

sense of belonging to the universe as a whole.

This sense of oneness with the natural world is fully borne out by the new systemic conception of life that has recently emerged at the forefront of science. As we understand how the roots of life reach deep into basic physics and chemistry, how the unfolding of complexity began long before the formation of the first living cells, and how life has evolved for billions of years by using again and again the same basic patterns and processes, we realise how tightly we are connected with the entire fabric of life.

Spirituality and religion

Spirituality, then, is a way of being grounded in a certain experience of reality that is independent of cultural and historical context. Religion is the organised attempt to understand spiritual experience, to interpret it with words and concepts, and to use this interpretation as the source of moral guidelines for the religious community.

There are three basic aspects to religion: theology, morals, and ritual. In theistic religions, theology is the intellectual interpretation of the spiritual experience, of the sense of belonging, with God as the ultimate reference point. Morals, or ethics, are the rules of conduct derived from that sense of belonging; and ritual is the celebration of belonging by the religious community. All three of these aspects depend on the religious community's historical and cultural context.

Theology was originally understood as the intellectual interpretation of the theologians' own mystical experience. Indeed, during the first thousand years of Christianity virtually all of the leading theologians – the so-called Church Fathers – were also mystics. Over the subsequent centuries, however, during the scholastic period, theology became progressively fragmented and divorced from the spiritual experience that was originally at its core.

With the new emphasis on purely intellectual theological knowledge came a hardening of the language. Whereas the Church Fathers repeatedly asserted that religious experience could not be adequately expressed in words, and therefore expressed their interpretations in terms of symbols and metaphors, the scholastic theologians formulated the Christian teachings in dogmatic language and required that the faithful accept these formulations as the literal truth. In other words, Christian theology became more and more rigid and fundamentalist, devoid of authentic spirituality. This rigid position of the Church led to the well-known conflicts between science and fundamentalist Christianity that have continued to the present day.

The central error of fundamentalist theologians was, and is, to adopt a literal interpretation of religious symbols and metaphors. Once this is done, any dialogue between religion and science becomes frustrating and unproductive.

Spiritual experience is also known as a mystical

experience, because it is an encounter with mystery. Spiritual teachers throughout the ages have insisted that the experience of a profound sense of connectedness, of belonging to the cosmos as a whole, which is the central characteristic of mystical experience, is ineffable – that is, incapable of being adequately expressed in words or concepts – and they often describe it as being accompanied by a deep sense of awe and wonder together with a feeling of great humility.

Scientists, in their systematic observations of natural phenomena, do not consider their experience of reality as ineffable. On the contrary, they attempt to express it in technical language, including mathematics, as precisely as possible. However, the fundamental interconnectedness of all phenomena is a dominant theme also in modern science, and many of our great scientists have expressed their sense of awe and wonder when faced with the mystery that lies beyond the limits of their theories. Albert Einstein, for one, repeatedly expressed such feelings, as in the following celebrated passage:

“The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science... Enough for me the mystery of the eternity of life, and the inkling of the marvellous structure of reality, together with the single-hearted endeavour to comprehend a portion, be it never so tiny, of the reason that manifests itself in nature.”

Now let us turn to the two other aspects of religion: morals and ritual. Morals, or ethics, are the rules of conduct derived from the sense of belonging that lies at the core of the spiritual experience, and ritual is the celebration of that belonging.

Both ethics and ritual develop within the context of a religious community. Ethical behaviour is always related to the particular community to which we belong. When we belong to a community, we behave accordingly. In today's world, there are two relevant communities to which we all belong. We are all members of humanity, and we all belong to the global biosphere. We are members of *oikos*, the Earth Household, which is the Greek root of the word 'ecology', and as such we should behave as the other members of the household behave – the plants, animals and microorganisms that form the vast network of relationships that we call the web of life.

The outstanding characteristic of the Earth Household is its inherent ability to sustain life. It behoves us, as members of the global community of living beings, to behave in such a way that we do not interfere with this inherent ability. This is the essential meaning of ecological sustainability. As members of the human community, we should behave in a way that reflects respect for human dignity and basic human rights.

The original purpose of a religious community was to provide opportunities for its members to relive