

Humanists and Spirituality

At the 2021 Non-Theist Friends' annual conference Andrew Copson spoke about this idea, which some humanists reject as a deplorable oxymoron.

I want to open up some of the questions that exist for us as non-theists about spirituality or the spirit. And I think the difference between those of us who are gathered here this evening to discuss this topic and those other far more numerous people who are gathered to enjoy the other event on this evening [Euro Cup semi-final England v. Denmark] perhaps shouldn't be overforced because they too are engaged in an experience which for many of them is spiritual in the sense of being about connectedness – not just with each other in their case but focussed on a common goal or hope. They are gathered together and in communion to some extent with each other, standing outside themselves in moments of victory and celebration, which are all characteristics of a 'spiritual experience' as a materialistic humanist might define it.

That isn't just a trivial point. Many philosophers, like A.C. Grayling, for example, have pointed to large sporting events, large concerts and other moments of shared experience as being the most widespread instance (at least in Western societies) of spiritual experience today. (Though not for me, because I couldn't care two hoots about football, to be honest!)

Well, a humanist is not only non-theistic but also materialist in the literal sense of believing that this universe, which we can see and engage with through our senses, is a natural phenomenon. For humanists there can never be a spirituality that is in another realm from us, somehow disconnected from us, another world to which we might gain access by special efforts, or from which beings and entities could gain access to us by their special power. Spirituality for a humanist is never going to be that type of thing. It's never going to be outside this physical universe and our human experience and our material conditions.

There are those humanists today and in previous years who simply reject the word

'spiritual' entirely. They say it's deplorable in its origin and even today in its common usage it's equally deplorable referring, as it does, to an unimaginably wide range of different and disconnected practices and nonsenses, from the occult to dancing round stones with no clothes on at midnight, to whale song, to a full Catholic Mass. Google 'spirit' or 'spirituality' and there is almost no single concept that unites the results that you will find. So this word, they say, is so nebulous in its modern usage as to be completely useless for all of our purposes as humanists seeking to know the reality of the universe, seeking to know ourselves, or seeking to understand and find meaning in the human condition that we all inhabit.

I am not one of those people. I don't reject the possibility of a 'spiritual' life for human beings. So I find myself in the position of asking what I can take to be the meaning of the word 'spiritual'. And then what is meant by it if I want to apply it to my own personal experience of life.

Four aspects of the spiritual

I think there are four main aspects to what I would call a spiritual dimension to human life. They are described in some of the great books that you might have already read. Like André Comte-Sponville's *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*. You are probably familiar with the work of Marilyn Mason, the former director of education at Humanists UK, who did a lot of work on spiritual development for English schools. There is the work of Jeananne Fowler and then there is also a great little book called *Is Nothing Sacred?*, published by Routledge and edited by Ben Roger, which was the product of a whole day conference on aspects of humanist spirituality. There's a lot of literature on humanist spirituality out there and from that and from my own experience, ideas and opinions I would draw these four aspects of what I think spiritual experiences are about.

The first thing I would say is that they are *positive* experiences. I would say that a spiritual feeling is a powerful and also a positive feeling, that might be analogous to elation. It's a feeling of joy, a 'pro' rather than an 'anti' feeling, an outpouring in a positive sense. And these feelings are often relatively short-lived. It's a moment. It's not a constant condition. I don't think anyone is going around feeling like this all the time. It's the sort of feeling that you may realise you've had even a few seconds, a millisecond, after it's over. That's the first thing about it: powerful, positive, momentary – outside our normal experience.

Secondly, it is a very *personal* and, even though we might suspect that the spiritual experience we are having is something that other people might also be having, if we are all together at a concert, say, or all together at a football match, we can't know that. It's not something that we can know in the way that we can all read the same sentence. It's subjective.

The third thing about these feelings is that, although they are occurring within ourselves and, of course, naturally in our own minds, they are *not intellectual* experiences, not rational experiences. If you were to divide your life into the rational and the non-rational – I won't say 'irrational', because that sounds pejorative – they are in the non-rational category. They are not intellectual, they are not the consequence of deep thought. They are not the same as what you might feel in thinking through a mathematical puzzle. They are not even the sort of thing that you could analyse your experience of it, as you are having it. The moment that it is over, it is over and you are just looking back on it. In fact I'd go further. The moment you try to look at it, it disappears. You don't feel it any more once you try to bring any analytical mind to it.

The fourth thing about them is that, although they are very personal and individual experiences, *they take you outside yourself* – outside yourself in order to connect with something else. It's a sort of transcendence, though I don't like to use the word, because it does feel a very immaterial sort of word. They are peak experiences, cosmic shudders that connect with something else: the natural world perhaps, or another person, or a wider universal experience that you are partaking

of in your imagination. You're reaching outside yourself and your own self is shrinking to the background. You relate to something else more.

There, I think, are the four broad characteristics that a lot of people would say add up to the sort of feelings they are describing when they are talking about spiritual experiences.

It's very easy to see a difference between a religious or theistic person who has those sorts of experiences and a humanist who does. The people in the first category may very well believe that these experiences are possible because there is some separable soul or personality or entity within our material self which can literally reach outside and have these sorts of experiences. But a humanist is going to say, no, these experiences are the product of the incredibly complicated and still unknown functioning of the human brain. I think that two people can have the identical feeling and one of them, the humanist, will say 'how incredible that amazing moment is', and a theist might say 'this is the moment when God really spoke to me'.

I know this is true because I saw on YouTube a flash mob playing Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, which is the European anthem. I don't know how many of you felt, but I am very European and was very affected personally by our country leaving the European Union, and when I watched this flash mob playing the *Ode to Joy* I cried. It was a very powerful experience for me and I scrolled down the comments – it had millions of viewers – and one of the comments said: 'How can anyone say that there is no God when you experience something like this?' I thought, that's amazing. I had a very powerful, peak experience watching it, but never thought it was anything other than my own experience. Then someone else is ascribing precisely the same thing either to the semi-divine nature of the human soul or the existence in the universe of a divine purpose or entity that creates or curates these types of experience for us.

So on the one hand. I'm saying that there is nothing special about a humanist spirituality. They are the same type of feelings that every human being has. But I want to go on to suggest that there are three types of spiritual experience



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were an alien landed there in that strange environment. You feel that way because you grew up in it. As George Eliot, the great humanist novelist of the nineteenth century, said, 'We never would have loved the Earth so much if we hadn't had a childhood in it, if this weren't the Earth where the same flowers that grow up every Spring are the flowers that we

for which there is a distinctive humanist basis. And, like all humanist opinions, these categories of humanist spirituality are based on facts.

used to gather as children.' That is intrinsic to a humanist belief of our belonging on this planet. We are earthlings. This is where we are at home.

Three types of humanist spiritual experience

The first fact that I think gives rise to a sort of spirituality is a fact about human beings generally. A humanist is someone who accepts that human beings are not some type of separate divine creation. The Earth is not the centre of the universe and human beings are not the centre of the Earth. We don't occupy some pinnacle on the pyramid of life. We are a product of the same natural processes which have given rise to every life form on this planet (and, presumably, life forms on other planets elsewhere) and the universe itself: processes which are not the product of conscious design.

One of the most important things about human beings is that we are earthlings. I think the belonging of human beings to this Earth can be an incredible source of spiritual feelings of comfort existentially – it's not just intellectually true. We are part of nature, not separate from it. Why do you feel the way you do when you are in a forest and the sunlight is filtering through the green leaves? You wouldn't feel that way if you

I think the second source of spiritual feeling for someone with a humanist approach to life is through contemplation of ourselves. It's a different thing from being self-centred. It is about being an integrated human being, connecting different parts of our personality. As that great humanist novelist of the twentieth century E. M. Forster famously said: 'Only connect. Only connect the prose and the passion. Then the beast and the monk will be deprived of the extremes that give them both succour.'

E.M. Forster's 'Only connect' is not just about connecting with other human beings but about being integrated in yourself, connecting the different aspects of your own experience. Regard yourself, contemplate yourself, know yourself, as the temple of Apollo in Delphi used to say in ancient times: γνωθι σεαυτον: *gnothi seauton*: know thyself. I think that in this you can find a great depth of spiritual feeling, not in a self-regarding or self-centred way, but because by knowing yourself, the unique 'you' that you are, you can also develop personally. Personal fulfilment is the only sort of completion or fulfilment that a humanist thinks a human being

is ever going to have. There is no future state where you might develop even further. If you are going to develop in whole way, then it's going to have to be here and now.

Harold Blackham, who was one of my predecessors at Humanists UK when it was the British Humanists' Association, put it well (I think it was in his book on humanism): 'One has to be friends with oneself before one is fit to be a friend. No one else is responsible for taking care of one's own interests. Satisfying one's needs and desires and doing the best for oneself can be the best that one can do for others.' And he wasn't a selfish man. If anything, he led a very frugal and altruistic life. But he was right that your most profound experiences have to be self-regarding – when you are developing, becoming deeper, becoming kinder, connecting with yourself, the different aspects of yourself. In that way we don't just have those peak spiritual experiences, but we lay the foundations for a longer-lasting, contemplative, spiritual state, through our own self-knowledge, resilience and ability to make sense. Humanists hold it as very important that we are not merely animals to whom things just happen. We are animals that can give meaning to experience, not just of events but of our own selves. I think that in that enterprise can lie some very spiritual experiences, very deep experiences.

The third category, which I think is a type of spiritual experience very accessible to humanists, is our connection with other people. By this I mean a lot of different connections. Some experiences in this category are about our connection with one other person – lover or friend – whatever the connection at the time may be. It may be physical or intellectual (I think intellectual connections can have a spiritual penumbra about them) or something else. These relationships are very important and can be peak experiences.

But I'm not just talking about those connections with individual people we meet. I'm also talking about our *imagined* connections with other human beings, far distant from us. This is the moment where fiction really adds to our spiritual life. The novel is a very humanistic medium. Who can read George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and not feel that you have travelled through a thousand interior landscapes and really

connected and had so many experiences of what I would call a spiritual kind – great intimacy and great moments of realisation? Or it can happen with art of a figurative kind. You can look eyes with a face in a portrait and suddenly feel a profound connection with another human being.

And finally in this category: Especially today when we know so much about history, archaeology and anthropology, I think we can connect with something even bigger than our connections with the human beings with whom we have relationships in real life or imaginatively identify with in fiction. I think we can see ourselves as part of something more, which is the human story. We can situate ourselves within the human story and try to comprehend the stories of our ancestors, the things they did, the institutions they built, everything from morality to farming, everything that is the basis of our lives today.

That's somewhere where we can transcend ourselves as well, and not just thinking of the past. I think that one of the reasons why progressive science fiction like *Star Trek* is so popular is that people enjoying it are doing the same thing as those of us who look back and situate ourselves in the human story, as it has been from then until now, whereas in science fiction you are looking from now until then.

Whatever you are doing, you are still reaching outside yourself, not to the natural world, but to a bigger human story which, the more we know about it, is a remarkable source of spiritual experience. I think that story can be an object of considerable awe and wonder to us and, of course, awe and wonder are words which people quite often use to describe the peak spiritual experiences I have been talking about. In all of these ways I think we who have a non-theistic point of view and a humanist approach to life have rich, deep and almost inexhaustible sources of what I have been describing as spiritual experience.

Andrew Copson is the Chief Executive of Humanists UK. This article is a shortened transcript of the talk he gave as a keynote speaker at the 2021 annual conference of the Nontheist Friends Network on the theme 'That's the Spirit!'. For information about the Network contact nontheist-quakers.org.uk