater good, does give a sense of fulfilment, whereas antisocial behaviour tends to reinforce negative emotion. The word salvation comes from *salvare* in Latin, the same source as the word *salve* or ointment. We can see it as meaning to heal or make whole.

This of course, brings us to the heart of Christian faith and our understanding of Jesus Christ as God incarnate. I think that people who have difficulty with the divinity of Jesus, probably have difficulty with the divine in themselves.

In reflecting on this, we get into the wordless area of mystery, but words can be used as metaphor in parable or allegory. I'd tell it like this: We all have sparks of the divine within us. Throughout history, larger sparks have come to us as teachers when we have needed them in life.

We know some of the bright lights of our era: Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela – you can make your own list. But once, two thousand years ago, the great flame of God joined us to show us the way. And however we interpret what men wrote about him, his teachings unwrap for us the truth of who we are. Nor did he leave us. We know the continuing guidance of that Presence.

So where does this leave atonement theology? Jesus as sacrifice for our sins? For me that is limited human reasoning, first stage Christianity, which thinks in terms of a God who punishes and rewards. The Presence we know is greater than that.

Friends, our human understanding of existence is trapped between the walls of birth and death. The great fire of God walked through both these walls to bring us to a larger place of awareness, a place beyond division.

Salvation. Salve. To heal or make whole.

The Benedictine Sister Macrina Wiederkehr puts this awareness into poetry. I'll leave it with you as a blessing. She writes:

*O frail and glorious creature  
whoever you are,  
cherish this truth:  
there are hints of glory in your being,  
seeds of splendor,  
traces of holiness.  
To be divine is your destiny.  
Your original union  
yearns for a place in your life.  
Walk gently then, with your frailty,  
Allow it to bless you.  
It will not cripple you  
unless you run from it.  
Embrace it instead.  
Carry it as one carries  
the cherished secret of a great wealth  
hidden away in a holy, eternal space  
like a treasure in a field.*