IDLER

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RUPERT SHELDRAKE
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FEATURES



Interview: Rupert Sheldrake

Pilgrim Father

He's been described as a renegade biologist whose books are heretical and should be condemned – even burnt. Yet when **Tom Hodgkinson** *met* **Rupert Sheldrake**, *he was spellbound. Photos by* **Orlando Gili**

In March 2013, the biologist and sometime mystic Rupert Sheldrake was travelling in India with his wife, the voice therapist Jill Purce. They'd been rambling through the Madhya Pradesh region of India, when they received a nasty surprise.

"We'd been off grid for a few days," Sheldrake tells me. No phone or Internet. But then they arrived at the holy town of Maheshwar on the Narmada River and managed, as he puts it, to get "a flickering Internet connection for a while". Dozens of emails streamed in from friends, far more than he would usually expect.

"They were saying things like, 'Don't let them get you down', 'We're on your side' and 'This is an outrage.'

"I had no idea what they were talking about."

Sheldrake scrolled backwards and gradually figured out what was going on. In 2012 he'd been invited to give a talk on the TEDx platform by two



students at Imperial College. He'd initially turned them down: "I really don't like the TED organisation because they get their speakers to do it for nothing and they own everything."

But then he decided to give the talk, encouraged by his musician son Cosmo, a friend of the students. The title was "Challenging Existing Paradigms", and, Rupert says wryly, "I did what it said on the tin."

The talk took place on 13 January 2013, and in it he discussed what he calls the "science delusion", arguing that mainstream science, of the Dawkinsite stamp, leaves a lot of stuff unexplained, and is a sort of dogma in itself, a belief system.

The talk went up on the Internet. For a couple of months, it sat there quietly. Then on 14 March TED took the talk down, writing on a blog: "We feel a responsibility not to provide a platform for talks which appear to have crossed the line into pseudoscience." TED's catchphrase is "Ideas worth spreading", and in this case they'd come across some ideas that they thought were worth hiding.

The "sceptics" out there are particularly down on Sheldrake's theory of "morphic resonance". I remember my parents talking about this notion excitedly in the early eighties. Sheldrake says that this is "the idea that memory is inherent in nature, based on similarity. For example, if rats are trained to learn a new trick in London, rats of the same breed all over the world should be able to learn it quicker thereafter. There is already evidence that this actually happens." Sheldrake says that TED was encouraged to remove the videos by a pair of rabble-rousing sceptics called PZ Myers and Jerry Coyne – Sheldrake calls them "militant atheists" – who spend their days trawling the Internet and trying to make sure that the word "pseudoscience" appears next to Rupert's name as much as possible (see his Wikipedia page for an example).

An Internet storm followed. After Rupert's chat with multi-millionaire TED founder Chris Anderson (who made his first fortune from computer magazines), the talk was put back up again, with disclaimers. And now it's had over four million views (some Sheldrake fans have recently recast it as an animation, with over 1.4m views already). "It damaged their brand," reckons Sheldrake of the fuss.

Sheldrake first told me this story on a train ride from Hay to London in April 2023. We'd both been speaking at the How the Light Gets In festival, and were introduced by our mutual friend Mark Vernon, with whom Sheldrake records a regular podcast. I found Rupert to be an entrancing character. The three of us were delayed at Hereford station for about an hour. Left to my own devices, I probably would have sat there fuming, but

Rupert said: "I think we'll have time to visit the cathedral." Which we did, and not only that, we sat in a pew and listened (with about 12 others) to Evensong. Rupert pointed out the castellations and Norman columns and told us when the cathedral was built (it was finished in 1148, though major restorations were completed in the Victorian period). And so a commonplace delay was transformed into a magical and transporting experience.

"Most people don't read books. One of my debates got 150,000 views in a week on YouTube. You'd need to have a really best-selling book to reach that number of people"

I asked if he'd do an interview. He accepted and invited me to come and visit him during the summer at one of his son's Methodist chapels. He and Jill have two sons, Merlin and the aforementioned Cosmo. Merlin Sheldrake is the author of *Entangled Life*, the lovely book on mushrooms and underground fungi which has made his name, and Cosmo is a musician – very experimental, he records trees – who has recently done the music for a Stella McCartney show in Paris. (The two also sell their own hot sauce, branded Sheldrake & Sheldrake, but that's another story.) A recent *New York Times* profile described Merlin's face as "delicate… as though a distant ancestor might have been part elf or dryad". Somehow you suspect the names that Rupert and Jill chose for their sons have been instrumental in their fate.

By a mixture of happenstance and planning, both sons have recently bought converted Methodist chapels near Stroud. Rupert is keen that I don't tell readers which of their sons' chapels we're meeting at as, despite their undoubted worldly success, both are fairly private people. So whether we are in Cosmo's or Merlin's Methodist chapel will remain a mystery. The boys themselves are not in residence during our meeting: they are in Canada, at a retreat centre, to which this extraordinary family has been resorting periodically for some decades. Rupert and Jill live most of the time in the family house, which overlooks Hampstead Heath.

The table in the large ground-floor kitchen is set with three places and I sit down with them. Rupert asks us to hold hands across the table and says a form of grace: "With thanks to God for this food and our time together." We eat a delicious lunch of smoked trout and salad. Over the meal, Jill tells me that the boys were raised without screens.

(Charmingly, the couple still flirt with each other. When our interview is over, I ask Jill and Rupert if they would pose for a couple of snaps. Rupert brushes his hair, in preparation, and Jill says, "Let me spruce up my appear-



ance as well." To which Rupert replies, "No need Jill – most women would pay large sums of money to look just as you do now." And Jill giggles.)

After lunch we sit down in the vast chapel room upstairs, with a grand piano in the corner. It seems an absurdly appropriate venue to chat to this very English mystic and thinker, now 81 years old, whose parents were Methodists themselves. With his watery eyes, high intelligence, sense of mischief and love of the transcendent, he reminds me very much of the late John Michell, author of hippie classic *The View Over Atlantis*, also a highly likeable soul.

I'm surprised to discover, though, that Sheldrake has rejected book-writing in favour of YouTube. He doesn't sound a million miles away from my 18-year-old son when it comes to the YouTube-versus-books debate.

"I was given the key to the cupboard containing LSD and mescaline, and I did help myself to some of it"

"I've given up on books. I don't mind writing the book. I just hate what you have to do to publicise it. You're at the mercy of publicists and inane interviewers and podcasts and literary festivals. I like YouTube because it's instant and it reaches a lot of people. For example, Mark Vernon and I do regular dialogues. We have a conversation, Mark edits it that afternoon, we agree on a blurb, and it's usually up on my website that evening. Then within a day or two there are thousands of views and comments and things. And normal TV is also slow. When people who are doing documentaries get in touch, they say, 'We're doing a demo reel, we'd like to do a preliminary interview, then we're pitching it to commissioning editors, then we might start shooting in spring next year'… so we're talking two years, if it happens at all, and of course most of them don't happen. YouTube is much more immediate, much more spontaneous and to me, much more fun."

He goes on.

"The fact is that most people don't read books. YouTube reaches far more people. For example, last year at How the Light Gets In, I was in a debate with a German physicist called Sabine Hossenfelder [also a keen YouTuber]. They put it online last week, and it's had at least 150,000 views. You would have to have a really best-selling book to reach 150,000 people."

Like Socrates, he's used to annoying people, and possibly enjoys it. In previous years it was his books that did the trick. Sir John Maddox, the editor of mainstream science magazine *Nature*, famously described Sheldrake's first book, *A New Science of Life*, as being "the best candidate for burning there

has been for many years". In a TV interview in 1994, he said: "Sheldrake is putting forward magic instead of science, and that can be condemned in exactly the language that the Pope used to condemn Galileo, and for the same reason. It is heresy."

This anti-Sheldrake feeling exploded into violence at an event in April 2008. He was speaking at the 10th International Conference on Science and Consciousness in Santa Fe when he was stabbed in the leg by 33-year-old Hirano Kazuki. Sheldrake said later of his attacker: "He had spoken to me the day before my lecture, telling me he was hearing voices." So while the attacker was clearly not one of Sheldrake's rationalist enemies, the incident somehow seemed to say something about the effect Rupert has on the world.

It's all perhaps rather strange that this gentle, humorous and soul-expanding man makes so many people so angry. His worldview seems based on kindness. He credits a stint working at Big Pharma in his year off for waking him up.

"I absolutely loved India. I was hugely impressed by the temples, the people, the sheer vitality, the creativity and originality of it"

"At 18 I found myself working in a vivisection laboratory, tormenting animals."

This was a horrifying experience.

"We injected guinea pigs with random chemicals that might have been painkillers. You had this clip thing that you would put on their toes, and they would squeal every time. You had to count how many times they squealed when you pinched each toe. You would have ten guinea pigs, all with different doses of the same compound, and you would write down the number of squeals per guinea pig. You would notice that some were keeling over because they were being killed by the toxic chemicals. They also experimented on cats, but I didn't do those. They were done by one of the leading scientists. The cats were strapped down on operating tables and would have tubes pushed into them. Very grisly."

There was an upside, however.

"I read Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* at that stage, and became interested in psychedelics. And when I was asked to weigh out mescaline, for an experiment with day-old chicks, I was given the key to the locked cupboard containing LSD and mescaline, and I did help myself to some of the mescaline."

Clearly a brilliant scholar, he went on to study biology at Clare College,

Cambridge, and, following a stint at Harvard, went back to Clare and became a Fellow. He says he still considered himself an atheist at that point, though he loved playing the organ in churches.

It was a seven-year job in the seventies in India that really blew his mind. Not only was he doing interesting work, as a plant physiologist, but he also loved meeting his Indian co-workers – Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims.

"They were much closer to me, ideologically, than the academics. Practical scientists are just concerned with what works.

"I lived in the wing of a crumbling palace in Hyderabad. The Raja who owned it would have fitted well with your *Idler* demographic in the most literal sense. He was quite young and he had inherited the palace. He was rather baffled by the modern world, and spent much of his time reading PG Wodehouse.

"I wrote the book with a fountain pen"

"I absolutely loved it. I was hugely impressed by the temples and the people I met, and the sheer vitality, the creativity and originality of it. And also the view of the world that seemed so much deeper than the mechanistic materialism that I had been brought up with, with consciousness underlying everything and holy animals everywhere, and holy plants."

It was a Huxleyite transformation, from cold-hearted rationalist to mystical explorer, with his own guru.

"At that time I came across Father Bede Griffiths, who was a British Benedictine monk living in an ashram in Tamil Nadu in south India. He was just who I needed, a bridge between East and West. Highly sophisticated, he knew all about Western mystical theology and philosophy and was also deeply grounded in the Upanishads and Hindu tradition. He was living in this wonderfully simple ashram on the bank of a holy river. For me this was like a dream come true. He wore yellow robes and looked like an Indian. He had a long white beard and long white hair. I told him about writing a book on morphic resonance. I wanted to remain in India to write it but I couldn't stay at my job because it was very demanding. So he said, come and live here. So I went and lived there for about a year and a half. It was a huge education in the possibility of living a happy and simple life. It was a very happy time for me. I wrote the book with a fountain pen in textbooks. Chapter by chapter, Father Bede would read it, and we would discuss it. I got a really good education from him in medieval philosophy, in Thomas Aquinas and others."

Sheldrake decided he was a Christian, not a Hindu or Jain.

"I didn't really want to buy into the caste system and all the other aspects of Hinduism. I think we can learn a lot from the Indian tradition but you can't really become an Indian. I was very interested in the Sufi tradition but it felt really alien. Fasting and Ramadan and the various rules of Islam, giving up alcohol – none of that was terribly attractive."

Medieval Christianity, says Sheldrake, before the Protestant Reformation, retained mystical and holistic elements.

"Aquinas thought plants have souls, animals have souls. There was a kind of animistic view of nature as alive and holistic. Cathedrals are the perfect expression of that philosophy because they have geometry and sacred archetypes all over the place but they also have foliage and green men and vegetation."

"The woke movement doesn't come from India, or Ancient Greece or Rome. It comes from a kind of extreme version of Christian inclusiveness"

As a modern heretic, I wonder whether he would have joined some weird medieval cult had he been alive in 1200.

"You're rather suggesting that under any conditions I would be a heretic, that I'm some kind of inherent contrarian. In fact I think if I had lived in the Middle Ages I would have been a Benedictine or something like that. I would have been in a monastic university. The thing about the Middle Ages is that there wasn't a bland uniformity. If you didn't like the Dominicans you could become a Franciscan, or if you didn't like the Franciscans you could become a Benedictine."

He reckons today's "woke" finger-waggery, which is distinctly Puritan in character, is a sort of offshoot of Christianity.

"I like Tom Holland's argument that with wave and wave of Protestantism you end up with a secularism which is completely perfused with Christian ideas, often taking them further than Christians ever have. The 'woke' movement, where does that come from? It certainly doesn't come from the caste system in India, it doesn't come from Ancient Greece and Rome, which were slave-owning societies. It comes from a kind of extreme version of Christian inclusiveness."

Rupert's love of medieval Christianity has led to his involvement in two projects: the British Pilgrimage Trust, which aims to restore the British tradition of pilgrimage which, again, was attacked and essentially banned in the Protestant Reformation; and "Choral Evensong", a website which lists all the evensongs taking place around the country in churches and cathedrals.

These brilliant schemes have directly inspired me to take a day's walk ending up at Ely Cathedral for evensong (followed by a few pints of local ale of course).

It perhaps does not come as a surprise that Rupert is not a fan of either smartphones or the cashless economy.

"I don't have a smartphone. I have a simple phone but it's switched off almost all of the time. I don't want people to be able to ring me up at any given time and to be constantly on duty, as it were. I'm a believer in cash. I don't like the idea that someone could know where I am at every time of the day or who knows every single purchase I make. And I think the attempt to eliminate cash could backfire on the system. The minute the Internet goes down, the entire economy will be paralysed and if I was a Chinese or a Russian hacker, I would have a button to press that would take out the entire British, European or American economy."

He says his favourite of England's 42 cathedrals is Lincoln. "For me it's the most beautiful. My father used to take me there so I used to hear the B minor mass and the St Matthew Passion as a child, and choral evensong."

Christmas at the Sheldrakes, he says, is a conventional affair.

"We have a Christmas tree, the whole family goes to midnight mass, we have Christmas lunch with about 12 people. We always listened to the Queen's Speech, and now it's the King's Speech. I'm a great fan of King Charles, and although I don't think he can express the more mystical side of his convictions directly, he can do it through ceremonies. Quite a lot of what he does involves various religious ceremonies. The Coronation wasn't just a formality. I think he actually really believed in what was happening, and that was one of the reasons it was so powerful."

And as for idling: "If I have a free afternoon or if it's nice weather I go to Kew Gardens. No pressing problems and no mobile telephone. It's close to paradise."