

Odd convergences

Unexpected similarities among the human potential movement, quantum physics, Wicca, and Christianity

Abstract

This program examines some common themes that arise in perspectives that often seem quite distinct, if not at odds. I look at the human potential movement, quantum physics, Wicca and Christianity.

Qualifications

What, you might ask, are my qualifications to address these fields? That, I might say in response, is what I like about summer services. A person can get away with expounding on any topic without knowing a thing about it.

I might be qualified to talk about Christianity. After all, I have a masters degree from a Christian theological seminary. But then again, lots of people have masters degrees from theological seminaries and work full time as clergy in Christian churches without saying anything coherent about Christianity.

At least with the other fields, I've come across ideas through reading and other experiences over the last several months and have found some overlap that I did not expect. So that's what today's program is about—these ideas that seem to be shared by seemingly divergent, if not antithetical viewpoints.

I happen to have brought along some of my sources: For Wicca, two books, *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk [Starhawk, 1999], and *The Inner Temple of Witchcraft* by Christopher Penczak [Penczak, 2002].

For human potential, I refer to *The Art of Possibility* by Rosamund Stone Zender and Benjamin Zander [Zander, 2002], as well as my own notes from various courses offered by Landmark Education [www.landmarkeducation.com].

Finally, for quantum physics, I claim none other than our own Bryan Cook, whose annual rantings from this very spot and occasional expostulations in other forums I can barely understand and this movie, *What the Bleep Do We Know*, which I realized watching it for the third time really doesn't provide a whole lot of information about quantum physics, so we could be in a little trouble on that point.

The topics I'm planning to cover in the time remaining are:

It's all made up

Possibility

Time travel

The past

Intention

Responsibility and
The power of language

If you ask me at the end what this all means, I'll give you the same answer as now: I have no idea.

It's all made up

This is my favorite principle. It is one that the human potential people, physicists and to some extent witches all seem to embrace.

Stories vs. "the truth" – human potential

Zander and Zander, along with the Landmark people, make a very clear distinction between "what happened," and the stories we make up about what happened. It's well known that if you ask two people who were witnesses to an event, you'll get two very different answers. If they happen to be Unitarians, you'll probably get more than two.

"What happened?"

"So, I parked in the Rite-Aide parking lot, and I noticed this bunch of teenagers hanging out by the curb. They were looking for mischief, that's for sure. When I got out of the car, I must have been so distracted by the teenagers that I left my keys in the ignition and didn't even notice when it beeped. When I got back, my keys were gone! The teenagers took my keys."

"Hmm, that's an interesting story. But what happened?"

"I parked my car at the Rite-Aide, and I must have left my keys in the ignition. When I got back they were gone."

"OK, that's better. What really happened?"

"I lost my keys."

"Our minds are. . .designed to string events into story lines, whether or not there is any connection between the parts." [Zander, p. 12]

Keeping in mind the distinction between stories and what happened, we will now take time to share our personal joys and concerns. . . .

The observer – physics

The notion that it's all made up applies as well to quantum physics, and to just about all aspects of science. Sciences, just like many other aspects of culture, go through paradigm shifts. Experiments and observations tend to confirm or refute specific hypotheses, but, as Thomas Kuhn illuminated several decades ago, scientific paradigms often fall when the weight of unexplained observations make them unsupportable, and someone makes up an explanation that does better.

In the many cases, much of what scientists have believed turned out not to be true. In fairness, scientific theories tend to be important advances over what was believed before, but "if history is any guide, much of what we [now] take for granted about the world simply isn't true."

We make it up.

“Every single one of us affects the reality that we see, even if we try to hide from that and play victim.”

Wicca – It IS all made up

Wicca is a frankly made up religion.

Starhawk: “Witchcraft has always been a religion of poetry, not theology. The myths, legends, and teachings are recognized as metaphors for “That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told,” the absolute reality our limited minds can never completely know.” [Starhawk, p. 32]

Witches, and other pagans, are fond of saying that the difference between theirs and teachings of the mainstream world religions is that Witches freely acknowledge that their legends and traditions are myths.

Possibility

Human potential – The Art of Possibility

When nothing is true, everything is possible.

Zander and Zander call their book *The Art of Possibility*.

According to them, “Once you have begun to distinguish that *it’s all invented*, you can create a place to dwell where new inventions are the order of the day.” [Zander, p. 17] They call this the realm of possibility. “In the realm of possibility, we gain our knowledge by invention. We decide that the essence of a child is joy, and joy she is.” [Zander, p. 20]

Physics

Prior to quantum physics, scientists assumed that there was a fixed, predictable, measurable reality, and that if we only had the right measurement techniques and the right mathematics to go with them, we could understand that reality.

Early in the last century, physicists, especially in the area of very small particles, started to discover phenomena for which the paradigm of Newtonian physics, and even the radical modifications proposed by Einstein, didn’t provide an explanation. Light, for example, sometimes behaves like particles and at other times like waves. These particles or waves behave differently depending on whether, how and when they were observed.

I don’t know what they really believe, but physicists today seem to be saying that unobserved, these whatevers are waves of possibility. When they are observed, they are particles of experience. Taking it a step further, some say that there is no particle unless it is observed. Without an observer, only possibilities exist.

As Amit Goswami is fond of saying in “What the Bleep,” “quantum physics, very succinctly speaking, is the physics of possibility.”

Living in the possibility of an abundance of generous support for the work of this congregation, we will now receive the offering. . . .

Time travel

Reversibility of the laws of nature – physics

Physicists observe that even though time is fundamental to how we experience the world, there is nothing inherent in the laws of physics (sometimes presumptuously called the laws of nature) that couldn't work backwards as well as forwards. The mathematical formulas we use to describe our world are completely reversible. They do not explain the direction of time. Why, by acting now, can we affect the future and not the past?

Living into future possibilities – human potential

But are we really affecting the future by acting now, or is it that the future is affecting the present? This idea, which surfaces in the human potential movement, is as old as the Greek philosophers. Plato was kind of a cause-and-effect guy. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that everything had a purpose, an end, and that what happens in the present is determined, or caused, by the purpose toward which everything is going. It's not that the ends justify the means, but that they create them.

By distinguishing that it's not our past that is causing the present, but that most of it is a story we made up about our past, we can invent new possibilities for how reality will be in the future. The future, as given by the new invented possibility, begins to effect (*sic*) the present.

The past

Forgiveness – Christianity

One of the most important beliefs of the Christian faith is forgiveness. Not that it is unique to Christianity. The forgiveness that Christians talk about is rooted, as is much of authentic Christianity, in Judaism. Forgiveness is found in many other religions and belief systems as well.

Given the way that the Christian church has tended to turn sin, guilt, penance and forgiveness into a thriving business, you can be forgiven (so to speak) if you wonder whether this is an authentic principle. But there's plenty of evidence from the early Christian writings about Jesus. Probably the most common prayer in Christianity is called the Lord's Prayer or Our Father. “Forgive us our debts (or trespasses, or sins, as some translate it) as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Jesus goes on, “for if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your father forgive your trespasses.”

When one of his followers asks whether he should forgive someone who has sinned against him as many as seven times, Jesus says, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” When he sees some men carrying a paralyzed man on a bed, he heals the man by saying to him “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” As he is dying on the cross, he says, presumably of those who put him there, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

Being complete – human potential

The human potential people don't tend to use the term “forgiveness” so much these days. Instead, they talk about being complete, or getting complete. This has to do with living into the future. We live from the past, in the present and toward the future. Regardless of the laws of physics, this is inescapably how we perceive the flow of time.

One thing that can prevent us from living fully into a future that we desire or invent for ourselves, however, is an incomplete past. By that, they mean that we humans have a tendency to take the unfinished or incomplete business of the past with us, and put it into the future from which it limits what we can accomplish or manage in the present. So we need to complete the past and let go of it. This may involve admitting that we were at cause (not necessarily to blame) for broken relationships. It certainly involves forgiving the other party or parties rather than establishing right or wrong or assigning blame. If they are not reachable, due, for instance, to death or a complete blockage of communication, one is encouraged to write a letter in a journal or take some symbolic action to close the episode.

This is forgiveness, but with a twist. In this case, the beneficiary is not, or not only, or not primarily, the person being forgiven, but the person doing the forgiving. If I carry a grudge for years, dragging my past into the future, who suffers? Often, the person whom I have a grudge against isn't even aware of it, or doesn't understand it. It is the person who has not done the forgiving who is blocked, who cannot fully live into the future because the past is incomplete.

Intention

Changing reality in conformance to will – Wicca

There is probably no word in the pagan vocabulary that causes more problems for non-pagans than the word “magic.” Our first association is with stage magic or illusion. It is entertaining, but we're not taken in. No one but a child or especially gullible adult believes the woman has actually been sawn in half or that the live dove was pulled from the child's ear.

But when an adult talks about magic in a non-theatrical sense, we tend to assume they are either using the term dismissively, as in “I have no idea how cell phones work, it's just

magic,” or as referring to the supernatural or purely imaginary. As UUs, we tend to have little commerce with the frankly supernatural, equating it with superstition.

With this in mind, I have found witches’ use of “magic” to be surprisingly down to earth.

Here’s what Starhawk has to say about it. “Magic, the art of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational, is an element common to all traditions of Witchcraft. Craft rituals are magical rites: they stimulate an awareness of the hidden side of reality, and awaken long-forgotten powers of the human mind.” [Starhawk, p. 37]

“Magic is not a supernatural affair; it is. . . ‘the art of changing consciousness at will.’” [Starhawk, p. 42, quoting Dion Fortune]

“There is a difference between magic and psychosis—and that difference lies in maintaining the ability to step back, at will, into ordinary consciousness, to return to the awareness that . . . ‘reality is that when you jump off a roof, you break your leg.’” [Starhawk, p. 47]

Christopher Penczak: Quoting Aleister Crowley defines magic succinctly as “the science and art of causing change in conformity with will.”

Three characteristics. First, science and art. We all understand, I think, what this means. Sometimes we cause change in our environment through science: You want to change the intonation of a musical instrument, a flute or violin string. You shorten the barrel or tighten the string, it sounds sharp. You lengthen the barrel or loosen the string, it sounds flat. By trial and error and successive refinement of the adjustments you find the desired pitch—all very methodical and scientific. Of you want to change the taste of a soup. You add a little salt, try a little pepper. Eventually you achieve a taste that is pleasing or give up on the whole enterprise. It may not be fine art, but it’s art.

The second characteristic is causing change. Magic is not speculating on how things might be different. It is not wishing you were better looking or wealthier. It is actually causing something to occur.

Finally, you are changing something in a way to match your intention. It’s not a haphazard tinkering to see what turns up, but a goal-directed activity.

Intention – physics

It’s hard for some to believe that the witches’ magic could be a matter of physics.

Yet physics seems to be leading in the direction of saying that we create reality. We’re reality-creating machines. There is no out there out there independent of what’s going on in here. Taken to its logical conclusion, what makes up things are ideas, concepts,

information. Matter is a thought. The material world around us is nothing but possible movements of consciousness.

Perhaps our purpose in being here is to develop our gifts of intentionality; to learn how to be effective creators.

Responsibility

Physics

Quantum physicists contrast their views with traditional materialism. I'm not talking about materialism as the drive to acquire more wealth and material goods, but as the scientific and philosophical view that matter is what is fundamental to understanding the universe. In this vein, Jeffrey Satinover, in "What the Bleep" says, "modern materialism strips people of the need to feel responsible. And often enough so does religion. But I think if you take quantum mechanics seriously, it puts the responsibility squarely in your lap, and it doesn't give answers that are clearcut and comforting. It says yes, the world is a very big place, it's very mysterious. Mechanism is not the answer, but I'm not going to tell you what the answer is, because you're old enough to decide for yourself."

Wicca

If witches can bring about change in conformance to will, and magic can shape the unseen forces that flow through the world, then a cult of responsibility is key to guiding the will. Followers of Wicca are distinctive in not placing responsibility on remote divine beings. "Witches do not see justice as administered by some external authority, based on a written code or set of rules imposed from without. Instead, justice is an inner sense that each act brings about consequences that must be faced responsibly."

[Starhawk, p. 36]

Human potential

Taking responsibility is a major distinction in the world of human potential. It is, as Zander and Zander put it, declaring "I am the framework for everything that happens in my life." It is being willing to be at cause in the matter of your life, not seeking to attribute fault, to assign blame or to determine right or wrong. It is having a say in your life. You alone are responsible for what's working and what's not working in your life. This is not true, of course. Like everything else, it's made up. But it is a powerful place to stand.

The power of language

In the beginning was the Word – Christianity

The power of language, the power of speaking, is evident throughout the Bible. The very first chapter, the first creation myth in Genesis, has God creating the world not by cutting a dragon in two and making one half the earth and the other half the sky, but by speaking. "God said 'Let there be light;' and there was light." Just like that!

The theme is repeated in the New Testament in the opening of the gospel according to John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

The ultimate test for reality – human potential

In the world of human potential, we bring reality into being by declaring it. Declaration produces a possibility. Possibility alters the future which determines what’s happening in the present.

To see the power of language, let’s ask ourselves what is real. We’re always testing what’s real, but we rarely examine the tests. We can divide the tests for reality into three classes: personal tests; interim tests and the ultimate test.

Personal tests are things like our senses, thoughts, beliefs, instincts, intuitions and feelings. Most of the time, these work, but, unfortunately, they are unreliable. Senses can be fooled by hallucinations. Thoughts can be illogical, beliefs can be misguided. We have a pernicious tendency to prove what we already know by gathering supporting evidence and blocking contradictory clues. The brain receives something like 4,000 clues per second from the senses. We certainly can’t pay attention to all of them. We tend to pay attention to the ones that fit into our pre-existing framework.

How can we get beyond these personal tests? We can check out our interpretation. We can seek the agreement of others. Agreement creates reality. Advertising is all about creating agreement. The law is a reality created by agreement. The economy is a reality created by agreement.

Unfortunately, agreement does not give us ultimate reality. Laws change. Even what is measurable depends on the conventions of measuring. The abortion controversy cannot go away because there is no agreement on when a fetus is a person. There is no agreement on what happens to you when you die.

There is no reality accessible to us independent of language. The surprising truth about the ultimate test for reality is that there is no ultimate test

Conclusion

Is this view correct? How should I know? Just remember, nothing that I’ve said today is the truth.

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