



Spirituality and the Unchurche

by David Hay

Religion may be one of those topics to avoid in polite conversation, yet there is a common spirituality, argues David Hay. Permission to express the spiritual side of our nature seems to have been withdrawn, but that doesn't mean it no longer exists. How are we to take this shyness and use it in the task of mission?

David Hay is Reader in Spiritual Education at the Centre for the Study of Human Relations, University of Nottingham. His most recent book, written with Rebecca Nye, is *The Spirit of the Child*.

“I’m not religious, but ...”

How many times have you heard that phrase? In England it is almost the culturally required preface to any statement about the spiritual life. It reassures the nervous listener that they are not about to be bombarded by an evangelical harangue. Yet the truth is that in spite of our many empty churches, most people in this country are religious and do have a spirituality. This is not just a hopeful assertion; it is backed up by national survey data collected over the past two decades.

My personal judgment after a quarter of a century of research in the field is that all human beings without exception have a biologically inbuilt spiritual predisposition. It is this that allows us to be religious in the first place.¹ The overpowering inevitability of spiritual awareness is highlighted in my favourite quotation from the German Jesuit, Karl Rahner. In one of his *Theological Reflections*, Rahner asks us to imagine a world still more radically secularised than at present; a world in which all religious language has been forgotten and even the word “God” has disappeared,

“And even if this term were ever to be forgotten, even then in the decisive moments of our lives we should still be constantly encompassed by this nameless mystery of our existence ... even supposing that

those realities which we call religions ... were totally to disappear ... the transcendental inherent in human life is such that [we] would still reach out towards that mystery which lies outside [our] control.”²

As Rahner was well aware, during the past three hundred years, for reasons that are to do with the political and intellectual history of Europe, spiritual life has become more and more deeply privatised and divorced from its traditional Christian expression. At the end of the millennium the remoteness of popular British culture from religion is sufficiently strong for many people to feel that social permission for the expression of religious feeling has been withdrawn. As a result, they tend to hide or ignore their spiritual awareness and in some cases repress it from consciousness.

When spiritual longing does emerge in these circumstances, it can be experienced as bewildering. The common symptom is a great shyness – of which we have to take full account in the task of mission. This is poignantly reflected in Philip Larkin’s poem “Church Going”. He writes of a day when he slipped into a local church and wandered round it, once he was sure there was nobody else about. It was apparently not much of a building, hardly worth stopping for, yet he did stop. “In fact,” he says, “I often do, and always

end much at a loss like this, wondering what to look for ...”

Church buildings, even as dull and architecturally uninspiring as the one visited by Larkin, figure surprisingly often in the lives of people who are remote from formal religion. They remain as a kind of seduction, a temptation to stray into an area of life prohibited by secularity. I know this is so because last year in Nottingham (as part of the research programme of the Centre for the Study of Human Relations being done by Kate Hunt and myself) we began a study of the spirituality of people who, although they do not have any formal connection with Christianity (or any other faith community), feel that they are religious or have a spiritual life.

Connection

After identifying a number of people with this background, we started our research in the currently fashionable way by forming them into focus groups. The members of the groups were invited to discuss their understanding of spirituality and its connection with religion. We also asked them to talk about their experience of the religious institution and we filmed and audiotaped everything they had to say.

One or two people in the older age bracket are Christian in every respect apart from their

failure to go to church on a Sunday. They have so to speak “retired” – hurt, bored or exhausted – but they hold surprisingly strongly to Christian belief and pray regularly. They have gone, but not forgotten their religious roots.³

Next, there is a middle group of what one might call the neutrals, mostly from the younger age range, who are so remote from any direct knowledge of Christianity that it has no impact upon them, either positive or negative. Such stereotypes as they have appear to have been picked up from the media. But in spite of their remoteness we are learning that they do have a spirituality.

At the other end of the scale are people who are deeply alienated from the religious institution, annoyed by what they perceive to be the hypocrisy or foolishness of those representatives of Christianity they have met. Sometimes they feel they have been damaged by their encounter with religion and are enraged by what has happened to them. The anger can be extreme, as in the case of a clergyman’s son I talked to who said between gritted teeth, “One thing I hate more than anything else is to go inside a church!” Members of this highly disaffected group are about as far away from overt Christian commitment as it is possible to be. Nevertheless, we have become aware that they too have a spirituality.

So, what about the spiritual life of people in these latter two categories?

One important axiom guides our research. God the Holy Spirit cares about and communicates with them equally as lovingly as in the case of the most ardent churchgoer. The parable of the Lost Sheep tells us that much. And this axiom is proving to be correct as we study the conversations we have had with individual members of the focus groups.

You have to listen carefully, though. The problem is that people who are at odds with mainstream Christian culture express their spirituality in ways that stray well beyond ordinary religious language. Some of these expressions are nevertheless easily recognisable.

Thus, one or two of the people to whom we have spoken have forged a relatively coherent spiritual belief system in the New Age style. It contains recognisable elements of Christianity but also draws on a variety of other sources (spiritualism, geomancy, snippets of Oriental religion). I am still not sure about the detailed triggering for this theological creativity, but our analysis already shows that one important motive for reflection is the experience of suffering.

Suffering

Other less coherently expressed forms of spirituality are coming to interest us more and more. Frequently they also seem to be triggered by suffering. This is especially true when the personal crisis is of a very severe kind – the death of a loved one; narrow escape from one’s own death; being out of work with no immediate prospect of employment; perhaps having to endure clinical depression. It is in these desperate predicaments that secular ways of understanding reality show their inadequacy. The normal defense mechanisms we use to hide from the enigma of human existence – avoidance, daydreaming, various kinds of addictions – are no longer any use. There is then a turning, often blindly, towards the mystery of which Karl Rahner speaks.

In this bewildering darkness the relative detachment of a research conversation can allow an intimacy that would in other circumstances be denied – for example, where there is the suspicion that the listener is there with some evangelical purpose. One of the first things one is taught about qualitative research is the importance of not intruding one’s own point of view during an interview. It is a good lesson to learn, because it reminds us to respect the individuality and the unique life–history of the person with whom we are in dialogue.

In this area of research people are very easily embarrassed and will hurry away from the subject at the slightest evidence of the imposition of religious presuppositions by an outsider. This is especially true when one is listening to someone who,

perhaps for the first time, is struggling to surmount a personal taboo to articulate their spiritual experience. The intense privacy of such people’s religion makes it more of a secret than, for example, revelations about their sex life.

It is a very moving and humbling experience to hear someone wrestling with language to express these shy intuitions, searching for the appropriate discourse amongst whatever cultural resources remain available to them. Here, it seems, the Holy Spirit is working and the appropriate stance of a listener is one of respectful silence.

As we delve more deeply into the transcribed texts of these conversations, we will learn further and more subtle details of this creative process and how it relates to (and hopefully deepens) our understanding of Grace and hence our comprehension of the task of mission.

Notes

¹ See especially, David Hay with Rebecca Nye *The Spirit of the Child*, London: HarperCollins, 1998, Ch.1.

² Karl Rahner, ‘The experience of God today’, in *Theological Investigations 11* (tr. David Bourke), London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974, Ch.6, p.149–165.

³ See Philip Richter & Leslie Francis, *Gone but not Forgotten*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998.