



# A Source of

## Embarrassment?

*by David Hay*

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*There is no doubt that the vast majority of the population find meaning and fulfilment for their lives outside the worshipping life of the Church. Yet many of these people willingly acknowledge a “spiritual” dimension to their lives. The Church must take account of this reality and try to understand why people, who are attuned to “religious” experience, feel unable to embrace the Christian faith. Only then can we begin to understand why many people of goodwill remain untouched by the ministry and mission of the Church. Here, David Hay identifies some characteristics of the spirituality of those who don’t go to Church, and why such people are uncomfortable about becoming identified with institutional Christianity.*

**“M**ost people are aware from time to time of God’s action in their lives”.

Thirty years ago I would have disagreed with that statement, certainly in Britain, where regular church attendance has been low for many years. Since then, the results of my own research<sup>1</sup> have made me think again. Surveys show that probably two thirds of the population feel that they have a spiritual dimension to their existence. This is not in the form of a second-hand idea learned from parents and teachers, but based on their practical experience of life. Almost without exception, these people see their spiritual insights as conveying meaning, value and an ethical call. That is to say, when they are in touch with their spirituality they find in

themselves an increased desire to behave justly.

Like other Christians, I believe God communicates with all of creation, so in a sense there is nothing very surprising about my findings. Why, then, have we not been aware of these facts until recently? The answer is connected with a very strong taboo against speaking in public about one’s spiritual life. Most people feel that it is embarrassing to talk about their relationship with God as our Victorian forebears felt about discussing their sex lives. In one of the national surveys I directed, nearly 40% of people claimed they had been aware of the presence of God, but said that they had never spoken to anyone about it, not even someone as close as a husband or wife.

## Effects of the Enlightenment

In part their reticence is connected with a natural shyness about the intimacies of the spiritual life. More important is a widespread anxiety that they will be thought odd, stupid or even mentally disturbed. The source of these fears almost certainly lies in the social pressure created by the popular diffusion of critical interpretations of religion that have arisen during the last two hundred years as a consequence of the European Enlightenment. People to whom Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud are hardly more than names have nevertheless absorbed enough of their ideas from the surrounding *milieu* to have the uneasy feeling that religious belief is perhaps a mistake.

*The irony is that modern research shows that people resorting to religious experience are not particularly stupid or mentally disturbed. Quite the reverse. As a group they tend to be better educated than others and to be in a better state of mental health. They are less likely to be materialistic, more likely to be happy, to have social conscience and to be practically involved in social and political action.*

Of this very large group, numbering tens of millions, only a fraction are regular churchgoers. It is possible to make a number of educated guesses about why they keep their distance. Some of the reasons are obviously connected with the taboo I have highlighted. We also know several of the causes for people leaving the churches.<sup>2</sup> Yet in practice we know almost nothing of the detailed feelings and motivations of those people who have never belonged. The task of mission is badly hampered by our ignorance.

If the Holy Spirit communicates with the whole of creation, then God is speaking to these people, indeed may be speaking through them to those of us in the churches. What messages are they hearing? What can we learn of God by listening to them? Could the churches deepen their understanding, their mission, by

being sensitive to what they have to say?

## Children's Experience

From another perspective, my researches have made me concerned about the prevailing lack of religious vocabulary with which people can come to grips with their spiritual lives. Over the past four years my colleague Rebecca Nye and I have been studying the spirituality of six and ten year old children in schools in Nottingham and Birmingham.<sup>3</sup> The Bible is certainly not an open book for them. Very few have any access to the kind of biblical language I was given as a child. What this engenders is a turning to other available sources: the language of dreams, fairy tales, fantasy, games and play, science fiction and science and technology, in an effort to give expression to their spirituality.

With more than a third of the children interviewed, dreams provide a means of legitimating reflections on spiritual matters. One ten year old boy repeatedly referred to dreams when considering ultimate mystery and meaningfulness of life:

*Pictures going through my head like dreams or something... they all seem to fit together like a big puzzle... like one dream in all, like telling me things.*

An illustration of the use of fairy tales to grapple with spirituality comes from a six year old who pondered his difficulties in relationship and the nature of spiritual transformation through a consideration of Grumpy's change in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. In certain important respects, it echoes the Christian story of redemption:

*...like on Snow White, you know, Grumpy like, he feels very sad and grumpy... but when he get into know about life, he thinks more better about it, and Snow White and things like that, because Snow White being in trouble by the Evil Queen, then he cares and when she dies he really cares, and when she comes back alive again, he cares even more.*

Playfulness of language allowed ten year old Beth to inhabit an imaginary garden which had the function of providing an inner sanctuary for her

spiritual values of peace, beauty, solitude and hope. Six year old John, on one occasion, took playful charge of the conversation with Rebecca by acting like a chat show host. Standing on a chair holding the microphone he asked her a number of questions that were important to *him*: "It is (Christianity) good for everybody?" and what about "people who don't believe in good?" and (now as the audience) wildly clapped her attempted "neutral researcher" replies.

Expressions of ineffable wonder were often evoked through reference to science and technology, as when ten year old Altman was amazed at the sight of a huge satellite dish. Some scientific language, and the language of science fiction provided analogies for spiritual concepts that were otherwise inarticulable. More than one child spoke of holograms or parallel universes in attempting to represent what is meant by the soul.

What these languages seem to do is offer legitimate ways of speaking about what is often felt to be the illegitimate realm of spirituality in a materialist and secular culture. Children are very aware of the cultural conditions within which they have to grapple with spiritual matters, and are sensitive to the fact that talk about their emerging spirituality is unwelcome in the adult world. It is a remarkable testimony to the strength of the spiritual life of children that they continue to use para-language so vividly, but in the end they are seldom adequate to express the profound religious issues that are being groped towards.

## Privatisation and Community

There is a third, more obviously political reason for attending seriously to the spiritual life of people who do not go to church. The American sociologist Amitai Etzioni's recent critique of the social sickness of many Western countries, including Britain, is significantly entitled *The Spirit of Community*.<sup>4</sup> A communally shared spirituality encourages the development of a free society, because spiritual understanding feeds naturally into political legislation, social action

and personal responsibility. As I have noted, in our secularised culture most people's spirituality is an isolated, secret matter. This privatisation colludes with the individualism of modern Western life, and creates powerful pressures which put a strain on the bonds of civil society. When spirituality is absent from public debate, maintenance of the social fabric comes to depend less and less on a common understanding of rights and responsibilities, and more and more on repressive measures: the building of more prisons and widespread use of surveillance cameras. In the end, human freedom is compromised. It is *here* that the mission to make the Bible an open book has a vital social and political importance. When its language can once more be used freely and confidently in public, spirituality can come out of its hiding place.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> David Hay *Religious Experience Today* (Cassell/Mowbrays 1990)
- <sup>2</sup> see Philip Richter & Leslie J Francis *Gone But Not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning* (DLT 1998)
- <sup>3</sup> The findings of this project will be presented in a new book, David Hay with Rebecca Nye *The Spirit of the Child* (HarperCollins 1998)
- <sup>4</sup> Amitai Etzioni *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda* (Fontana 1995) ■