Harmony, Science and Spirituality

Rupert Sheldrake

From a talk at the Harmony, Food and Farming Conference, organised by the Sustainable Food Trust, Llandovery College, 10 July 2017.

Science and spirituality at first seem completely separate categories. Within the mechanistic world view that's predominated since the 17th century, the entire universe is the realm of science and is made up of inanimate matter moving in machine-like ways, whereas spirituality is seen as something entirely subjective going on inside human heads. That's the standard view that we've grown up with, a kind of Cartesian split, where the mind is just confined to us. We're the only things within nature that have minds or consciousness, the rest of nature is unconscious.

But the traditional view of the cosmos in all religious traditions is that the cosmos is not an unconscious machine, but is more like a living organism. This is something that science is bringing back. The Big Bang theory, for example, is rather like those ancient cosmogonies which describe the origin of the universe through the hatching of a cosmic egg, and it gives us the picture of a universe that's been hatched and then growing and developing and evolving for nearly 14 billion years. The real difference between religious and non-religious points of view is that, for the non-religious, or at least the non-spiritual, the universe is has no consciousness. Minds are just inside brains. It's a cerebro-centric view of consciousness. We've all grown up with that. It's a standard default position in our academic and intellectual world.

But all traditional views see that the universe is fundamentally conscious: consciousness underlies the whole universe and permeates it. One way of putting this view theologically is panentheism: God is everywhere and everything's in God, God is in nature and nature is in God. That's the view I myself think is the most reasonable and makes best sense of the world we live in. From that point of view, spiritual practices are not just about things going on inside our brains, they're about ways of connecting with this much wider universe.

For example, gratitude is a spiritual practice that all religions encourage and, indeed, many secular practices encourage it too, and there's now been a lot of

research in the realm of positive psychology that shows that being grateful makes us happier. There are very strong correlations between people who are grateful and people who are happy. To such evidence sceptics respond, 'Well, of course these people are grateful: they are grateful because they're happy'. Yet the evidence suggests that when we do experiments in which we take people who are neither particularly happy, nor particularly grateful, and divide then into groups who either do gratefulness practices, or do not, the groups who practice gratitude are much happier than those that don't.[1] It's good for us. In fact, most spiritual practices that have been investigated scientifically turn out to be very good for us.

Now, meditation is another one. In the Buddhist and Hindu traditions and the Christian and the Jewish and the Sufi traditions, meditation is about connecting our minds with the underlying mind of God or the mind permeating the cosmos. Within modern secular world, meditation's about doing some that helps your brain work in such a way that you get neurotransmitters released that reduce stress and so forth. Anyway, the science shows meditation is good for you and, whatever we believe it's doing, it's actually doing us good.[2] But for those who see the cosmos as permeated by consciousness, it's a way of connecting with the greater consciousness.

What I want to do now is think about how spiritual practices relate to food and farming, the focus of this conference. There are established spiritual practices within the Anglican church that relate to that. One is the traditional service of Rogation Sunday, celebrated once a year in parish churches throughout the land. There's a blessing of the plough and there are prayers for the fields. This still goes on. Just a few months ago I was in Compton Dundon in Somerset, on Rogation Sunday, in fact. I went to the parish church, which has an ancient yew tree outside it. It's 1,700 years old, about a thousand years older than the church itself. We went out of the church, processed around it,, and in each of the four directions the priest led a prayer for the fields and the footpaths through the countryside and the woods, and the whole countryside we were in. This is still happening - a way of relating the spiritual life and the spiritual centre - but a lot more could be made of it. The valid and long-established tradition is still there.

Another tradition that we still have is harvest festival, Harvest Thanksgiving. Giving thanks for the harvest and the way our lives depend on the land. Now, in many parish churches, like our own parish church in London, in Hampstead, this has slightly degenerated into being a collection of cornflakes packets and tins of baked beans which are then given to food banks. And I'm sure food banks are grateful for the cornflakes and the baked beans, but it does somehow lose the connection with the land. People think 'well, we're in a city, we get food from su-

permarkets'. I myself think a lot more could be made of this festival, particularly bringing food in that people have grown in their garden or allotments, because many people have gardens and allotments in cities, and relating it much more to our lives.

But the point I really wanted to focus on is prayer. Prayer is also good for you. As a spiritual practice it's been investigated, and there is evidence to show that people who pray are happier, have less depression and so on, than those who don't. One study in the US took over a thousand people aged 65 and found a matching group of a thousand people with similar economic, social and professional l status. One group prayed regularly, the other did not. Od the people who prayed regularly, six years later 60% had survived better than those that hadn't, had had fewer medical complications and they were less depressed.

There are many studies of this kind that show that prayer is good for the person doing the praying.[3] Now of course, people who pray think it's not just about them, but about the wider world and their relationship to it. I think that what I wanted to bring up now is the Lord's Prayer, which is the most familiar of all the Christian prayers. 'Our Father who art in Heaven'. Now, many people may think that's about heaven as some kind of mythic state in which God exists, but actually when, when Jesus said it, I'm quite sure he meant the sky. The heavens are the sky, and as Nicholas Campion reminded us, the sky is the arena within which all our life takes place: we're in the sky. if God is everywhere, then the vast majority of God is in the sky because there's 99.999% more sky than there is Earth.

So, when people say, 'God's not out there', contemptuously, I think that's a false dismissal. You see, I think God is out there and up there and I think when people pray and look up to the sky, they're looking up to the place where most of God is. Of course, God's probably equally present everywhere but, nevertheless, the fact is the sky is where God is on all traditional views. In the 20th century, there was a vast expansion of our view of the universe through the Hubble space telescope, and through the discovery of galaxies beyond our own. The sky is much vaster and much older than anyone imagined in the past, so the arena of God's abode and activity within the universe is vastly increased.

'Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. They kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven'. Or, in the form of the prayer that we use in choral evensong in the Anglican church, 'In Earth as it is in Heaven'. Now, what does that mean? How does the will of God get done in Earth, or on Earth as it is in Heaven? How is the will of God expressed in Heaven? Well, views have changed with changes in science. At the time of Jesus, people thought that the heavens moved in a series of spheres and that they were pretty well fixed in

their movements, that the heavens were not a realm of change. We now have an evolutionary view of the heavens, and as Nicholas Campion has reminded us, Johannes Kepler showed that the planets didn't just move in spheres, they moved in ellipses.

In his book about the heavens, *Harmonices Mundi* (The Harmony of the World), which was one of the foundations of modern science, Kepler points out that the movements of the heavens are polyphonic.[4] The harmony of the spheres is not just a static chord. Because the planets move in ellipses, they change their relative speeds as they move, and we live in a kind of polyphonic heavenly world. The world is also, as we know from modern cosmology, evolutionary. So the will of God on Earth as in Heaven, at least on a modern understanding, is evolutionary.

However, it's also very clear, that this is not about making products and then dumping them. The heavens all work on a recycling economy. When stars break down, their stardust turns into planets and part of that stardust turns into us. There's a recycling throughout the whole of the universe, and it does give us a model of how things can work on Earth, which is different from the older understanding.

Then there is 'Give us this day our daily bread'. Presumably, if this prayer is going to go on working, then agriculture has to be sustainable. I think that it's important to rethink this, which is the most familiar of all prayers throughout the Christian and post-Christian world that we live in, because this is a prayer prayed by millions of people every day, and many people pray it very sincerely. But I think reinterpreting the way we pray and what we're praying for can have quite a lot of relevance to sustainable food and agriculture.

I'd like to end just by mentioning one final spiritual practice in which I'm very interested and in which two of Britain's leading proponents are here today, namely pilgrimage. Because, as Will Parsons likes to point out, one word for pilgrim was peregrine, as someone who goes through the fields. The pilgrim is someone moving through the fields, and on pilgrimage, on foot, we travel through the landscape, through the countryside, and relate to the land, connecting holy places with the fields and the land that we move through. Pilgrimage is probably the best way in which we can actually embody a relationship to the land and appreciation of it, and a connection to our own spiritual journey in accordance with the traditions in which we're all rooted. The traditions of our land and the holy places of our land include sacred wells and springs and river sources and cathedrals and churches and ancient trees. Luckily the British Pilgrimage Trust is doing a lot to reawaken this spirit of pilgrimage which our ancestors took part in and indeed took for granted.

Notes

[1] Rupert Sheldrake, *Science and Spiritual Practices: Transformative Experiences and their Effects on our Bodies, Brains and Health* (London: Coronet, 2017). Rupert Sheldrake, 'Science and Spiritual Practices;, Temenos Academy, 2018, https://www.sheldrake.org/books-by-rupert-sheldrake/science-and-spiritual-practices.

[2] See for example, Alvin Powell, 'When science meets mindfulness, *The Harvard Gazette*, 9 April 2018, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/04/harvard-researchers-study-how-mindfulness-may-change-the-brain-in-depressed-patients/ (Accessed 30 March 2019).

[3] Talita Prado Simão, Silvia Caldeira and Emilia Campos de Carvalho, 'The Effect of Prayer on Patients' Health: Systematic Literature Review', *Religions*, 2016, Vol. 7 no 11, pp 1-11,

[4] Aiton, E.J., A.M. Duncan and J.V. Field, 'Introduction' in Kepler, Johannes, *The Harmony of the World*, trans. E.J. Aiton, A.M. Duncan, J.V. Field, (American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1997), pp. 129-254.