

Cool Religion

A Journey Into Faith



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*For Deb, my wife, who has always been patient with me. With
thanks to Derek, my spiritual brother, who has guided me.*

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Taking a step

Something is needed.

You might be forgiven for thinking me self-absorbed and, therefore, irrelevant. Yet we are on a journey in life. We have only the smallest inkling of where we originated from, and even less of an idea about where we might end up. My quest has become one of finding answers. Not definitive answers, mind. Not the “this one fits all folk” type of answer. We are seeking practical answers here. Real answers. The kind that change you and help you to grow.

Who the heck am I?

Hmm. Disclosure would help here, I suppose. A few years back, I started a personal blog. I quickly noticed that, whenever I posted something related to my experience of faith, the traffic would spike significantly. That being said, I didn’t want to turn my personal space into a religious blog.

As time has gone by, and my has it flown, I have come to realise that I need to talk about this stuff. The blog has been a great place for me to share some experiences and ideas, allowing anyone else who wants to the chance to follow along too.

My life was undergoing major change. It’s a life that has moved into a teaching career, and away from a business career. It’s a life that is really seeking to deepen and grow beyond the usual stuff that everyone else is hankering after. I have, for instance, little interest in wealth generation and owning the trappings of modern Western society.

More than that, full disclosure would require me to confess that I am allegedly a Christian by faith. I wasn’t always a Christian though.

Truth told, I have long been dissatisfied with “the Church”, unhappy about the gap between my life and my beliefs, and utterly opposed to blindly following anything without thinking it through first. I am seeking authenticity and spontaneity. This, then, will perhaps be the journal of my walk deeper into a lived-out faith.

How will we make this journey? Well, to be honest, this is not set in stone either. That said, I feel that it’s time to start slow. One step at a time. The old proverb goes something like, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.”

Yeah, I heard that somewhere. Chinese, isn’t it? Never can remember that kind of thing.

The point is that we have to start somewhere. Going slow, step-by-step, works for me better than rushing off to the conclusion. You are welcome to travel along too. In fact, to be honest, I will probably appreciate the company.

Where are we going? Erm. I dunno.

Religion is a thorny subject, filled with worry and anxiety for many people. Isn’t it something that we really ought to keep to ourselves?

I would challenge that particular view. Wherever we end up, it’s worth pointing out that humans are inherently social. I don’t want to end up alone.

Surely it’d be far better to arrive, at the end, with some people around you. I guess this is a desire to belong, to share what we are experiencing. That probably means that we are going somewhere that has room for a small crowd.

Will you get involved? I don’t think I want to tell many people about this stuff, at least not to begin with. That being said, if you’ve

happened upon it you are very welcome to add a comment or drop in your own thoughts.

I am interested in hearing from people of faiths such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. I'm also interested in people of no particular faith, and in hearing from atheists too. You will probably find that you have something that you can share.

My only request is that you keep it cool, as in respectful, calm and polite. I won't want to leave any rudeness or intolerance posted up. We are seeking a space for reflection and learning. If you are full of bile, please find somewhere else to unload it.

Will you get involved? Well, I guess we will have to wait and see. Peace be with you.

Warning: You Might Have A Soul

Do Humans have a soul? Famous psychologist Carl Jung certainly thought that we did. How did I get to make that bold claim?

Take a look at your psyche

Looking at your life from the perspective of Jungian psychology, an approach that is perhaps more widely accepted than most people generally realise, you need to consider your psyche.

Psyche is a word derived from a Greek concept which means breath or soul. Interestingly the Hebrew word for spirit also covers breath, an idea that is closely linked to the concept of our soul in (for instance) Jewish and Christian thinking.

For our purposes, then, you can pretty much start equating your psyche with your soul. Jung defined your psyche with that complete package that contains both your conscious and unconscious self. Because he was more mystically inclined, Jung also suggested that your psyche is, at a much deeper level, connected to a wider collective unconscious that permeates all of human experience.

Does your soul/psyche matter?

Again, taking a Jungian approach, the answer would be, “yes”.

Why? That question will take us a lot of time and effort to explore but, in short, an exploration of your psyche and an appreciation for the idea of your soul will probably pay massive dividends. If that wasn't the case then the whole approach of analytical psychology would never have taken quite such a firm hold.

What's my point here? Well... might it be possible that Jung was right when he said that there was a distinct connection between religious ideas (both Eastern and Western) and the experiences that we share in life?

Religion is as much about our own psychology as it is about abstract concepts and ideas. In fact, as the testimony of millions of human beings down untold thousands of years of human history will attest, religion is massively practical.

How can you explore your soul?

The truth is that there is no single or definitive answer to that question. If there was, you wouldn't need to do much searching or put in much effort... and I wouldn't need to write many more articles.

That said, there are many exciting approaches that you can take in starting to open up your psyche to some amateur exploration. My initial suggestion would be that you start to take the matter of your soul/psyche seriously. My only caveat is to point out that I am not a fully trained psychologist... not that I've ever regarded qualification as a prerequisite and barrier to personal development.

Take this or leave this, it's your call.

3 Small Steps into your soul

If you'd like to open up and begin to explore the reality of your soul, here's 3 easy steps you might like to try:

Step One: Sit in Silence and Stillness

1. Take some time out of your busy day - perhaps as little as 15 minutes - and go to a quiet place alone. Ensure that you have no means of communication with the outside world, like a

phone or other people to distract you. Yes, I know that can be tricky... but please try and find a way to make it happen.

2. Sit in silence, say nothing... and focus on stilling your body too. Keep quiet, keep still, and focus on stilling your mind. For as long as you can bear it, sit in silence and stillness, alone. To be honest, unless you are well practiced in meditation, you're going to find this surprisingly hard. First time out, aim to do it for 5 minutes. Next time, stretch yourself to 10 minutes... and then, third time, to 15 minutes... and so on.
3. Notice the disquiet and discomfort that, if you are anything like most other people, you will experience in your mind... that is, the conscious part of your psyche. You will perhaps recognise some flood of thoughts and worries, or questions, or images, or distraction to trying to sit still and quiet. That'll be your psyche acting up and impressing upon you how unbalanced your mind really is. If you're not having those kind of reactions then, believe me, you are incredibly blessed indeed because the majority of the rest of us find this exercise tough

Step Two: Notice Your Dreams

1. Next time you plan to go to sleep, grab a pencil/pen and a sheet of paper (or small notebook) and put it by your bed. You are going to start trying to notice your dreams, so you will need a means to capture them... before they evaporate.
2. Sleep. If you dream, when you awaken, immediately grab the pencil/pen and paper and scribble down any key images, feelings, ideas or stories from what you have experienced. Do it quickly and don't try to make sense of it.
3. Resist the urge to interpret any of it. Just jot it down and keep it as a record. It's probably best to date the page, just for reference down the line. This is a way for you to begin to tune in to your psyche's unconscious experience of life. Tuning in is all you need to do for now.

Step Three: Pay Attention to Your Conscience

1. You know when, as you live, occasionally you might experience those moments when something inside you feels uncomfy with something you've done or said? Yes, I'm talking about conscience - which is a word worth looking up in the dictionary if you're not familiar with it. Well, start noticing when it plays you up. Notice when your conscience pricks at you.
2. Make a note, perhaps in your diary or journal if you have one, of the more significant moments when your conscience gives you a warning. Again, as with the dreaming, consider dating the entries but resist the urge to interpret things too much at this stage.
3. Look for trends in your behavior or words that might give you clues as to what your psyche is uncomfortable with. This is not the time for changing anything if you don't want to... but it is a useful means to sensing those parts of your soul that are trying to speak to you. Again, all we are seeking is to create an internal awareness.

Try this stuff out for a few weeks, maybe something like 4 to 6 weeks as a starting point. Yes, that probably sounds quite daunting but, you know, it's going to be worth it in the long run. I know that you are probably going to find it hard to trust me on this, but it really is likely to be one of those experiences that will open up the seriousness of what we are discussing here.

Your soul/psyche is important... and even if you think that's hokum and a bundle of rubbish, it's still something that most people on this planet agree on. What's that I just said?

Most People on Earth Believe In Something Bigger

According to the Gallup International Millennium Survey, conducted on the eve of the 21st Century, only 13% of the world's

population claims to be atheist. The rest would identify themselves as belonging to a religious belief system.

From this data, admittedly now more than 10 years out of date, it might seem that for people growing up in a global society, more connected and integrated than ever before, the question of religion might be very relevant indeed.

Underneath the statistical findings is the heavily implied belief that humanity contains within it a spiritual need. It seems to me that a spiritual need implies a spirit... a breath, or a soul... and thus, coming back to Jung, perhaps a psyche.

It's up to you to decide. Do you have a soul? If so, what are you going to do with it?

Tribalism: Why Faith Is Social

Throughout human history, and only until recently, faith has been an inherently social phenomena. The idea that faith is purely a personal, individual matter is a recent aberration.

Faith as identity

One of the most repeated criticisms of faith from the small but vocal realm of secularism is that it causes strife and war. That puts aside, of course, the fact that strife and war have been a feature of human culture, both within communities of faith and within secular communities, for all of our history.

Yet it is fair to say that faith has often been bound up with the tensions that lead us to war. One of the reasons for this, it might be suggested, is that faith helps human beings to form identity - not least in terms of who holds “ultimate truth”, a concept that seems exclusive however you choose to look at it.

From differences in the way in which we identify one-another, the idea goes, we recognise and are tempted to persecute that difference. Tolerance, whether religious or political, has tended to be a rare quality. In my own life I have both experienced and participated in this kind of group-think leading-to-violence. That violence is not always physical but, nonetheless, certain behaviours and attitudes are clearly of a violent nature.

Listening to two atheists on the bus talk about their “stupid faith-head” associates is about as appealing as hearing two Christians or Muslims express their own frustration at how “blind and stupid”

non-believing people can be. The same extends into football tribalism, fashion taste, movie preference, vegetarianism versus omnivorous habits, environmentalism, the passions that arise from stopping animal testing and culling, and so on... and on... We are a tribal species and faith is one of the key elements in our tribal identity.

You are not a tribe of one

An individual alone is not a tribe. Alone you are simply that - alone.

Tribes form when a few people come together. The earliest tribal identity was probably rooted in family - the unit commonly formed when two humans opt to raise a child - and grew from those roots. We are, psychologists seem to be telling us, essentially “wired” to group together - to form connections with other human beings. That heavily implies that our health and well-being is, at least in part, linked to the social context within which we find ourselves.

Individualism is limiting

One of the critical dysfunctions of our modern (Western) culture is that we have elevated the individual to the point of loneliness. We are informed that we alone can decide who we are and what we will seek to achieve.

We are surrounded by opinion but denied access or reference to any kind of truth. The biggest taboos in my own life, that I was raised never to try and spread my own views about (at least not without first being asked for those views), were three subjects: **politics, personal wealth, and religion.**

I have to confess that, for many years, it was as if I was living within a tyranny of self. I learned to view the world in the way that it was explained to me, and I learned to function within the rules and boundaries that society laid out for me. Yet, to be frank, I was

too constricted by those boundaries and could not understand the “why” of many of the rules. Some things in my life did not meet with the expectations of nature... and those mismatches caused doubt and, eventually, frustration and pain. Not being able to talk about and challenge the ways of thinking around me, which were dominated by secularism and atheism, led me to withdraw and seek something else. I began to seek a new tribe.

There are many tribes

Human history offers you many tribes to join. There are at least six major religions and, beyond that, there are many dozens of less popular faith identities. For me, however, the most valuable things to discuss and explore are the points of connection between those many spiritual approaches.

Not for one moment, incidentally, am I in favour of trying to blend many faiths into one. That would be unrealistic and completely counter-productive - after all, we like our tribes and we like our tribal identities. No, we can do better than that because the great aim of my own approach is to keep the tribes at peace. Understanding and seeing points of contact are good things, to my mind... but blending differences will just lead to a meaningless mess.

Choose your tribe with care

Get involved at a practical level to learn about and identify the different tribes that surround you. Accept that it is quite possible that you understand less than you believe may be the case... and that, quite simply, the best thing is to explore the cultures that each of those tribes offer.

For our purposes, you are welcome to join the journey we are taking here and we really do mean that too. We aim to begin with the “big 4” of Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. We will also take

a delve into Buddhism. And I'd love to explore modern Paganism too. That's just for starters.

What might that offer to you?

Perhaps you are already part of a tribe. Would you consider learning about the other tribes? Are you tribeless? Maybe you can try and feel your way into the right community for your own spiritual health.

Are you anti-tribe? Well, maybe you would prefer to stay away from our tribalism... I really don't know. In the end, the main thing is to understand that you are not alone. Religion is social, not private, and it is worth some effort.

In the end, this is no small matter of lifestyle... this is about your soul, psyche, and purpose in life. Come, join the tribes.

3 Reasons Why Pushing Your Religion Is A Bad Idea

All of us hold a world-view, a picture in our minds about how the world works and what is real or unreal. When you come across somebody who has a different picture in their mind you have various options about how you share your differences in world-view. Today I want to suggest that pushing your particular view of religious ideas onto other people is probably not a cool idea.

Whether you are Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Pagan, or Atheist the same general principle applies. We no longer live in an era where it is considered acceptable to conquer somebody's country and impose our belief systems. Whatever the scale, from countries down to the talking-space at the bar, pushing your religion is a bad idea.

1. The Truth is Out There? If so, it's not obvious.

What is truth?

If you claim to have it, how can you show me that you are right? How can I know that you are not some deluded nutter who thinks they have the answers but who is actually not living in the same world as me? Simply telling me your "truth", and that I am wrong, is not going to be terribly persuasive. It's really the argumentative style of the school playground to simply state something as truth and then expect others to bow to it.

Whenever I get talking to other Christians who, having not met me, don't realise that I am also a Christian there almost inevitably ends up being a moment when they try to assert some basic "truth" of the Gospel. Perhaps it's the idea that God has spoken definitively about

abortion in the Bible, or that tithing (giving 10% of your income to the Church) is divinely mandated, or how terrible it is that folk don't get their children "Christened" any more. For me, given the nature of each of those questions, I find myself wondering, "Really?"

Has God (in the Christian sense) really spoken definitively on those issues? Because I don't think He has... and the moment I think that, I am also tempted to think that you haven't really thought about it nearly enough to believe otherwise. Yes, I am perhaps wrong to give in to that temptation... but what other option have you given me?

2. Closed Statements Demonstrate Closed Mindedness.

A closed statement is a viewpoint that brooks no discussion. (Like that one.) Allow me to rephrase: In my experience it is generally the case that when someone makes a definitive statement they leave me no space for discussion or input. It is then likely that my response will be to either argue with them or, more often, opt for silence and the judgement that this person is a closed-minded bigot.

How do you respond to this kind of statement?

- "Faith-heads are all people who need a crutch to help them get through life. They need to wise up, get real, and start living in the real world."
- "New Age boffs are all a bunch of dreamers who don't have the courage to make a solid decision about what they believe."
- "Atheists are intellectually arrogant yet, on the whole, can't understand that you can't prove a negative. Where do they get off?"

Look - I know I am being provocative and extreme here. Nobody really says stuff like that, right? Except that they do. I've heard it

myself... and I have probably uttered similar things at one time or another too. If you're a human being then you've probably done it as well. This kind of thing is pushy, disrespectful, and out to get you labelled as... well... something not nice.

There is another way. You could encourage a discussion instead.

- “What I’ve always struggled with in relation to faith is the fact that, throughout my own life, I’ve never felt the need to lean on any god or stuff like that. But then, is that what it’s really all about?”
- “Given that the Qur’an tells me how to live my life, I don’t really understand the value in seeking out different religious practices from other cultures. How has this helped you in your own faith?”
- “I’ve always found it hard to understand how being an Atheist is any different from making any other faith choice. How did you come to the conclusion that there definitely is no god?”

Yeah. I know. It’s not something that happens much, is it.

3. Spamming Is Annoying.

A friend of mine mentioned that, the other day, they had been “spammed” on their blog by some Christian-style organisation. The inference was that my friend had been told, in no uncertain terms, why they were wrong. I’m guessing that my friend chose not to publish the comment they made to me.

It doesn’t matter who you are or what the context is, really - you need to ask yourself what right you have to push your own views onto somebody else. An unsolicited opinion is the interpersonal equivalent of spamming. It’s unwelcome, it doesn’t enrich the experience of the recipient, and it gets you labelled. Please don’t

post spammy comments on blogs. Try to avoid “spamming” the conversations other people are having. And finally, don’t sit there in your armchair and try to tell me how stupid I am for seeking after the Divine.

Have you considered how the other person would feel? Are you going to give them a chance to speak too? Are you prepared to listen? As far as I am concerned, it seems reasonable to assume that there is far more to learn from other people’s different world-views than there is in trying to smash them apart. What do you really gain by trying to conquer their minds?

Your Faith Is Not Irrational

A Quick Question

There's a man I know who every day washes himself thoroughly and goes, barefoot, into a separate small room in his home within which sits a small table. In front of the small table is a cushion and upon that table is a sculpture of a creature with the head of an elephant, four arms, and a large portly body.

Every day this man brings fresh flowers, water and fruit to that table and places it in front of the statue. He lights incense and wafts it around the statue while he mumbles some strange words that are quite hard for me to understand because they are spoken in a foreign language. After doing this he will usually sit for a while in silence and stillness. Eventually he will walk away seemingly calm, happy even, and go about his business.

Is this man irrational?

Where Reason Begins

In a previous article, I wrote:

Reason is an excellent tool for any human to utilise in making sense of the world around them. But, as Spock would certainly concede, logical deduction is limited by the assumptions from which one argues. Thus, in forming our world-views, beliefs and (ultimately) faith we are reasoning from somewhere. I'd like to ask you, "from where?"

And from this question we explored the basis of my own theory that, when dealing with issues of faith and world-view, people

allow three other key influences to help them with their use of Reason, that faculty of our human brains that allows us to figure things out for ourselves.

Since writing that article, I have had the privilege of working with more and more people who sit outside of any kind of belief system, or world view, that requires or accepts religious assumptions. That is to say, the starting point for many of these people is entirely different to that which I have experienced when I walk into my local church or visit a nearby Mosque, Gurdwara or Synagogue.

My observation is simple: these people who have different starting points in the way that they interpret the world around them are unlikely to be able to understand the world-view of the differing starting point. If you don't see any need for God, gods, or goddesses then you are going to be pushed to understand the person who does... at least in any way that doesn't start to border on being patronising.

This article, then, seeks to reassure those of you who start with assumptions about the world that do involve those "other beings" that you are not irrational and unreasonable. It also seeks to challenge those who see the world through natural (as opposed to supernatural) spectacles to consider taking them off for a few minutes.

Reason Starts From Your Core Assumptions

I was raised in a family where the basic assumptions included the following:

- God does not exist, and neither do any other supernatural beings (including ghosts, angels or fairies).
- The entire natural order is a colossal accident from which beauty has arisen from chaos.

- There is no purpose to human life except for that which we make for ourselves (in our case, have children and make money).

Imagine what it is like when, as a person of faith, I come home to visit nowadays with these alternative assumptions in my head:

- There is only one God and we humans are supernatural beings.
- The entire natural order is designed and beauty is part of that design.
- The purpose of human life is to know our creator and to serve his design.

Now, for those readers who are not monotheists or who don't believe in a created order, bear with me. I simply ask you to make the comparison. It is clear that now, despite the impact of my family to socialise me otherwise, we have belief systems that arise from totally different assumptions about the nature of things. And, consequently, whenever a discussion about how the latest evidence from science points towards how something else in the universe might have come about by accident rather than design, the various pro- and con- arguments focused on the science might as well wash over all of our heads.

Why? Because, at the core, our assumptions immunise us against understanding the other point of view.

Your Positive Assumptions About The Supernatural Are Not Irrational

I've got to be honest, I don't like using the word 'supernatural'. For me, many things that are outside of the secular world-view are simply natural parts of the created order... but, in deference to

those of you who find that a tricky idea, we'll continue to talk of things supernatural in the sense of those things that defy scientific measurement and material definition - such as the concept of deity.

If you hold a positive view about the supernatural (such as God, gods, goddesses, angels, fairies, ghosts and the like) then you are not suddenly rendered an irrational human being. Even if you hold such matters in a place of possibility, instead of outright ruling them from existence, then you are not crazy to do so.

Many people look out of the window at the morning sun rising across the open fields of their homeland and see beauty and order, something that seems to defy randomness. Others look at that same scene and regard it as nothing more than a beautiful accident. Whatever your basic assumptions about our world, whether it is something created or something that simply happens to be, you are neither way building the rest of your life on an irrationality. On the contrary, your mind is seeing and interpreting the world through different eyes... and forming conclusions based on different first assumptions.

If you believe in some kind of creative force in the universe then it is not unreasonable to feel that there are other supernatural beings. It is not unreasonable to believe that human beings, from our very ability to perceive that which is "beyond", are ourselves in some way supernatural. If you believe, as the Hindu might, that we are all Atman (the eternal self) residing for a time in these temporary bodies then you will live out your life in a very different way to that person who rejects all such ideas as mummery. The point is that you simply look through different assumption spectacles.

Your Reaction To The Supernatural Is Not Irrational

The man in my initial story is Hindu. He worships Ganesh, a deity who is believed to be the Remover of Obstacles and the Lord of Beginnings. His morning act of Puja (worship or service) honours that deity and hopes to draw favour from him. For a man who

believes himself to be an Eternal Self living temporarily within a physical body that has a purpose, and which resides within a universe in which supernatural forces exist who might be able to help him, this is not an unreasonable act.

I have another friend who believes that she can influence change upon her life through the incantation of special words and the repetition of specific ritual acts. She calls upon the supernatural force she names simply as 'The Great Mother' to help her make the positive impact she desires to have upon the world around her. She also, in deference to this supernatural power, seeks to take only what she needs from the Earth and, consequently, is inspired to recycle and repair rather than buy and throw away. Once again, given that she holds the assumptions about the world that she does, this is not an irrational act.

For those of you who do not hold belief in the supernatural, it may all seem quite strange and, frankly, superfluous. After all, we can all recycle and repair to protect our environment. We can all choose to light incense in our homes, or choose to serve other people, or work to make a difference in the world we live within... and all without the need for deity or the supernatural. Yet... to make such an assertion misses the point. For those people who are inspired by the supernatural, these acts are rational consequences of the assumptions they hold.

My Pagan friend is an environmentalist because of her beliefs about the sanctity of life and the special quality of planet Earth... and those ideas were born in her devotion to Mother. The Hindu chap lives his life with purpose and devotion to Ganesh because it arises naturally and reasonably from his way of looking at the same facts that you or I do.

Most human beings are rational. They do things for a reason. You simply may not understand their assumptions.