

Sermon
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By John Harley

'Where do we Come from? What are we? Where are we Going?'

There's a joke I heard that was voted the funniest religious joke by 1000s of people from a range of faiths.....

A man was walking across a bridge one day, and saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump. He ran over and said: "Stop. Don't do it."

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked.

"Well, there's so much to live for!"

"Like what?"

"Are you religious?"

He said: "Yes."

"Me too. What religion are you?"

"Christian."

"Me too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant."

"Me too. Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

"Baptist."

"Wow. Me too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

"Baptist Church of God."

"Me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Me too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"

He said: "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915."

"Die, heretic scum," and he pushed him off.

This joke seems especially topical of our modern world

The atheist scientist Richard Dawkins would probably like this joke – I've been reading his book 'The God Delusion' and he argues passionately how religion divides people and fails to bring out the best in human nature.

He says belief in God is out of date – we don't need God – I would agree in many ways, but to me the little word God is just one way of expressing a deep sense I have of the one-ness of humanity – I don't think we need to believe in God to be alive, healthy human beings but I do think we need to find glimpses of the oneness of all life – because if we don't our separate lives become privatised, diminished, disconnected

Rumi wrote:

You are not a single 'you', when you fall asleep, you go from the presence of yourself into your own true presence, you hear something and surmise that someone else in your dream has secretly informed you. You are not a single 'you'. No you are the sky and the deep sea. Your mighty 'thou' which is nine hundredfold, is the ocean, the drowning place of a hundred 'thous' within you

Art has the power of exploring the themes of separation and one-ness in ways that go beyond words

An artist who explores divisions between people is the Columbian artist Doris Salcedo

She has constructed a sculpture commonly known as the Crack – Turbine Hall – Tate Modern

The crack is a hairline fracture – along the floor – it meanders menacingly across the floor of the Tate from one end to the other and widens – creating a sense of danger and catastrophe – dangerous border separating peoples – immigrants – the outsider –

Europe sees herself as democratic and welcoming yet for many immigrants they are excluded – do we Europeans prefer to look up at the ceiling and admire our achievements rather than looking at the widening crack below our very feet

She calls this work 'Shibboleth' – refers to the story in the Bible when the Ephraimites tribe attempt to cross the River Jordan – they are stopped by their enemies the Gileadites – to check out their ethnicity they are asked to say the word 'Shibboleth' – their dialect did not include the sh sound and could not say it so their real identity was exposed and they were executed.



Doris Salcedo 'Shibboleth' 2007

Shibboleth has become a symbol of the loathing that can be unleashed if we can only see the divisions between human beings

Many examples of Shibboleths in history – one example – 2ND world war – Pacific – Japanese spies would try and pose as American or Filipino personnel – they would be asked to say Lollapalooza –if they said 'rorra' instead of 'lolla' they would be arrested or killed

The meaning of Shibboleth has expanded over the years to refer to the in crowd and a kind of jargon that excludes – I'm sure we can all think of times when we have felt shut out by language used by others and felt unwelcome

Paul Gauguin's masterpiece 'Where do we Come from? What are We? Where Are We Going?' 1897



Paul Gauguin 'Where do we Come from? What are we? Where are We Going?' 1897



To me this work is a celebration of all the diversity of humanity – the canvas expresses a vast sweep through all the stages and experiences of life – from the right the beginning of life – the baby and the young mothers, in the centre the youth picking the fruit of knowledge and curiosity and the old woman dying on the far left accompanied by the white bird symbolising the beyond and watched over by the blue idol, the mystical core of life, there is beauty, anguish, play, sexuality – all elements of life are here – humanity is one – living this life is about living these same questions – whoever we are – the whole canvas expresses our one-ness

Martin Luther King said

'as long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than 28 or 30 years, I can never be totally healthy even if I got a good check up at Mayo Clinic. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent. We are interdependent.'

This same concept of oneness and interdependence breathes through the language spoken by the Shona tribe in Zimbabwe.

A typical greeting will go something like this...
Good morning – did you sleep well?
I slept well if you slept well
How has your day been?
My day has been good if your day has been good.

A few years ago I went on an Autumn walk with a friend in woods north of west of London – it was one of those days of fall, crisp, fresh and sunny that renew the spirit – we walked past a vast field of withering, dying sunflowers – they were all different heights and shapes – all I could hear was a chorus of whispering as they rubbed and caressed against each other – it was the music of one-ness – they were one life together – I'll never forget this experience – I believe it can never be truly explained – but art can explore these extraordinary phenomenon

Georgia O'Keefe, the American artist, in this highly charged painting 'Jack-in-the-Pulpit' in 1930 –she captures a mystical experience – for her looking at flowers was a looking into the heart of all life – looking at flowers was for her to be fully alive, fully in touch with the mystery of life and seeing something vast and eternal in the flower



Georgia O' Keefe 'Jack-in-the-Pulpit 5' 1930

Marc Chagall, the Russian painter 'Birthday' painted in 1915 –the man's head stretching round corner – defies all scientific rules – to me the painting celebrates how life is full of surprises -love and the power of the imagination do this – they surprise us constantly – at the core of life is a playful, utterly unpredictable spirit
It's amazing how art can do this – it can refresh one's belief in daily miracles

Marc Chagall

'Birthday'

1915

While Dawkins says God is a complete fraud some religious people suggest that because we've turned away from believing in an all powerful God we're losing our morals and our direction, art gives us glimpses of what lies at the heart of life – I would say that



artists are able to wander into mysticism without dividing people

Krishnamurti the Indian mystic said– 'religions are nothing but the vested interests of organised belief – to walk free we have to throw away the crutches'

We don't need God, we don't need religion but we do need to find languages and safe spaces and stories to make sense of this mad and precious world and know and feel the one- ness that flows through all life.

Amen

this is it

INTERBEING

There is a cloud floating on this sheet of paper that you are holding in your hand. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either; so the cloud and the paper inter-are.

If we look into this sheet of paper more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper; the paper and the sunshine inter-are.

And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know the logger cannot exist without his daily bread and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper.

And the logger's father and mother are in it too.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception.

So everything is in this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here – time, space, the Earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. "To be" is to "inter-be". You cannot just be by yourself, alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe within it.