

Love and the Individual

‘That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question.

“Teacher,” they said, “Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?”

Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead - have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.’

(Matthew 22:23-33)

This discussion between Jesus and the Sadducees tells us more about life after death than any other. It is, of course, the resurrection at Easter - and the raising of Lazarus, and before that a child, to life - which provided the hard evidence of the individuality of the soul. So, what is it to be like one of the ‘angels in heaven’?

To start with, we need to accept that it would not be logically possible for the individual to experience the continuity of spiritual existence inherent in life after death unless our memory was part of that process. The information held in that memory must make the individual distinct and recognisable in the post-physical state, since all physical parts of us will have turned to dust at that point. In other words, memory is fundamentally important for the soul to be able to recognise itself after death: if you couldn't remember who you were, the ‘after-life’ would be meaningless.

If you believe in life after death, therefore, it follows that your memory is not physically within your brain but is held in your soul. Illustrating this using the analogy of computing, the brain acts as a communication and processing device in the personal computer which is our physical body, and passes information to and from our memory in our soul: just as packets of information flow to and from a repository in the ‘Cloud’.

Of course, there is local intellectual activity, processing power and instincts within our nervous system, just as there is local processing within a networked computer, but the memory resides within our spiritual state which is both within our living body and with God.

The apparent loss of short-term memory amongst older people, or when the brain is deteriorating from, for example, Alzheimer's disease, helps to explain it further. Long-term memory had the opportunity (when it was originally generated) to pass through this marvellous communication device and processor which is the brain when it was in its prime, and only immediate retrieval is necessary through its weakened state. Recollections therefore emerge comparatively intact.

Short-term experiences, however, have to struggle with weakened communication media in both directions, thus appearing comparatively deficient in human retrieval.

Scientists would accept that little is understood about the working of the brain - and there cannot therefore be any biological foundation for this assertion. However, the gradual re-building of access to memory after brain damage also helps to provide evidence.

What it describes is a continual liaison that takes place between the physicality of our brain (as a communications device) and the spirituality of our soul (as the host for our memory).

The heaven of which Jesus speaks is therefore alive and buzzing with information: structured, logical information that can be interpreted and fulfilled into any form of existence which is appropriate for it. The flow that continually passes from the physical world to the spiritual world - a bit like the angels ascending and descending in Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28: 12) - is a flow of information, the very material of the goodness of God.

This is the continual interactivity of the Love which is God working within us, and which we see in the way in which we physically respond to that flow. Information is at the heart of God, at the heart of his creation, at the heart of everything.

My interest was further fired by Stephen Hawking's description of a fifth dimension and beyond in his book 'The Universe in a nutshell', in which he envisages the encoding of all information relating to the four dimensions to which we are familiar: three spatial and the dimension of time.

The 'paranormal' dimensions appear to permit activities and communication beyond our understanding - where the speed of light is not a determining factor, and where time is necessarily neither linear or uni-directional: and, indeed, these are borne out by our struggle to understand quantum mechanics.

So many biblical situations can fit into this understanding where the physical appears as a result of divine inspiration: angelic appearances, the transformation, the resurrection. For if God controls the four dimensions of which we are aware by setting the information conditions within dimensions beyond our experience, then indeed all things are possible. Why should we doubt miracles? They are surely evidence of the power of God influencing events by the ordering of that information flow between the dimensions.

Another aspect that intrigues me in Stephen Hawking's book is the part that gravity appears to play in this process. In the universe that we experience, gravity is as central as light - in fact, in a sense, more central. For without gravity, matter could not coalesce to form particles, mass or any of the material or bodies to which we are accustomed. If the smallest identifiable element is the Planck length then, without gravity, the universe would be filled with a generic soup of these elements.

So, gravity is an essential part of creation, and indeed it is recognised as such in Genesis - in the separation of light from darkness, the separation of the waters, the formation of land and seas. In Stephen Hawking's book, it is identified as the linking influence between the dimensions of our experience and those beyond.

There's plenty of material in Stephen Hawking's book to fuel a dialogue between theologians and theoretical physicists/mathematicians, and the repeated references to God are interesting, both here and in his "Brief History of Time", its predecessor. Although these references are often illustrative and part of the delightfully light touch which makes these books digestible to lay readers, they are always deferential.

Perhaps that's why, in a glossary in which all terms - including those in general use - are explained for the reader, Stephen Hawking omits to attempt any explanation of God. Could it be that he suspected that he was drawing close to an understanding of the divine, and that this was the real horizon which keeps him searching for the 'Theory of Everything'? He will know now, for sure.

And finally, some thoughts on the human condition, and our spiritual identity.

First, returning to Jesus's discussion with the Sadducees. For those obsessed with gender issues, this is the clearest evidence that there is no gender in heaven. And logically, why should there be? The soul doesn't need to engage in physical reproduction, and the Love with which it is surrounded is not in any way partial - it is universal and unconditional. So why should people marry or be given in marriage?

And as a corollary for matters spiritual here on earth, why therefore should the Church struggle with women's ministry and leadership?

And secondly, both evolutionary science and the Bible agree that human life on earth started from one point and spread across the globe throughout the past hundred thousand years - a mere blink of the eye in the earth's history. Over recent centuries much has been made of the differences between peoples in terms of race and skin colour, but we know that these are the result of generational adaption to climate.

For example, the greatest contrasts in skin colour are to be found in those latitudinal regions where there are massive barriers to migration, such as the Sahara desert or the Himalayas. In due course all these differences will disappear as travel and migration unites the human species once more.

These are all features of our physical, not spiritual existence. Our memory in our soul may recall gender, race and skin colour, but just as there is no gender in heaven, so also is there no race or skin colour.

These are, of course, all thoughts based on reason, the third 'leg' of the grounding of Anglican understanding of the Christian faith: scripture, tradition and reason. The time will come when our understanding of God's technology enables us to see clear evidence of the nature of the spiritual dimensions but, for the time being, we must make do with logic.

It is an attempt to understand what is going on within Love, and God's relationship with us as individuals. Sometimes it is said in religious circles that we should not attempt to analyse or explain the process of faith, but it is part of the human condition to seek to understand; and, as our understanding of God's technology increases, how much more important that we should seek to understand how God interacts with us?

Far from the advances of science reducing the relevance of faith, I am more convinced that they are drawing closer together and finding mutual interdependence. Neither scientists nor theologians should be concerned: in the case of scientists, they are by definition curious about the next horizon that they cannot see, and should expect that another perspective might offer an understanding that currently eludes them. In the case of theologians, it is God's purpose that humans should interact with this world and seek to understand it.

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