**IN DEFENCE OF FAITH**

I know what it is to be an atheist, someone as starkly sceptical and dismissive of things spiritual and belief in the Divine easily as Richard Dawkins. However, until my thirties, I had what might be understood as a very woolly notion of the spiritual, although apart from being confirmed into the Church of England at age 14, I had never professed any real interest in things ostensibly religious, despite having had experiences of a mystical nature in my youth. At school, my religion education teacher and I hated each other and I failed my GCE examination in the subject with the lowest grade.

When my daughter was born and there came the time to decide whether she should be baptised, her father (a lapsed Catholic) and I approached the evangelical pastor of the local church. He explained that we would have to attend formal sessions on Christianity to demonstrate our commitment and in order to help me make up my mind, gave me a book written by C.S. Lewis about his own reasons for being a Christian. It did help me make up my mind. I felt so alienated by some of what I saw as the facile reasoning of this famous literary Christian that that, together with the need to submit to a re-indoctrination, was enough to help me firm up my woolly thinking and have the courage of newly emerging convictions to dispense with all this nonsense and embrace the atheism that by then was becoming the dominant state of belief for me. My daughter’s father was in complete agreement, so that for me marks the defining point of nailing my articles to the door of rationalist, positivist, evidence-based atheism. No more God for me ....

Some eight years passed this way and I settled more deeply into the rationalist mould. As a young child my daughter remembers both her parents for their adamant dismissal of anything God related. Across the top of the Baptist church down the end of the road ran a large exhortation “Have Faith in God”. Most of the time I never even saw it, and when I did I felt that patronising sense of superiority that many people (atheists and religious believers alike) have at feeling they know better. I had a friend who was a committed Christian whose daughter attended the same primary school as did mine. We respected each other’s right to see things differently and rarely discussed religion, although she was an avid church goer and involved in many of the church social events. Time passed.

At this stage I was working as a contract researcher at the local University, within the fields of health sciences and health economics. It was itinerant work, and the real love of my life was actually South American archaeology. I had finally achieved my PhD after many years working on it intermittently and, wanting to develop my career interests, I was successful in winning a large independent award to start a new research project on the coast of Ecuador, not far from the original region where I carried out fieldwork for my doctoral thesis. The award was for a full year and I had already established fertile contacts with in country researchers and had a new project proposal ready to go into the field with. I set off towards the end of September of that year with my young daughter, then aged six, who was to spend a year out of school, her father joining us on unpaid leave from his job later that November. There I stayed until August of the following year when what had been the first stage of what became an eight year project ended, and the time to return to the UK had come.

I had had a reasonable salary on a rolling contract with the research institution at the university which I had given up for my project, so I returned to nothing. The grant monies had properly all been spent on the project itself and there was nothing to add into the family income which had to meet the usual demands of mortgage, household spending and so on. It had been a big enough shock to have to return to 'normality', which for me had never felt normal anyway, viz life in the UK. But now I had no job or means to earn. I applied for several jobs without success as the late summer wore on towards an early chill autumn and winter. Finally, there was one last genuine hope in a good permanent post in British Archaeology via the then English Heritage. I applied and was shortlisted for an interview in London. I had issues with the interview process and didn’t feel particularly satisfied with my performance, despite having devoted a lot of time researching for it. So when I was called by the interview panel’s secretary to say that I hadn’t been successful, I wasn’t surprised, although inevitably still crushingly disappointed. That was that. My last hope had gone and I had completely run out of means for helping myself.

In the sheer desperation of my situation (the household could never have lasted long on the salary of my daughter’s father alone and we were already accumulating debt by then) I remember going upstairs to the bedroom, sitting on the bed and beginning to pray. My prayer was articulated something like this: “You know I don’t believe in you and I feel a complete hypocrite for praying to something I don’t believe in, but I’m desperate and I don’t know what to do. I’ve tried everything to help myself and there’s nothing left. I need a miracle. So please forgive me for my hypocrisy, but I’m praying for help, for a miracle.” Probably not the exact words, but close enough. I let it go then and a couple of days passed. It was afternoon and I was decorating the Christmas tree when the phone went in the hallway. It was the same secretary calling to tell me I had got the job after all. I was stunned. Apparently, I had been second on the short list and the person who was first had eventually declined the job offer, leaving it open for me. I went back upstairs to the bedroom and said: “I still don’t believe in you, but I can’t ignore this. So all I can say is that I will leave a door in my heart open, and please give me faith.” The miracle I had prayed for had, against all apparent odds, been granted.

This was December and nearly a year elapsed with me thinking and feeling pretty much as I ever had, but making a concerted effort to set aside my reservations and outright disbelief and open myself up to reconsidering the long eschewed realms of the spiritual and the religious. I read a lot, including the Bible and tried to engage with an inner enquiry about it all. I talked with my Christian friend about what I was doing and she was very pragmatic, supportive and helpful, not in anyway attempting to take advantage of my new openness. She simply explained her own views and beliefs with me, but probably inevitably as someone from a very conventional Christian background would. She assured me for example that God would ‘show me Jesus', things that really had little meaning for me. However, reading the Bible I became better acquainted with many parts of it that I had never known before, like the Apocrypha (Wisdom texts) and re-engaging with the New Testament stories of Jesus and the famous sayings of his, did start to resonate with me, which is to say the deeper truths and wisdoms they contained. You didn’t have to be a Christian to recognise the real truths you were reading and from that time they (the sayings/parables of Jesus) became key parts of my life guidance systems and still are.

I tried going to church occasionally, but it wasn’t a very inspiring experience for me. I greatly disliked many of the dreary hymns, which just reminded me of school assemblies, and seemed about as far removed from any notion of a sublime deity of love that you could imagine. Ditto the clergy and most of the congregation too. However, I had vowed that I would make a real effort, so I persevered regardless. Christmas passed, the New Year came and I settled into my new employment as an English Heritage archaeologist working in the region, mostly on my own, which gave me enviable freedoms. I have always enjoyed being able to work alone and organise my own working schedule. I was part of a team of independent field archaeologists assigned to different regions in the UK and happily they were all people I liked a lot: funny, zany, anarchic, fun, although it was only on the different field trips we made that we ever got to socialise with each other.

Another perk was that they let me take three months unpaid leave in the summer to continue my archaeological project in Ecuador and this was the start of a real run of luck for me in applying for and getting grants for fieldwork. American colleagues I collaborated with in Ecuador and stayed with were themselves dyed in the wool atheists, so it was a little difficult now for me to get embroiled in the kinds of conversations we had used to have and I didn’t feel strong enough to come out and own my new preparedness to believe in something I had until so recently roundly condemned with them. Being in the closet and unable to discuss these things with anyone, still exposed to the kinds of religious practices and views that had ever alienated me, made life difficult. I had had no further striking experiences either that might have helped reinforce my first miraculous one, which had led me into opening myself up to something which had been alien to me for years. However, returning from Ecuador and driving down south for a work training weekend, I came the closest to having a severe road accident that would likely have killed me outright and probably other drivers too. I came within centimetres of colliding with some aggressive tailgaters on the motorway, but just managed to avoid the collision. It recalled a weird apocalyptic dream I had had back in Ecuador, when I had just barely managed to avoid being annihilated by a weird pale horse like creature. I had ducked down in the dream and screwed up my eyes and waited for the worst to strike me, but miraculously it passed.

With the summer fieldwork over, I returned to the UK late September, still at odds with this new condition of would be faith in something I still didn’t really believe in and not knowing how to integrate it in any meaningful way in my life. I continued reading widely and discussing affairs of faith with my Christian friend. Autumn for some unknown reason has always been a very evocative and significant time for me. And as the autumn progressed, I began to enter a more receptive and mystical sort of place.

The actual experience I am now going to describe was set within a complex context of my own evolving inward and deeply personal feelings, which I won’t attempt to describe here, but I certainly felt that I was beginning to enter into a rarefied place within myself. Perhaps quite prosaically when I was in the kitchen one afternoon and entranced by a recurrent daydream that kept haunting me, I felt a sudden, fleeting but profound sensation like a vortex of light or energy flashing up through me which reaching my head filled me with the most sublime and beautiful inner apprehension of what I absolutely identified as the Divine Love of God. It was over in a moment, but I knew I had experienced something unique, yet also something somehow already known to me. As though from another cosmic dimension, I recognised the force that had touched me; it was as though it was already something familiar, if long forgotten. In that one moment everything changed and everything seemed to sparkle with a new vividness and sense of mystery. Everything suddenly seemed precious, even the cat seemed precious. I told my friend that I had had a revelation of the Divine love of God and she was suitably impressed and rather envious. But from that moment on, what had been a meaningless and arid exercise of forced and false belief in something I still found hard to believe in, changed into something innately a part of me, within me; not in anyway explicable, but having its own undefinable reality. It has been with me ever since and indeed evolved and grown into something immense and profound, as a vast tree might grow from a newly sprouted sapling.

I cannot describe the succeeding years in much detail, we are talking about some twenty-five years of steady, if occasionally intermittent spiritual progression involving a wide range of experiences as I slowly changed and evolved myself. Some key things are worth noting however. After this first experience and following its immediate aftermath, the force that had taken me over started to work with me on deep seated personal behaviours that needed immediate attention, and none more critical than the relationship with my then eight year old daughter, whom over years I had been in the process of gradually alienating with my often cold, controlling, and unloving behaviour, very much following my learned family pattern. This was the start of a sea change in the way we related and healed the terrible rift developing between us. But there were many other things in my life that were similarly addressed and changed, including the deteriorating relationship with my daughter’s father, that had simply stagnated for years. It was as though an unstoppable force of truth was moving through me and my life and setting the whole back into motion in a way that forced me to recognise deep seated truths and gave me the courage to address them in purposeful ways.

**Faith from the atheist perspective**

When you are a rationalist atheist, faith, as relating to a belief in a so-called supernatural realm, including God, is generally approached in this way:

‘I have no material evidence of any other reality than the world as experienced by my five senses. Certainly, as a believer in science, I also accept other kinds of realities, such as that of quantum physics for example, but understand that I can never really integrate such alternative worlds into my daily understanding of what reality is. However, I also accept that as a human being, I have emotional needs and experiences, and therefore to live within a purely positivist world, devoid of symbolism and analogy, life can appear a little stark. I might be an atheist, but I know I love art, literature, theatre and other expressions of human creativity that are outside of a purely rationalist view of the world. I also love the natural world, outside of any purely scientific understanding of it, for its beauty, even though I would struggle to offer an easy definition of what the abstract concept known as ‘beauty’ is. These non-scientific dimensions nurture me in important ways, adding richness and meaning to my life. I understand these experiences within the framework of what I know about human psychology, that as people we need more than mere facts and absolutes, but a complex web of experiences, many of which are drawn from the emotional realm, although that I understand to be a consequence of our evolution as a social species, albeit complex and difficult to define. But I do accept that people need these experiences, however hard they might be to define. I also observe that, as a consequence of the evolution of humanity as complex social beings, in times before we have been able to decode the laws of physics, of nature, people understood many of their experiences as manifestations of supernatural forces beyond their control. As time passed and with important changes to our understanding, particularly from the European Enlightenment period, people moved away from the darkness of superstition and began to look for explanations within the framework of the newly emerging sciences of the day.

So, this concept of faith is for me a completely redundant one, as it means I must set aside my rational faculties and embrace a belief in something completely unprovable. It is for people who have an emotional need for some exterior force or being that gives them comfort when life seems too painful or uncertain. Or they are afraid of death and need to comfort themselves with the notion that there is a life beyond it.

So, when people talk to me of having faith in God, it seems to me to be rather like this:

“I don’t believe in fairies at the bottom of my garden, but I see that many people do believe in them and get comfort from doing so. They buy pictures of fairies and read stories about them and indulge themselves with day dreams and fantasies about them. Many people seem to get some genuine enjoyment from suspending their rational minds and determining to believe in fairies. So, I have decided that I will too. I shall set aside all my reservations and simply sign up to this belief and hope that in so doing, my life will become a little richer and more interesting”.’

This has been by way of a very simplified, caricatured picture of the idea I am trying to present. I know many atheists who would likely fully endorse this, as indeed I did too during the years that I was an atheist myself. It is simply the only way that you can account for why, in a purely material world, people claim to believe in the existence of a non-material dimension with associated forces and beings.

Following the experience I had had of ‘the miracle' and my vow to leave a door in my heart open with a prayer for faith, my experience of the succeeding year was pretty much exactly as described above. I could almost visualise my rational mind, now set firmly to one side, shaking its head in embarrassed disbelief. This all changed completely however, following the second experience I describe above. The determined belief in something I had no evidence for was always an experience outside of myself. Following the revelation, it came within me and initiated a whole new dimension and associated way of knowing with it. Faith was, then, just another way of knowing, an apprehension of truths that lay in a dimension outside of what we might call mundane or 'ordinary reality’. Now I have plenty of evidence from traditional cultures who believe in these alternative realities, although in fact my study of shamanistic societies and the psychology underpinning them really took root at that time, following from the extensive readings I made into the experiences of mystics down through the ages and from many different religious traditions.

I never admitted to my daughter’s father the process I was engaged upon, although inevitably he did begin to get suspicious in time, and feel threatened by it. His own experiences of having been raised as a Catholic and sent to Catholic boarding schools had been enough to destroy completely any interest or preparedness to look in any way again at anything that had anything to do with things religious or spiritual, which he adopted the harshest and most cynically dismissive attitude towards. I understood that the main reason for this had to do with the severity of the conditioning he received as a boy into the Catholic mind-set, which appeared to mean for him (and I imagine that this is a common experience) that he had two choices only: either rejecting the entirety of any concept of faith, or else re-embracing Catholicism in its entirety. Apparently there was no room for re-examining religious beliefs and experiences within the context of any other philosophical or spiritual traditions. So he chose the former and as far as I am aware, continues so today.

I was able to discuss my evolving experiences with my traditionally Christian friend however, although because I had effectively strangled the spiritually aware side of myself for so long, I found it almost impossible to be able to talk freely about, feeling constrained, awkward and embarrassed and suffered from an extraordinary stricture of the throat when trying to talk, much in the way that you might experience stiffness and pain from some limb that hasn’t been used for too long. However broadly conventional in her adherence to Anglican Christian canon, she was readily open to wider ideas too. Hence, that Christmas, she bought me and small shortened edition of the Bhagavad Ghita, that timeless sublime Hindu spiritual text. I was completely taken with it and the beautiful words of wisdom spoke straight to my heart and I immediately bought the full length version. It, together with the sayings of Jesus (and I repeat I am not a Christian), have been the principal guides of my life to this day.

It’s not really necessary to describe in detail all that happened in the succeeding year, except that I had many significant dreams relating to the intense process of inner change I was engaged upon. I read widely, building on the accounts of the lives and experiences of the famous mystics, as well as other religious traditions, particularly yogic and Hindu. Come autumn, ever that special time of year for me, and a year following my original revelation, I had entered a very intense and personal stage with what I will loosely refer to as ‘God' (better understood in Eastern philosophies and Jungian psychology as the Self). One night, waking in the depths of the night, fully awake and aware, sitting up on the side of my bed, I engaged with that deepest sense of It and said simply “I love you”. Immediately from behind my closed eyes a shining white image appeared of a cruciform shape, not a Christian cross, but more an Eastern yantra or mandala as I later came to know them better. It shone before me for around ten seconds and then slowly faded out.

The process of inner engagement with that deepest Self and of inner change that had started with that sense of a light being shone right into my centre, showing me the things I needed to address about myself and change, continued intensely for several months, but there came a time when I was made aware that I would have to let it go and return to the world again. I had felt very protected during this period and was very reluctant to let go of it, but perforce I had to. And across the succeeding period, all close sense of 'God' that I had had, slowly faded, leaving me with just memories of how that intense connection had felt. It felt heart breaking now that it had left me. Through my different readings, I came to understand this experience had long been referred to as 'the dark night of the soul' and it most certainly felt that way too. It felt terrible. There are all sorts of explanations as to why spiritual adherents generally have to have this experience and most of the famous saints and mystics I read about had also had their own dark night experiences too. This was to last several years, and as apparently I had no choice in the matter (contrary to the common atheistic view that these experiences can be readily conjured up by the imagination at will) I had to let go and eventually move on with my life, during which time I pursued my career interests in South American archaeology and continued my personal study of philosophy, Jungian psychology, comparative religion and Shamanism.

Clearly this is by way of a simple thumbnail sketch of my life to set the framework of understanding within which my accounts of my spiritual life and changed beliefs can be situated, otherwise the whole will simply become too dense and unnecessarily autobiographical. There is much I could say about the entirety of what I experienced and the way that it changed me across time, into the person I am now, but however interesting that might be, it is not the purpose of this account.

To return, then, to the topic of what is faith, and to the standard arguments employed by the majority of atheists. The reason I am writing this is largely to clarify the commonest misapprehensions of atheists who attempt to understand and critique spiritual beliefs and practices from an entirely materialist and logical perspective and, by applying the rational mind to an experience which is 'spiritual' ie not material, in finding themselves unable to account for these experiences, explain them in the kinds of ways I described above. If you have had these experiences, there is no way you can describe them to someone who hasn’t. Some simplistic analogy will suffice, of describing, for example, what one sees in the visual realm to someone who has been functionally blind since birth offers a view. How do you even begin to describe what an image is? Let alone nuances like colour? Having spent a sizeable part of my early adult life as such an atheist I really do understand this.

I am not an evangelist and have no vested interest whatever in trying to convert anyone into believing anything, it doesn’t matter to me what you believe, but I do want to set the record a bit straighter. The commonest line you will hear from the majority of people who are atheists, from Richard Dawkins himself onwards, is the premise that all spiritual experience and religious beliefs conform to a literal understanding of the Bible of the Judeo-Christian religion, which includes belief in simplistic absolutes that the earth was made in seven days, the entire universe is but some four thousand old and that everything on earth was created in its current form by the Old Testament Jehovah God ie creationism. This is something I simply don’t understand, as the majority of atheists are actually intelligent and educated people, so how come they almost wilfully ignore the whole corpus of spiritual traditions and philosophies of the east for example, so entirely different as they are to the simplistic fundamentalist interpretations of life and the cosmos found in the Bible? There is a kind of smugness to this too when these arguments are made, along with the assumption that this is, of course, what anyone who claims to believe in God must be signing up to. It’s as though they almost need you to believe this, because obviously this extremely outdated and grotesquely simplistic explanation about how the universe came into being is so easily refuted by even the simplest science.

Contrast Hinduism. At first sight this ancient eclectic and loosely interrelated set of spiritual and metaphysical beliefs and practices can seem alienating to the Western mind, with its colourful array of gods and goddesses, including those with animal form, as with the elephant headed god Ganesha, or the monkey god Hanuman. Hinduism offers the spiritual adherent or seeker a kind of progressive sophistication of means to engage with and express belief in and devotion to the Divine and certainly very many people are content to embrace the literal physical depiction of a particular deity, complete with immediate sacred family and stories of their deeds and triumphs. This is so popular that it is alive and well and now finding full expression in modern graphic novels for young adults, with all powerful gods like Shiva, the supreme being of the esoteric traditions, depicted in much the way that any modern superhero is. However, Hinduism as an ancient tradition evolved from way back in the first millennium BCE and by the first millennium CE had already become a highly sophisticated set of esoteric metaphysical understandings of the universe, time, being, matter, consciousness. Ancient adepts (yogis) in deepest meditation had apprehended and elaborated how the Universe came into being, what the physical laws of the cosmos were and how they were to be understood, albeit within the framework of the concept of a Supreme Spiritual Being, an ultimate reality that they called Brahman, the source of being and of consciousness, and the Totality in potential. The concept of the evolution and interconnectedness of all life is central to the understanding of Hinduism, for whom the simplistic literalistic notion of creationism is as alien to their understanding as it is to Richard Dawkins. Some of the top particle physicists working at CERN in Geneva are practicing Hindus for whom there is nothing irreconcilable between their work as physicists and their following of Hinduism. Indeed within CERN may be found the beautiful representation of the origin of the Universe in the form of Shiva Nataraja – the Lord of the Dance – dancing the physical Universe into being within a circle of fire, intimately present in every aspect of it.

It is tempting to digress into a summary account of the main features of yogic philosophies and Hinduism, but again that would be to complicate this. Anyone seriously interested can find good enough explanations and elaborations even on Wikipedia. And I haven’t limited myself to espousing or exclusively privileging any one ontology and associated set of beliefs over another, but have ever sought to read widely, looking for the common denominators and testing them with my own understanding and experiences.

Returning to the issue of faith and how it is experienced, what of those people who don’t apparently have any form of mystical experience which might serve to reinforce their beliefs and experience of their faith? I don’t know how common mystical experiences are amongst conventional religious believers, but it’s clearly not standard for everyone, although I understand that many people of very wide-ranging spiritual traditions do have them and they are particularly common in shamanistic societies. Shortly after I had my first revelatory experience, I mentioned it to the husband of a close friend of mine at that time, who was a very traditional Christian, but my friend was herself an atheist as I had been. He said he had never had these sorts of experiences himself and didn’t in anyway see it as necessary for his own faith to flourish. He didn’t require some sort of mystical validation. My Christian friend was much this way too, and another friend of mine from student days at university; also my Protestant Christian mother in law. Yet clearly these people were devout and committed to their beliefs and therefore to somehow condemn vast numbers of people who believe in God, whether formally expressed through a particular creed or privately and informally, I think smacks of the kind of high handed arrogance and superiority that Western science is regrettably widely and justifiably criticised for. There is no humility here or a preparedness to try and accept that there may indeed be many ways of 'seeing and knowing'. The conventional Christians I knew were intelligent rational people, some with a university education and perfectly able to endorse beliefs in the biological sciences and the laws of physics and be people guided in general by reason, as much as people anywhere, atheists included are able to, given as human beings we notoriously filter our experiences and understanding of the world through a mesh of personal life conditionings and emotions.

Inevitably I do not know what another person’s experience is, how faith feels to someone else who professes it. But I am quite sure that for many people it is far from being the crude and wilful suspension of rational faculties in the manner I described earlier. Following my own personal ‘conversion’ and the evolution of my personal experience of faith, I was finally able to understand that what I had always believed, as an atheist, to be a product of someone’s wilful determination to deceive themselves in describing how their faith felt to them, or a mere product of fantasy, was in fact people probably describing something that was another way of knowing and experiencing a dimension of reality outside of the material domain. In our modern materialistic world, we have moved into a position of unidimensionality, there is matter and that is that. In earlier times there was a too heavy bias towards everything being spiritual and a tendency to despise the material as being profane, something to be eschewed. God was the world of the spirit and the Devil of matter. In esoteric Hindu traditions however, things are far more wholesome and better balanced. Brahman is the source, the origin of all, pure being and consciousness, without form or attributes, containing all totality in potential. As Brahman (frequently understood by other names such as Shiva, or Vishnu) moves into the creation mode, It gives rise to It’s other latent aspect: Shakti, loosely understood as Mother Nature, the creative feminine actualised world of matter. Shakti is divine power in action, commensurate with matter being a limited phase of energy. The inner sanctum of Hindu Shivaite temples simply contains an aniconic symbol of this primordial order called the Shivalinga, being a stylised phallus set within the yoni, a stylised vulva, the whole simply symbolic of the balanced male and female generative principles of creation contained by the Supreme Spirit, itself without gender.

In short I urge that we move from this extreme denial of all things spiritual in modern Western industrialised societies, contending that it doesn’t exist because we are trying to prove its existence via tests that arise from the dimension of matter. The domain of the spiritual is unprovable via the domain of the senses. This worries our intellect however, putting many people back into the scenario I have described above, of wilfully forcing the rational mind to believe in something unprovable. I have as sound a reason as any other intelligent person and highly value it in the world of ‘ordinary reality', but also understand that it has its limitations and cannot be employed in any domain outside of the purely material.

That’s about as much as I can say here, but I am sure there are many valid accounts of the way that people experience their faith, this is simply my personal account and not a formal research study with an extensive literature review. Certainly there are many religious fundamentalists who are creationists and rejecters of the laws of nature, but to judge all believers as though they are all the same is itself a wilful and culpable ignorance of the worst kind from people who claim to have reason, logic and science on their side.

What is certain is that people do experience their beliefs in widely different ways and certainly many people do say that it is a source of comfort for them in much the way I referred to earlier. Hence you find that atheists will frequently adopt a condescending air when they find you impervious to their rationalist arguments, saying something to the effect that they are ‘happy for you' that your (illogical) beliefs give you comfort; religion, the opiate of the masses and so on. Whether or not it is for the majority of people, it seems clear to me that any meaningful faith involves a set of moral principles and wisdoms that you are meant to engage with actively to improve yourself as a person. This is quite clear from the teachings of Jesus, as it is from Hindu classics such as the Bhagavad-Gita, the Buddhist dharmapada and so forth. A meaningful faith is definitely not a comfort zone and most certainly never has been for me, since the earliest days when I clearly saw just how much I needed to change about myself and my behaviour, continuing to now. It is best expressed as being like toiling up a steep mountain, sometimes feeling you might finally have reached the summit, just to see yet another peak looming still higher through the mists. There has never been a time when I felt the work was over, that I could rest on my laurels in the happy knowledge that I had achieved some state of perfection. And what most religions aim to teach, at core, is enlightenment, however you wish to understand this.

Certainly you don’t need to espouse a belief in God in order to live a moral life, have compassion, or to engage in programmes of self improvement. Many atheists are compassionate and humanistic people with fine moral principles, in the same way that there are also many people who claim to be religious, who also engage with double standards and shady dealings. Beliefs codified into the organised mass movements called religion, are simply another sort of ideology, so the fact that so many religions fall afoul of ideological extremism and become vehicles for terrorism is also not a valid reason to condemn religious movements or beliefs. The Cultural Revolution in China, and Stalinist Communism in the USSR were also murderous extremist ideologies, both of which actively sought to suppress conventional religion or other spiritual traditions.

I was into my forties by the time I had these first experiences of faith, and given the influence of childhood trauma and all that went with that, only compounded by my experiences in early adulthood, it has taken me most of the rest of my life to engage with all those deeper early conditionings and little by little undo them. Happily as I write I am largely free of the burden (karma) of much of my earlier life and I cannot see that I ever would have been able to do this, certainly without formal therapy, in the way I have, without this faith.

There is an aphorism which cautions us not to throw out the baby with the bathwater and we would do well to remember this. In moving into a high tech world with the dominion of science, in properly confronting antique superstitions that were often the vehicle for the scapegoating and persecution of individual differences, or for explaining inexplicable natural events, in acknowledging the beauty of the natural world from microcosm to macrocosm and the innate wonders of the laws of physics which allow it to be, we needn’t throw out concepts of the Divine with this as now redundant. We just understand these beautiful laws of the Universe better and therefore they must only generate greater awe, wonder for their very being. We need simply to upgrade our understanding of the Divine, to do it better justice by acknowledging fully the wonders of the natural world and the laws of biology, chemistry and physics that are an innate part of its functioning. It used to be commonplace (perhaps still is) to hear this expression 'God of the gaps' meaning that God could only exist in those areas that science hadn’t been able to determine a cause or process for. This is blatantly nonsense, and only serves to underline how little many conventional religious believers and atheists alike understand of the great Cosmic forces of creation, preservation and destruction, so well expressed in Hinduism. The God I believe in is intimately a part of these forces in its Shakti aspect.

This is not an exhaustive exploration of all the questions and conundrums raised by the notion of faith, whether experienced through formal religion or not, nor did it set out to be. There will still be people saying “but what about...?” in reference to many things and to coin an oft used expression in academic papers, including those I used to write, a larger more comprehensive treatment of the issues raised is beyond the scope of this paper. My aim was simply to offer an account of how I came to change from someone who was easily as much of an atheist as Dawkins into the person I am now with the faith that that involves and to try to set the record straight about the kinds of standard assumptions and prejudices commonly encountered.

So, to conclude, what of this God and my faith in It then? As indicated earlier, this is not an autobiography, so I won’t be offering even a summary account of my life as lived and the evolution of my faith through that time to now. I have described it elsewhere, at least latterly, as being a Pilgrimage of the Heart. So, another October, that oh so evocative time of the year for me, and I was in Ecuador carrying out my last research project. In fact, much of this time had also been a deeply personal inward journey of improving my connection with that same 'God' and the increasing understanding this journey was giving me into my own deeper self. Periodically I would dip back into the Hindu and Yogic teachings to understand more the way these ancient Eastern traditions understand the Divine. There came an afternoon when I had another experience, the order of which is frankly impossible to describe. I am very hesitant indeed to include it at all, but if people don’t share their collective experiences, how are others who are also looking for deep spiritual truths to be helped? I had a vision of God, or the ‘Self’ as I generally refer to it following Eastern and Jungian custom. By calling it a vision I should clarify that I didn’t actually see anything at all, which is to say that it was not an experience mediated by the senses, so it wasn’t an hallucination, visual, auditory or otherwise. It was as though an organ of apprehension that I hadn’t before been aware of, opened in my centre (the heart as understood in Eastern philosophies) and I clearly apprehended the Totality. The experience lasted for some two minutes, perhaps longer, and initiated a complete collapse in me. I broke down sobbing, unable to comprehend, contain, express what I was seeing, completely overwhelmed by it. There were no words whatever that could come close to describing what I saw, but in a moment, I felt understood the reason for everything. To apply the term 'beyond' rather in the manner that ‘to the power of' numbers are added to a figure, I could say this: it was beyond the most beautiful thing you could begin to conceptualise, with a feeling from it of love of an order that I was unable to confront because it was beyond my capacity to. In a moment I understood that famous vision of St. Teresa of Avila, oft misunderstood, when she had a vision of an angel who stabbed her several times with a lance, filling her with love for God. She says that it was so painful she thought she would die of the pain, yet so beautiful she wanted it to go on forever. The feeling of love that this vision contained was so immense it was beyond my capacity to endure, but so beautiful I wanted it to go on forever. You cannot imagine these experiences. They come from another dimension.a I had no inkling whatever of what these feelings were before and how I saw the Totality in all Its beyond magnificence. I couldn’t have imagined it; it was completely outside of any prior realm of experience. You might understand how precious and personal this is for me, and I share it because sometimes we just have to, to give others hope and encouragement and to stand up and be counted as it were. It doesn’t matter to me if you believe me or not, or of you try and explain it away as being “just this” or “just that”, I am simply giving a frank account of what I experienced. It also bears out what all Yogic teachings caution, that the world of the spiritual cannot be experienced through the intellect, the mind cannot approach and understand the spirit. A well-trained mind might set an informed context or framework for exploration of it and a sound methodology for doing so, but the actual experience itself is something directly apprehended in the manner I have described. The way you apprehend these truths is via another process of deep inner knowing, like intuition, which is something that even many atheists are prepared to admit exists. This doesn’t invalidate reason as a powerful tool, it just is not the mechanism you can ever employ for apprehending divinity. This is faith then, another way of experiencing and knowing. Certainly there will be many people, I imagine, who also are just happy to believe, for whom any direct experience is neither sought nor had. As I said, I do not know what other people’s faith entails, but at least I am now prepared to admit that it doesn’t have to be some woolly minded denial of the rational, but encompasses a form of experience that, unless you have had it, is frankly impossible to describe.