



No Other Hands But Yours

An Evolutionary Imperative

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In a recent contribution to the SoFnet [the Internet network by which Sea of Faith members worldwide discuss a diverse range of issues] John Edmonds said “A lot of discussion seems to start with difficult, abstract philosophical areas that interest philosophers, theologians and so on, not where most people begin on a daily basis.” That struck a chord with me. It is in the everyday, the ordinary that what we have hitherto called “God” is manifested. I think we are hung up on a notion of the divine which belongs in the past and even those who reject the notion of God are blinkered by an out-of-date model and so reject a hypothesis which has proved false without considering alternatives. What I propose is to share with you my ordinary, lived, spiritual experience, with which some of you may concur, and then look to see if there is another hypothesis which answers questions, resolves difficulties and leads to a better understanding of humanity’s place in the great adventure of evolution.

I was reared in the Church from birth but the theology of my adolescence got off to a bad start when I read in a bible-class primer “God was lonely so he made humans to keep him company”. Even to a 15 year old that seemed naïve nonsense. As Dawkins has amply demonstrated (*The God Delusion* and elsewhere) it is easy to criticize Christian doctrine negatively. It is, and has been, the source of a lot of harm both in the past and now. The doctrine of sin, associated with the medieval hypothesis of Heaven and Hell, engenders guilt, fear and self-righteousness; Paul’s doctrine of propitiation makes a mockery of a loving God; the exclusive divinisation of Jesus separates off Christianity from other equally legitimate searches for the divine, creating rivalry, tension, persecution and ultimately bloodshed; the Trinity is a silly obfuscation parading under the guise of a mystery; the high priesthood of Jesus, with the presumption of his mediation between us and God, cuts directly across the lesson that he taught and died for, that God is as immediate to us as a father. One could go on. Of the traditional doctrines of the Church there are very few that withstand the tests of credibility, utility and modern biblical scholarship.

And yet for nearly eighty years I have kept the unshakeable conviction of a presence just beyond thought with which I can align my life in harmony.

I communicate with the “Presence” in a way that I can describe, but for which “speech” is a metaphor, and it has had a part in all the formative decisions of my life by a process that can be analysed, which goes under the name “faith”, but has nothing to do with belief in this or in that. We are talking about attitudes of mind. To address

my “Presence” I must adopt Buber’s “I/Thou” mode. This means that I simply assume the “Presence” without enquiring what or who it is, where it comes from, or what it wants.

The “Presence” has challenged my beliefs step by step in a steady evolution throughout my life and yet is not itself subject to belief, since, as clause after clause of the creed drops away, it is still there.

This “presence” is intensely personal in that my being is uniquely attuned to it; your “presence” is attuned to you and Joe Bloggs’ to Joe himself; but it is clearly not a person though it is tempting to maintain that illusion.

“What proof can you offer of this presence?” you may ask. “What proof is needed?” I reply. The “Presence” is just part of what is. I am rarely aware of the air I breathe, inhale, exhale, inhale in reassuring rhythm, part of the ordinariness of life. Put a little chlorine into my air and I will notice it, send a tornado over my roof and its presence will stress me; you can even demonstrate a vacuum and impress me. But from day to ordinary day the air is there and I enjoy it without thought. The “Presence” is part of the everyday in a similar way, part of the fabric of the world we occupy.

What of those who deny the “Presence”? By so doing they neither remove it or limit it. They merely foreclose communication with it – more on that later.

In the Waikato SoF we have explored a little *The God Delusion*. What fun! Setting up with Dawkins a straw god here, a straw god there and bowling them over with such gusto! Down with the Jahweh god, down with the Justice god, down with the Moral god, down with the lot and when they have all been swept up and thrown out, the “Presence” is still there. Proof? There is nothing to prove. It is just there – the fabric of the universe with its light, its energy, its gravity, its awe and wonder and its “Presence”.

We can however ask “How unique is this experience?” Is this perception limited to me? Do others feel it? In fact it is one of the best attested human phenomena there are. Jesus is the model for my life. For him the “Presence” was his centre; as a father, closer even than his social father, Joseph. Adam “talked” to God, so did Abraham and Moses, and Gideon on his threshing floor, hiding his grain from the tax collector; indeed from the beginning of time, what has been my experience, seems to be a fundamental human phenomenon situated in the day-to-day, the stuff of the ordinary, common in one form or another in every religion on earth and outside them, a universal product of our humanity; part of ‘the-way-things-are’.

If we insist on finding an explanation of this “Presence” where will we look?

Scientists tell us that at the beginning of our universe the conditions which ultimately produced our world depended on critical proportions of elemental particles. Too much of this or a little less of that and creation as we know it would not have occurred. At school my science teacher told us about the anomalous expansion of water. As other things get colder they shrink. When water freezes it expands. Without that anomaly the great engine of climate which creates living conditions on our planet would not operate and life as we know it would not have developed.

Humanity has always sought to ascribe an ultimate cause for the as-they-are nature of things – for the lightning, the floods and droughts, for earthquakes and wars – and we chose what we know best, ourselves, as a model for that ultimate cause, which we called God. As I make a house or a mince pie, God made the universe. Creationism is the codification of that naivety. In reply a part of the scientific establishment has sought to dismiss the idea of any sort of creator, hence Dawkins’ quixotic tilts at divine windmills. But that hypothesis would make the universe nothing more than a meaningless accident, assembled by chance wouldn’t it?

In the source phase of the universe – the Big Bang – there are too many coincidences, too much coherence, to make such a negative view credible. And when we consider the development of life on this earth and understand the mechanisms of random mutation and natural selection by which it evolved, we stand in awe at the complexities by which our earth, Gaia, has regulated itself and promoted evolution.

Can we not envisage the Universe as a self-regulating whole, as our little universe, the earth, Gaia, clearly is, with a beginning we cannot know with any certainty and an end we cannot see, in the process of becoming we-do-not-know-what, by means we are only just starting to understand for the earth within the constraints of Darwinian natural selection, and for the universe, the play of unknown and unimaginable forces; can we prefer that view, on the one hand, to a specific creator – God – with attributes and purposes we invent, or on the other to a mere random accident without point or purpose? I am proposing the universe as a great becoming, a “work in progress” somebody called it, and the earth, our little part of it, as exemplary of the whole.

If we look back over the history of our earth, which we know and understand to some extent, can we find in it evidence of a trend, a set, a progress which marks out a direction to an end? Yes we can, and it is Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s great discovery, which thinkers seem largely to have ignored.

Among the many rich intuitions of *le Phénomène Humain* there are two I wish to draw out: the development of what Teilhard calls *conscience* and the conditions which mark the passage from one state of existence to the next in a quantum leap in which the new both embraces and transcends its predecessor.

Conscience: Teilhard is a scientist, a paleontologist, who, in *le Phénomène Humain*, has traced step by step the evolutionary passage from primaeval slime to humankind. One thing stands out in this progress – the development of *awareness*. He draws an analogy with the wavelengths of light. We see light in frequencies between violet and red: ultraviolet and frequencies above and infrared and frequencies below we cannot see, even though they can be detected by means other than sight. Another analogy is with speed; the bullet goes too fast for our eye to observe movement, the hour hand on a watch too slowly. We perceive speed only between those two extremes. So awareness (*conscience*) inheres in the whole universe but is most evident to *our* perception as a continuum throughout nature; in the plant world it is no more than the sensitivity of the seed to the warmth and moisture in the soil, to the direction of the light, to the proximity of supports up which to climb. Then, in a rising scale it leads through many variants – insects, reptiles, birds, mammals to the primate and ultimately to humanity. The analogy implies that in rocks and water the quotient of awareness is too small for us to perceive, and whatever awareness lies beyond our own is as yet of a kind and in a quantity beyond our imaginings. More exciting still, and undeniable, the focus of evolution on earth appears to be on making creatures more and more aware, with the increase of neurological complexity that supports that awareness. Awareness in many different forms and manifestations is demonstrably the set of evolution, and humans are at the apex of its development on earth.

Different sorts of awareness. There are many sorts of awareness starting with what we may call primitive awareness – the promptings of the senses, touch, sight, hearing, smell. Beyond that, there is the awareness of the social group with its call for collaboration and altruistic sacrifice at need, as seen in the hunting pack and the hive insects. There is the kinship bond uniting the family to protect and train the young and defend the territory necessary for survival. There is the mutual awareness of predator and prey and deeply rooted strategies to either get a meal or avoid being one. Within social groups, between predator and prey, there is a more or less highly developed degree of communication, like for example the dance of bees which shows a source of honey or the warning behaviours of birds or meerkats when a predator is sighted. All these awarenesses humans share with the rest of the animal world although with less sensitivity in some areas than other species. We do not have the directional hearing of bats, the multifaceted, multi-directional eyes of insects, the proximity sensors in blind cave fish and the detective skills of narcotics dogs. But we have language to a degree that transcends by many orders of magnitude the communicative skills of all other creatures, and writing which multiplies our advantage even more. We are no longer

simply animals. In the degree of our self-awareness, in our sense of individual and collective identity, in our perception of present and past, in our imagination, in our comprehension of numbers and dimensions, of cause and effect we belong in a different order of existence from the animal world.

As a result of unprecedented world-wide collaboration and a rigorous rational methodology we know more or less how nature and the universe work – no need for a God-of-the-gaps; with extraordinary tools we can discover what the make-up of the Martian soil is or split a cell to repair a faulty chromosome. It was Teilhard in 1958 who made the point that humanity could not only observe the processes of evolution but participate in them. He would not have credited the speed or the volume of discovery that has taken place since then. There is practically no aspect of our world which we cannot know and modify if we set our mind to it.

We are, or can be, fully aware as it happens of every new discovery and every event in the life of humans on earth, whether it be a bomb in Karachi, a flood in China or the first mating of a 100 year old tuatara; encyclopaedias on line furnish us with any knowledge we desire. Distance has been annihilated. Jocelyn and I have a son in America, another in England and we communicate with them more frequently than we did when they were at hand. Whether it is making money, learning about other cultures and religions, spreading food and aid to devastated communities and even cheating our neighbours, all our actions have gone beyond the clan, beyond the nation and take place globally.

This quantum leap in human awareness is a triumph of science – rational thought and a rigorous method – coupled with the development of extraordinary tools, a far cry from the stick a parrot uses to push a bug out of a branch. But do we forget in our idolisation of reason that it is only a subset of the gamut of human awareness? Eileen Cameron on the SoFnet said: “One of these boundaries [of the SoF] is our dedication to being as objective as we can be, which we rationalise by our claim that objectivity is good because it is truer than subjectivity.” But is this so?

Our awareness is primarily affective, not rational. We are creatures of emotions which stem to a great degree from the instincts inherited from our hunter-gatherer ancestors – the drive to dominate or the submissiveness of the follower, self preservation at all costs, the urge to reproduce and the gathering of a harem; our social relationships are built on affective patterns and face a constant striving to transcend the animal roots of our personalities, transforming the urge to dominate into an ethic of service, self-preservation into altruistic sacrifice, lust into love, caring and an ideal of justice (*agape*). We are, in this century, more aware of more others, their sufferings, the injustices that afflict them and more willing in empathy to better their lot than ever before in the history of the world. We have developed an empathy also

with the natural world. The emotional, affective side of our awareness is as important as, or rather more important than the rational and the intellectual, in making us what we are.

The successive states of evolution:

We see atoms combining into molecules, not changed as atoms but existing in a higher state; molecules come to form self-replicating cells, still molecules, but combined and transcended by a higher order of existence, cells become organisms of increasing complexity:– plants and animals, primates and ultimately us, each order taking the physical forms dictated by the necessities of survival and passing into successive stages of heightened awareness.

Teilhard sees a pattern as each existential state prepares to pass into the next – atoms merging into molecules, molecules forming cells and so on. There is a development towards greater and greater diversity, accompanied by greater and greater tension, which culminates in a leading-shoot taking evolution into the new order of existence that embraces and transcends the previous stages. For him the leading shoot for humanity was Jesus, leading us into a new spiritual view of ourselves. However if **awareness** defines the set and end of evolution then in the last 50 years the world has burst through the ceiling of what we might call the natural order and we are living a new and different existence, characterised by human control over the very processes of evolution itself. This transcendence over nature has taken us by surprise and we are just starting to realise its implications for us.

For millennia Mother Nature has managed the earth's resources with admirable skill, balancing population against food resources by famine and disease, by predation regulating behaviour and weeding out the old and incompetent. "Nature red in tooth and claw" seems to our heightened empathy cruel, but seen in the overall economy of the earth, predation is beneficial and necessary. There was an interesting article in the Waikato Times on 22 July about the removal of predators in North American nature reserves and the effect on the natural environment. Without the fear of wolves and cougars, herbivorous animals now graze intensively in limited areas. Where once they were kept moving by the threat of hunters they are now staying put, eating out new growth beyond recovery, altering the environment to the detriment of smaller creatures, changing the course of streams as banks collapse. All unexpected results of our removal of "dangerous animals".

In our heightened empathy for people and with the quantum increase in our ability we have cured epidemics, fed the hungry by increasing the area and the yield of cultivation, corrected nature's errors by genetic engineering, extended life for 20 years beyond the biblically allotted span. But we can express these successes in

another way. We have overridden the natural population regulators, plague, famine, and predation; we have grossly overpopulated the earth with humans who are exploiting natural resources to destruction, we feed the hungry only to set them up to starve again, in our drive for food we destroy diversity by monocultures which expose the earth to the danger of the Irish potato blight on a global scale (e.g. bananas), by deforestation and irrigation we derange the climate and turn vast tracts of land into desert, by medical miracles we fill the gene pool with rubbish and maintain the old until they become a burden beyond the capacity of the active population to carry.

If the universe is in the process of becoming we-know-not-what and if the outcome of that becoming on earth is the growth of awareness, then the progressive control exercised by humanity over natural law is a proper and inevitable part of that evolution, a part of the universal becoming. But it means that the responsibility for what happens on earth can no longer be passed to some God or other or to the overriding law of Nature. It is ours to wrestle with and we face both the fact of our ignorance of consequences – like the removal of predators from the American national parks – and the terrible dilemma of reconciling our heightened empathy with the regulation necessary to ensure a viable world. Nature kills off a million kangaroos in a single drought. A good farmer keeps his stock within the carrying capacity of his farm. Can we halve the world's population with kindness and love? Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Pol Pot, the Hutu league and the brutal warlords of Somalia have done their best and hardly scratched the surface of the problem. The ethical issues of humanity's future seem without solution. We have already set in train processes which will change perhaps forever the life of humans on earth; will these management errors produce in the long run a cataclysmic collapse of social and natural systems or trigger from our animal instincts territorial battles for food and water, waged with the immense energies we now possess, which will create the same devastation?

We need help.

Is it an accident that we, who have inherited the responsibility of the earth, have also been endowed with a "Presence" just beyond thought? This coincidence is to be put alongside the critical ratios which set the universe in train; it is to be aligned with the myriad of coincidences which have given the process of random mutation and natural selection their direction in the evolution of the planet. It is to be equated with the chance happenings which have directed our own lives. It is the divine in action, a process that works by coincidence, and it is time to propose a new hypothesis about its nature.

The term *presence* represents an affective reality. Let us call it the **Divine**. It is like gravity, or energy, a principle which inheres in the whole universe, below quarks, bosons and charms, as much as in the collision of galaxies; in the biosphere of Earth it

manifests itself as **awareness**, inherent in every molecule, but most in evidence in the higher primates and particularly in us. It is a fundamental part (ground?) of our being. Unlike light, or gravity it cannot be quantified because it is affective; we have to feel it. Its efficacy depends in part on our awareness of it. It is not a person, a unit, an individual; if we were to seek an analogy it could be the electricity network of a country, available everywhere simply by plugging in; the same electricity can be tapped at Bluff and Cape Reinga. But the analogy breaks down because electricity is foreign to us, external, brought in when we push in the plug. The divine is part of us, already there in every cell. We are in this respect made in the image of God, part of the same awareness and each of us is an extension integrally linked with the divine principle that joins us all and seeks its becoming in and through us. When we are joyful the universe rejoices, when we are sorrowful it grieves. In our new existence, transcending the natural order, we are the hands of God, carrying out the divine becoming by our thoughts and actions. This is what I think Jesus understood and put into words in John 8 when he said “I and the Father are one”, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father”. But the link between the particular spirit within us and the universe requires our compliance, our freewill, to open our awareness to the spirit of the universe and ensure the flow of its action in the world through us.

If we are to regulate the Earth, the establishment of the link between our essence and the divine is an evolutionary imperative. This is the discovery Jesus made. He was so united with what he called “my father” that his actions were all in harmony with the divine becoming. So how do we synchronise the divine awareness within us with the awareness of the universe? There are many ways, some more efficacious than others. For Patti Whaley it is absorption in Music, for Richard Dawkins it is awe at the wonder of the world; Buddhists meditate, for Muslims it is the practice of daily prayer, Christians pray too but that action is so set about with dogmatic prescriptions that it is perhaps a hindrance rather than a help. The essential criterion is an attitude of openness, a willingness to receive rather than impose – “not my will but thine.” The outcome is actions done in love, inspired by justice, a refusal to judge others (“Judge not” said Jesus). We all share what Noel Cheer calls the itch, the urge to link our awareness with the awareness of the universe; for the sake of the earth we need to recognise the need and choose the best tool to achieve it. That is what religions are – tools to enable communication with the divine. We choose the one that best brings our attitudes into line with the “Presence”. The claims of Christianity, despite its shortcomings, are compelling for those whose culture has been formed by it. But the essential point here is that belief of any sort is only a tool to facilitate syncretism. It is the growing together that matters, not the dogma.

We are talking attitude and there are some attitudes that act to block connection. Atheism is of little account since those who have thought enough to reject the God-entity hypothesis are already searching for the transcendence that Noel talks about;

their method may not yield the close, conscious bond which Jesus exemplifies but few of us ever achieve that. On the other hand the investment in material values – the lust for power, wealth or women – crowds out the evolutionary urge. But the most absolute block of all is the certainty of one's own rightness. "God is great and Mohammed is his prophet" shuts the door to evolution and "the plain meaning of scripture" does the same. These are the cries of those who fear the future and seek to lock us all into the false securities of the past. They abolish the diversity necessary for the becoming of the universe by insisting that everyone be like them.

There is one more thing to say. In our age of expanding empathy the power of society to stigmatise and control is waning. The moral sanctions in Jewish law were severe. Deut 23.2 "A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even unto his tenth generation shall he not enter the congregation of the Lord." That was the situation of Jesus and although Joseph legitimated him there are indications that his irregular birth haunted him all his life. Some Muslim societies in our day are even more draconian, particularly where sex and women are concerned. Our society used to be more judgmental, particularly about women, and still is over gays and lesbians, but now the emphasis is more on human rights and personal freedoms; control of our behaviour is becoming more and more a matter of personal responsibility. We legislate to control the availability of drugs and alcohol, to ensure all children go to school, to ensure they are reared and fed properly. But we are realising that unless people do these things of their own volition, the legislation achieves nothing, except to fill our jails with recidivists. So our heightened awareness confronts the dilemma of knowing what must be done to redeem society and save the ecology of earth, and knowing too that corporate greed, and ignorant and obtuse individualism make all corrective efforts seem impossible. Is this not an inevitable stage in the quantum shift between natural and human control of earth's destiny? How are we to cope?

Jesus again provides an answer. He was probably the child of rape, illegitimate in any case. In the metaphor of God speaking, Mary accepted him, Joseph, hearing the same voice, legitimated him, his disciples, drawn to his charisma, supported him, to the extent of furnishing him with a divine alibi for being born, and following his teaching and example established their own links with the Presence at Pentecost. Paul, after exposure to God's megaphone sowed the seed of Jesus' teaching as far as Rome, the hub of the known universe. That teaching transformed the world through a small group of people who opened themselves to what we are calling the "Presence". What is called for from us is to open ourselves to the divine as Jesus did, not half-heartedly and by indirect means as most of us do, but fully and consciously, in love, with the intent to serve. Jesus word to us is "Go and do thou likewise. (Luke 10:37). If individual awareness – the part – is linked to the whole – the divine principle – anything becomes possible by the same process of coincidence, operating in individual lives, that set the universe going and has brought us to our current state.

A certain self-styled bishop in a TV interview seemed to be saying that the mansion he lived in, the private yacht, cruises around the Pacific and other indulgences were the consequences of a life devoted to the divine. Is that the payoff for a close link with universal awareness? Our model, Jesus didn't find that was so. "The birds of the air have nests and foxes have holes but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Perhaps the plush lifestyle was one of the temptations Jesus rejected in the wilderness. As the reference to the Presence becomes a reflex in our lives and our awareness becomes attuned to the universe, there is a growing acceptance of whatever life throws at us and an inner peace that comes from trust. But that doesn't mean absence of challenge.

If the universe is self-aware and becoming we-know-not-what and if in our corner of it, the earth, this becoming has as its goal the growth of awareness then two things follow:

- A personal awareness attuned to it is in harmony with it and participates in the peace and love which characterise living in the divine light;
- Life is of lesser importance than the growth of awareness in the individual. Participation in life means facing its problems and challenges. As it was for Jesus, so for us the making of decisions may be anguishing, even life threatening, but that is the occasion for the growth of awareness in us and we can perhaps say that from the point of view of evolution the making of decisions and consequent growth of awareness in us is more important in the scheme of things than the consequences of the decisions we make. It is from the accumulated growth of awareness in individuals that evolution moves up a notch towards the goal that the universe has set for us. Every decision of every day is in a way a mini-Armageddon. The possibility was raised above that the world might be heading for cataclysmic collapse. There are alternatives if there is time left to implement them, but if the worst should happen, it is the way individuals respond in the crisis to the divine voice, as Jesus did, which will determine the future of our world.

The Universe has no other hands but yours to achieve its becoming in this place. What a privilege, what a responsibility!