

# **Response to the TV debate on Science and Religion – Sept 2012**

## **An exploration of how it is therapy that makes the bridge between them**

Lord Sacks in his recent TV program “Rosh Hashanah: Science versus Religion” explored how science and religion need not be enemies and can co-exist and be mutually supportive. He looked at Science as the attempt to understand *how* the world works and Religion is an attempt to understand *what it means*. This essay is an attempt to show how this debate between science and religion can be even more interesting and meaningful than this program, which was a helpful step forward from the usual sterility surrounding this debate.

First we have to define religion in a more explicit way than even Lord Sacks’ inquiring Judaism was pointing towards. I agree with William James, G.I. Gurdjieff, Ken Wilber (among many others) that religion represents the institutionalisation of our spiritual experience and that we need to strip out all the ossified historical forms in any religion in order to get back to the heart of what these experiences are and the understanding and meaning that emerges from them. Spiritual masters and commentators down the centuries have repeatedly shown how these experiences demonstrate a developmental path that points towards the profound freedom that the human spirit is capable of, and is destined to work towards.

At their simplest these experiences are simply the classics of love, wholeness, awe, wonder, gratitude, forgiveness, feeling free to ‘be’, inhabiting silence, a greater depth of awareness of being present to ourselves in the here and now, feeling open and connected to life, feeling connected to a whole which puts our everyday lives into a new perspective, the experience of diving deeply into our ‘now’.

Religious people use the word God when trying to describe these experiences, humanists use words like “energy” and “life force”, more secular people use words like, “inspirational” and “exceptional”. The point is I think that these experiences all have something in common and they are all about what is possible for us as human beings, they point to our potential.

Our experience of the world is broadly made up of thoughts, feelings and sensations, or head, heart and body, and when there is an aware connection between these we sense it as something special. We are so used to living in just one part of ourselves, with our world dominated by our thoughts, or our world is dominated by our feelings, or by our bodily sensations and appetites. So when we have an experience of say, art, music, sport, nature, singing, philosophy, science, or even just walking down the road, and there is some combination of feeling (whether joy or sadness or anything in between), of an aesthetic appreciation (thought or understanding) and or an awareness of our bodies (sense of our energy, breath, our aliveness), we treasure the experience. Especially when all three connect, it enables us to feel that life is worthwhile, that there is some meaning in it all, where life is not just a random, chaotic, meaningless interlude between birth and death. This is what Maslow talked about in terms of our “peak experiences”.

Wilber has made it wonderfully clear that if we want to experience the spiritual we have to undertake activities that are known to produce such experiences, there is scientific logic here. If you want to know the territory, explore it; so engage in activities that facilitate the connection between our head,

heart and body. Religious rituals are designed to open our hearts, philosophy to open our minds and meditation, yoga, Tai Chi etc. to open our bodies.

Once this dynamic of connection between our parts has been experienced it becomes clear that it is something that can be practiced and developed. But it also soon becomes clear that it is not a straightforward process. That we are somehow not able to make and deepen these connections at will and that there is something mysterious going on outside of our conscious awareness. Some people can go quite a long way down this road, some only a few steps, before realising this. So what is it that prevents our chosen progress? In my experience this is all about motivation. The experience of presence that comes from connecting up our parts is something that is beyond the personal and unless we approach it with openness such contact cannot be maintained. This presence always has the quality of a gift about it, it cannot be taken and owned and controlled. Storytelling is full of legends relating to this dilemma, from Greek myths to Pilgrim's Progress to Lord of the Rings. It is this problem that religious "schools" were, and are, designed to address through years of disciplined work. These "schools" historically have, in the Far East, focused on bringing the head and body together, as in Buddhism, Zen and Yoga, or in the West, focused on the emotions, as with Christianity and Islam.

But in our scientific and post-modern age we now have new tools for working on this problem. It is therapy that now provides the means by which we can work to know and understand our motivations. Counselling and Psychotherapy have come a long way over the last century to develop into a something of a science; we now understand human psychological development quite well. But the fact that they are dealing with human consciousness and human choice mean that therapy has to remain an art. Also, as every parent knows that each child is born with their own characteristics (genes / spirit?) and how that person turns out is the result of the complex interaction between them and their particular developmental conditions. So therapy uniquely traverses the boundary between science and art.

The need for therapy usually comes from difficulties that arise due to being damaged by our environment, but anyone trying to understand themselves and their motivations will find themselves having to examine and know themselves at this level. In any case we are all damaged to some extent and it is largely this damage, I think, that messes up and complicates our motivations and thus restricts our ability to make and develop the connections between head, heart and body that enable our "spiritual" experiences.

I understand this basically as how the self, when damaged in some way goes into survival mode and this involves separating, or splitting the connections between our head, heart and bodies. When this happens the self has to create and maintain a defence to protect this damaged part, with its repressed hurt, pain, distress, fear, etc. constantly held out of awareness and away, from being re-wounded. The result is that we are then caught perennially protecting ourselves and we become, in all the myriad different ways possible, insecure.

It is this insecurity that drives us to be compulsive, to be motivated by all the compensatory process that distract us from ourselves and our deeper needs and wishes. We struggle to understand ourselves because of the deeply ingrained habits around maintaining the splits between head, heart and body with the over reliance on whatever our survival strategy was. This is "mechanical" living as Gurdjieff put it. We are caught effectively endlessly repeating the feeling, thought and bodily mechanical structures that are, our habitual way of living. Breaking free of this, (awakening?) is not easy and it is not surprising that most of us struggle with a lack of willpower. There are those that don't try because

they don't want to face the damage and those that do try because the 'damage' makes their life so unbearable they feel forced to, and all the stages in between.

There is a sliding scale here, the more insecure we are the more difficult it is to make and maintaining the connections between head, heart and body. As we face, work on and understand our insecurity the more it lessens, we can gradually finish with the "unfinished business" from our pasts and this leaves us freer and more able to choose to journey towards our potential and freedom, which is what the goal of religions is.

So, this is my argument that it is therapy that is the unique bridge between Science and Religion. That it is therapy that points the modern way to human development, to enabling people to journey along the road towards the profound freedom that the mystics have pointed to down the centuries and which represents our destiny in a transformed consciousness and loving heart.

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