

How Can We Have Faith in Humanity?

By Ian Wallace

I'd like to open my talk with a quote from Chris Hedges, he is a veteran New York Times war correspondent and author. In his youth he received a Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School, and after 30 years, he was recently ordained as a Presbyterian minister. He has stated that he does not believe in a personal God. Hedges has been arrested multiple times protesting the corporate takeover of the American political system.

The language of religion ... honors the sacred. It is not irrational, but it is also not rational. Perhaps it is best described as nonrational, for it allows believers to remain in a world that is real while holding up an ideal and an ethic that cannot be scientifically examined. This is the basis for the spiritual dimension to human existence. This religious impulse allows us to transcend what Flaubert said was our “mania for conclusions,” a mania he described as “one of humanity’s most useless and sterile drives.” Faith is not in conflict with reason. Faith does not conflict with scientific truth, unless faith claims to express a scientific truth. Faith can neither be affirmed nor denied by scientific, historical or philosophical truth. And this faith can separate the rational world from the powerful nonrational experiences and emotions—love would be one—that infuse and give meaning to our lives.

We live in a universe indifferent to our fate. We are seduced by myths that assure us that the world revolves around us, that fate or the gods or destiny have given us a unique and singular role in the cosmos.

This is from Chris Hedges 2008 book with the tongue-in-cheek title, *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, in which he lays out an argument against the views espoused by the “new atheists.” This is the current brand of atheism that demonizes religion, they make religious beliefs the scapegoat for humanity’s inability to create a perfect world. This is a school of thought that, ironically, has deep faith in the ability of science, reason, and technology to solve all of the world’s problems. This kind of blind faith in science Hedges sees as naively middle class and Western, born from the heart of the Empire. According to him it ignorantly reinforces misogyny and white supremacy. Science and reason, he argues, are tools which can be used in the service of good, or of evil. Technological advancement does not equate to moral superiority. Utopian ideals lead to authoritarianism when a privileged philosophical position denigrates and devalues anyone who disagrees.

Hedges knows that people struggle. In his words we all sin, by which he means that no one is perfect, that we are all enmeshed in the experience of being a human animal, with its fears and pains, troubles and tendencies toward resentment. He has lived for decades in warzones, and has an insight into the ways in which desperation drives people’s beliefs. Looking at the new atheists’ unexamined faith in their myth, that mankind will only advance morally through a prompt acceptance of their own privileged, bourgeoisie philosophy of reason, Hedges sees great danger arising from a

belief system not based in reality, after all, reality is very complex. It stands to note that his book on new atheists was preceded by his book, *American Fascists, The Christian Right and the War on America*. He goes on to say of both belief systems:

It is hard to reject these myths and face the bleakness of human existence. It is more comforting and reassuring to have faith in our collective moral advancement as a species, to believe that we are heading toward something great and wondrous. The bitter reality of existence and the bondage of human nature, however, are real. These myths are not. All those who tempt us to play God turn us away from the real world to flirt with our own annihilation.

Now to turn to the cosmological

Certainly a scientific understanding of the world has a more fleshed out picture of the details of our universe than any world view of ages past. Through observation and data we might delude ourselves into believing that we know all there is to know. Looking back to the Big Bang and observing the development of our universe gives us a kind of satisfaction that we are, in a sense, the lords of this universe, at least in our ability to comprehend it. In an atheistic worldview, the universe has given rise to us, not because any infinite creator *chose* such a thing, but because our universe happened to be structured in just such a way to allow for the arisal of life. But the belief that the current atheistic, scientific worldview has a complete grasp on reality is yet another fairy tale.

We think ourselves very special. We feel we are more than some mere quirk of cosmic fate. And so we ask, why is this universe so perfectly structured such that it has given rise to us? Scientific observation, at this point, cannot provide answers, but the most current theory proposes that within a multiverse, perhaps within an infinite array of universes, a universe will, by chance, arise which is suited to life and conscious beings. This may always remain only a theory. There's no way to prove it, as we are not able to make observations of anything outside of our own universe.

The evidence of the Big Bang can only show our universe springing forth as if from nothing. Do you remember that old story? God is supposed to have created the world from nothing, out of the void. And no more thought is to be given to the void (the feminine), as early Christian theologians battled to maintain that God (masculine) is a self-caused cause.

Theism is the belief that a singular, sovereign god has designed and created our world, and many theists are glad to jump on the big-bang bandwagon. Unable to make observations of a time before the moment of creation, science, as a belief system, seems to lose its teeth — we have no data preceding the Big Bang, we must, then, have some kind of faith, and why not have God take back over, “speaking” light into the darkness... How un-ironic that the Big Bang was first proposed in 1927 by Father Georges Lemaître, a Catholic priest.

There is a ghost in the house of science, the ghost of a sovereign, masculine god. Without taking a more critical lense to an entire series of unquestioned beliefs, atheists in the heart of Western civilization may be fated to reproduce the same patterns again. Patterns of misogyny, oppression, brutalization of the ecosystem, and subjugation of the environment.

Perhaps the uncertainty of quantum mechanics and the unavoidable presence of *dark matter* can dampen our hubris a bit. Through our astounding cleverness we can deduce that roughly 95% of our universe is something which remains unknowable. The mass of these dark features *dominate* the physical universe we inhabit. Perhaps some day we will understand what dark matter is in detail, but at present, perhaps it can serve to act as a mirror for our understanding of ourselves, and our world as a whole. Despite our brilliant reason, we see, as Paul says, “in a mirror, darkly.” Every corner of existence houses unfathomable depths. In faith then, we breath, and can love.

There is no avoiding our inability to function without faith. Faith, as Victor pointed out earlier this month, is a mode of being. What we put our faith in is of the utmost importance. There are so many troubles, real and pressing in our world. Among these troubles, the most democratic is our mortality.

Also of universal concern for all life on earth is the staggering ecological impact of 7 billion-plus human beings. So to counter this drive to put our faith in the hope of a

brilliant utopia, which, in atheistic form appears to be only a highly credentialed reanimation of the same old “guy in the sky” coming to save us routine, I propose our faith might be better placed firmly in the sacred dark of the ground.

We are, after all, humans. The name of our being means of the soil. Earthlings. Along with our fellow earthlings, the bacteria, the archaea, all of the funguses and plants, the protists and amoebas, the slime molds, and the animals, we are, together, a glorious family. Intricately interrelated, feeding into and off of each other, all beset by viruses. Life. It is sacred, our intuition tells us so. And if life is sacred, it must have emerged from a sacred place. The deep sea, the dark ground, the molten springs, the roiling chaos of a chemical soup where the sacred earth wove herself into awareness. And our sacred earth, herself the concentration of myriad forces and elements, ancient and tumultuous matter and energy, tumbled to light in stars and forged in the eruptions of supernovae, originating with that moment of inception: The Big Bang.

Alas, these days we drive ourselves to distraction, forgetting our sacred world. Being a human in the 21st century entails an exposure to a dizzying arrangement of human interactions. We feed ourselves stories constantly. We are driven by our systems. It has reached a point of absurdity. We have gone beyond biological necessity. The dream is a frenetic flux of places we are supposed to be and minutes on the clock. It was Jean Baudrillard who coined the term ‘simulation’ to describe this ‘reality of the

system'. Baudrillard spoke of our core experiences hinging on the "more-real-than-real", or hyper-real experiences that increasingly insert themselves into our lives. This media landscape is bread and circuses to the n-th degree, engineered in collective concert. Cracks in this simulation can be felt when snow closes the highway, when someone commits a horrendous crime. When the me-too movement develops.

A rope-sandled worker in a mine, schlepping heavy sacks of clay, rich in rare earth metals, up a steep slope to the processing plant has assuredly found himself in a strange corner of the simulation. Certainly the idea of living in a simulation breaks down entirely for a family desperate to survive the airstrikes in Yemen.

This absurd post modern view of life as a simulation is constructed in order to critique the ideologies of the West. The new atheists, on the contrary, entertain the notion of living in a simulation, not as a reflective critique of our flawed system, but as a matter of faith. In the face of infinite universes, our consciousness, they suspect, is probably the result of our universe's having been designed and constructed as a simulation by original conscious beings living within a prior universe. So self assured are the new atheists in their belief that they have mastered rationality that they miss the parallel between Christ creating the world for us to inhabit, and the hypothesised beings of a prior universe creating this universe in which to simulate more conscious beings.

Well, if we are in a simulated universe, I intend to love my heart out all the same, as I am not able to be sure about much of anything. Is a simulated world any less sacred? If ours is only one of an infinite series of universes, and we are in it, can we not know it to be sacred if only by its linking us to the infinite. From the dark, passionate, chaotic chemical dance, we arrive in the world, vulnerable. We will be devoured by the world in time. To have a chance at making this life be worth all it can, I think we should remember to see the divinity in all things. Even in our brokenness, in that crack that runs through everything, there is holy presence. In this way, for me, faith is a genuine driving force for justice, because we can act. We have that old gift of the holy spirit, counsel, to discern what we can do to help.

This is also the moment where I want to bring the focus right back to this room, to this present moment. Finding pleasure in each other's company, celebrating that despite our failings and faults, the sacred divine is immanent in all of us. This isn't to make ourselves as god. Even though we have learned so much, we know professor "Faustus himself illustrates a misunderstanding of faith." It is to see that the divine is boundless, and so cherish each other in our limitations. Rather than conceiving of a sovereign God, masculine and separate from the corrupted world, we can see myriad divine facets of existence in and around ourselves. Every place, and each moment of 'now' cannot have their presence separated from the infinite that is.

How lucky and delightful that we Unitarians encourage each other to make brave conceptualizations of god. We must admit, the word and the idea are human after all. Through this temporary and tumultuous existence may the embodiment of love move us. Thank you.