Reflections on 'How it all works (perhaps)' –2nd June 2021 – prepared by Rob

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer providing video resources every week but may continue to create these important seasons of the year. We have attached some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate in our homes at 7.30pm on Wednesday. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction:

This month I would like to share some passages from a book I am reading about Quantum Physics – Helgoland by Carlo Rovelli. Not that I understand it – but am comforted by his saying that anyone who claims to understand it doesn't! Nevertheless, I am inspired by the facts that his account is poetic and that his theory is "the 'relational' interpretation of quantum mechanics, where the world is fundamentally made of relations and events rather than permanent substances." This has for a long time been my own understanding that in some mysterious way there is just relationship without ultimately there being any entities actually to relate to one another.

The way he describes quantum theory is this: "A simple equation codes quantum theory. It implies that the world is not continuous but granular. There is no infinite in going towards the small: things cannot get infinitely smaller. It tells us that the future is not determined by the present. It tells us that physical things only have properties in relation to other physical things. That these properties make sense only when things interact. It tells us that sometimes the perspectives cannot be juxtaposed."

Rethinking Nature:

He goes on to reflect poetically from his own perspective:

"There is something disorientating in all this. The solid basis of reality seems to melt between our fingers, in an infinite regression of references.

I stop writing these lines and look out of the window. There is still snow. Here in Canada, spring comes late. In my room there is a fire in the fireplace. I get up and add another log to it. I am writing about the nature of reality. I look into the fire and wonder which reality I am speaking about. This snow? This flickering fire? Or the reality which I've read about in books? Perhaps only the warmth from the fire reaching my skin, the nameless reddish-orange flickers, the tenuous whitish-blue of approaching twilight?

For a moment even these sensations melt. I close my eyes and see bright lakes of vivid colour parting like curtains, through which I feel I am falling. Is this also reality? Violet and orange shapes are dancing, and I am no longer there.

I take a sip of tea. Stoke the fire. Smile. We navigate in an uncertain sea of colours and have at our disposal good maps with which to orientate ourselves. But between our mental maps and reality there is the same distance as between the charts of sailors and the fury of the waves crashing against the cliffs, where the gulls hover and cry.

That fragile web, our mental organisation, is little more than a clumsy tool for navigating through the infinite mysteries of this magical light-flooded kaleidoscope in which we are amazed to exist and that we call our world.

We can traverse it unquestionably, with faith in the maps that we have; after all, they allow us to live pretty well. We can remain quiet, overwhelmed by the light and by the infinite beauty. We can sit patiently at a desk, light a candle or turn on a Macbook Air; go to the laboratories, discuss with friends and enemies, retire to a Sacred Island to calculate and clamber across rocks at dawn; or drink a little tea, revive the flames in the fireplace and start to write again, trying to understand together a few more grains of truth, to pick up the mariners' chart again and contribute to improving a bit of it. Once again, to rethink Nature.

Consciousness

In his book Blue Sky God, Rev. Don MacGregor has a chapter called "Quantum Reality and God as Consciousness" in which he says: "In this new understanding, consciousness is the starting point, the primal state, and 'downward causation' happens as consciousness brings about material reality by 'choosing' from the range of possibilities offered in the energy wave. Put simply, the universe does not seem to exist without a perceiver of that universe. As an analogy, consider a laptop computer. It contains immense possibilities and potential; it can show beautiful pictures, play gorgeous music, display the most elegant prose, perform enormous calculations, but until the consciousness of a person acts on it, nothing appears at all. In the same way, energetic possibility waves exist in the universe, with all the potential to form material particles – electrons, protons, atoms, molecules – but until consciousness acts on them, nothing will come into being. Consciousness is the underlying reality of everything, the matrix in which everything is held."

Having read most of Rovelli's book, and not surprisingly, perhaps, I am not sure that MacGregor has quite understood the quantum process! Rovelli will have none of an "underlying consciousness". He says: "Someone has suggested that there is something psychic in all things. The argument is that since we have consciousness, and are made up of protons and electrons, then the electrons and protons should already have a kind of proto-consciousness.

I don't find such arguments and such 'pan-psychism' persuasive in the slightest. It is like saying that since a bicycle is made of atoms, then each atom must be a proto-cyclist. Our mental life needs the existence of neurons, sensory organs, a body, the complex elaboration of information that occurs in our brains: all the evidence suggests that without all this we have no mental life." However, he goes on:

"But there is no need to attribute proto-consciousness to elementary systems, in order to get round a frozen 'simple matter'. It is enough to have observed how the world is better described by relative variables and their correlations. This allows us to be released from the prison of a blunt opposition between the objectivity of matter and mental life. The rigid distinction between a mental world and a physical one fades. It is possible to think of both mental and physical phenomena as natural phenomena: both products of interactions between parts of the physical world."

Reflection

I think something of a compromise between MacGregor's and Rovelli's approaches may be possible. Not being either a scientist or a theologian, I hesitate to attempt any degree of certainty, but it may work a little like this. 'Mind' is the ability to discriminate which, in effect is to act in a particular way. All of nature has the ability to act. Buddhists call this 'Karma'. There is a fundamental principle or longing which is to connect or relate, perhaps to re-connect. But to do so intentionally there must be information on which to act. At a basic wave or particle level, there is none, or very little. So primitive connections have to be made perhaps randomly. In his book on Brain Science, Second Nature, Dr Gerald Edelman says: "A large portion of brain development is stochastic and epigenetic – that is, strongly influenced by the fact that neurons that fire

together wire together." As connections are made, two things happen. First there is appreciation of the 'other' (compassion) and secondly a little bit more information is acquired about the world (wisdom). Gradually some kind of picture emerges from which there arises the possibility of acting with intention (Rovelli's mariners' charts). The process is one of cause and effect or evolution. But crucially the process is not entirely deterministic. As Rovelli says, the future is not determined by the present. Mostly, certainly in primitive stages (and arguably we are still at a very primitive stage), the process of cause and effect is unconscious as well as conditioned, but there are a variety of possible consequences which could arise from any particular cause. So it is possible to act within this margin of conditionality and unconditioned action is also possible. For that to be facilitated the system has to create entities, beings which believe themselves separate from their environment and from others. A sense of identity arises. At this stage action within the margin of conditionality is possible in one of two ways. We can either turn away from the other and try to build our individuality and separateness, or we can let go a little of our individuality and connect and relate. To do the latter is more difficult – it takes a degree of trust – a leap of faith; it is moving into the unconditioned. This is because the system has been building separateness and to continue that process is to follow the more conditioned path – the way of the world.

So where is God, the divine? God, perhaps, manifests the possibility of connection, the longing for it and the invitation to enter into communion. To the extent that we accept the invitation, differences and identities dissolve, and there is peace – non-duality.

Preparation for Meditation

So we need to come down into the present like Carlo Rovello by his warm fireside in snowy Canada, for our practice of meditation and development of connecting. Finding a comfortable position, relaxing the body, noticing its contact with the chair or cushion and with the floor. Letting go of the efforts, difficulties, triumphs and worries of our day, and bringing ourselves into the peace of the present moment. Noticing our breathing as it slows and deepens. Giving attention to any points of tension or discomfort in the body. If you use a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, perhaps co-ordinating it with the rhythm of the breathing. Or you may wish simply to focus on a candle or to follow the breath. Returning to our meditation object or point of focus whenever we are aware of the mind wandering off, in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance. Opening to God or the divine – however we conceive Him and understanding our relationship with Him not just as our own but as drawing us into a connection with the whole of creation.

We will meditate together for 25 minutes.

Post Meditation Verse

I would like to end with the final speech of Prospero in Shakespeare's Tempest.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,

As I foretold you, were all spirits and

Are melted into air, into thin air:

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,

Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,

And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,

Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded in a sleep.

Rovelli describes this as “one of the most moving passages in the history of literature” and adds: “This is how I feel, at the end of this long meditation on quantum physics. The solidity of the physical world seems to have melted into thin air, like Prospero’s cloud-capp’d towers and gorgeous palaces. Reality has broken up into a play of mirrors.”

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon. Stay safe and well.

Resources:

Carlo Rovelli – Helgoland, Allen Lane, Penguin Random House
Don MacGregor – Blue Sky God, Circle Books
Gerald M. Edelman – Second Nature, Yale University Press
William Shakespeare – The Tempest
Photographs from Pixabay.







Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.