

## THE SPIRITUALITY OF ADULTS IN BRITAIN – RECENT RESEARCH

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Like all interesting and important words, 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' have many shades of meaning. I can remember an exhausted looking man being pointed out to me at some gathering with the whispered comment 'He's very spiritual, you know!' My friend meant that he read poetry, enjoyed string quartets and fitted the stereotype of the sensitive aesthete. That is one kind of meaning for the word 'spiritual'. On the other hand 'spirituality' is taken by most people to be connected with religion – prayer, meditation, that sort of thing. Here 'spirit' carries implications of what it means to be fully aware of our indissoluble membership of the human collective or, as Marx put it, to discover oneself as a 'species-being'.

Rather than adding another definition, I want to allow a broad understanding to emerge as I discuss the findings of recent empirical research in this difficult and controversial field. I need to emphasise that this is work in progress; I shall for example be mentioning a number of threads of evidence that do not as yet add up to a totally coherent picture. Empirical investigations of spiritual experience in Britain have been going on for about thirty years, but the most interesting data has begun to emerge only very recently, during the last three or four years.

### **The Spiritual Life of Britain**

These findings suggest that something surprising is happening to the spiritual life of Britain. In the year 2000, the BBC ran a series of TV programmes called *Soul of Britain*, intended to be a review of the spiritual state of the nation at the Millennium. The data for the programmes came from a national survey commissioned by the BBC along with a number of other groups. One of those bodies was the Spirituality Project I directed at Nottingham University. We inserted a set of questions in the survey asking people about their spiritual lives (Hay & Hunt, 2000). The results showed that over 75% of the sample claimed that they were personally aware of a

spiritual dimension to their experience. That is the average for the whole of Britain. I do not have separate statistics, but on the basis of previous national surveys I would expect the figure for Scotland to be even higher than this.

The reason for our surprise was because I had inserted an almost identical set of questions into a Gallup Poll thirteen years previously (Hay & Heald, 1987). On that occasion the positive response rate for the national sample was 48%. On the face of it, over a period of thirteen years the number of people admitting to spiritual experience in this country has probably increased by around 60%. Now, in spite of my remarks about contradictory understandings of the word 'spirituality' a moment ago, it is true that most people assume that spirituality is to do with religion; indeed some people say the words are identical in meaning. It is therefore interesting to note that over roughly the same period as these surveys have taken place institutional religion has suffered a severe haemorrhage. Regular church attendance in Scotland has dropped by around 14% since 1990, whilst for the two major denominations – the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church – the fall is nearer 18% (Brierley, 2000). We are therefore currently in a curious social situation. A rapidly increasing number of people are prepared to recognise spiritual experience as part of their lives at the same time that the institutions traditionally associated with the spiritual life are in a process of severe decline.

Nevertheless, from previous research we know that a religious understanding of 'spirituality' is still normative for most people. Although the secularisation of British culture is proceeding very quickly, so far for most people it is only skin deep.

### **Meaning making**

So what do people have in mind when they talk about this kind of experience? The commonest ex-

perience reported in last year's *Soul of Britain* survey was to do with meaning making: the recognition of a patterning of events in a person's life that convinces them that in some way those events, whether happy or sad (and hence this can and does include the experience of falling ill) are part of an unfolding transcendent meaning that is not of their making. A total of 55% of the national sample recognised this in their own lives. That is a 90% rise compared to 1987.

### **Presence of God**

Many people feel they have been aware of the presence of God. In the latest poll, 38% of the sample said they had known such a presence - a 41% rise on 1987. We know from previous research that this often happens for the first time when a person is deeply distressed; for example they are seriously ill, or fearing that they are going to die, or grieving because a loved one has died. The experience of God's presence does not normally change the physical facts of the situation, though occasionally people claim that it does. Normally the suffering is so to speak put in a broader context of meaning that helps the person to bear it, or even to make something positive out of it.

In great unhappiness or fear many people, including those who are uncertain about whether there is a God or not, turn to prayer. A total of 37% of those recently questioned felt they had received help through prayer - a 40% increase on the figure for 1987. Again, the help is usually seen as to do with a reorientation of meaning rather than any material shift in the person's situation. People say things like 'I felt that God answered my prayer by making his presence felt. He supported me in my suffering'.

### **A sacred presence in nature**

Another commonly reported experience is an awareness of a sacred presence in nature, rather like William Wordsworth's description of a presence that "rolls through all things" in his lines written above Tintern Abbey. Although Wordsworth was a practising member of the Church of England and certainly made a connection between the presence and the God of Christianity, quite often these days, people are keen to distance their experience from any formally religious interpretation. A total of 29% of the sample felt that they had had this kind of experience - an 81% rise since 1987.

A surprisingly large number of people, 25% of the national sample, feel they have been in touch with someone who has died - this is a 38% rise since 1987. Almost always this encounter is experienced as healing and consoling and it usually takes place fairly soon after the death.

More ominously, a quarter of all the people interviewed feel they have been aware of an evil presence - a rise of over 100% since 1987.

The figures are startling if only because our lengthy research experience tells us that people are very shy about admitting to spiritual experience. This makes it even more remarkable that the responses were obtained in the relatively uncongenial circumstances of a national telephone poll.

### **Why the change?**

Why might this be happening? Is it to do with a move away from the materialism of the 1980s? Is there more social permission today for the public admission of what was until recently something too intimate or embarrassing to be shared? The paradoxes are many. My personal guess is that there has not in reality been a sudden increase in the prevalence of such experience. It is more likely that in some way social change has made it less of a taboo subject.

Nevertheless, in an increasingly secular culture like ours it is important to look at how spirituality might be expressing itself outside the religious institutions. For example, we might want to ask about the forms that spirituality takes in people who have no connection with any religious institution. Very many patients entering hospital will probably fall into this category. In association with our national survey my colleague Kate Hunt and I had a look at this question (Hay & Hunt, 2000). We ran a series of focus groups and in-depth research conversations about spirituality with people who had no formal religion. The members of the groups were selected for us by a polling organisation on the major criterion that they never went to church.

All of these people had an easily recognisable personal spirituality. We also know from our conversations that in spite of their distance from institutional religion most of them find themselves using fragments of recognisably religious language to express themselves. Some who had had a religious upbringing

ing were quite overt in their use of Christian terminology and even admitted some adherence to it. 'Emma' illustrates this. Here she is talking about her belief in Jesus:

*I think that's quite difficult really, yes, he does, I mean because I believe in the, you know, in Jesus as such, he came down and, I don't necessarily understand it, but I you know believe it to have happened as such. I wouldn't be able to pinpoint a role for him at the moment you know, I don't quite know what he's doing now, what he's got on his c.v. as such, but yes I do.*

The confusion and evident embarrassment, covered over by humour, is very characteristic and suggests the strength of the taboo on talking about religion in contemporary culture.

The way many conversations developed suggested that most people's spirituality is in what the sociologist of religion Daniel Batson (Batson, Schoenrade & Ventis, 1993) calls the 'Quest mode' (as I think was true of Emma). People sometimes said explicitly that they were on a journey on a route that was not clear, or as one person put it 'It is like a foggy day'. From a religious perspective the doctrinal content in most conversations was minimal. Quite a lot of people didn't like to use the word 'God' at all. The phrase we most commonly heard was "I definitely believe in Something; there's Something there."

Doctrinally informed religious people might be inclined to dismiss such vague talk, but another way of looking at it is to see it as falling into the 'apophatic' tradition, that is, seeking to approach the transcendent through refusing to make positive statements. There is a good deal of evidence from our research conversations that behind this approach lies a suspicion or resentment of religious doctrine in general, seen as a denial of the mysteriousness of life. Quite often this was expressed in conscious opposition to the dominant Christian tradition, seen as dried up and formalised. This came out particularly in 'James' who spoke of that which he encounters as 'deeper than God' and of his communion with this as 'deeper than prayer'.

Very often people would only start to share their spiritual intuitions very late on in a research conversation, once they had judged that it was safe to do

so. The taboo arises from two kinds of fears; firstly that they will be targeted by evangelists, secondly they fear being laughed at. One woman we spoke to cringed as she imagined the mockery if she admitted to her spiritual yearnings, 'She's seen the light, haven't you Evelyn?' At the same time, although there is such a powerful prohibition on talking about the subject it is clear from our conversations that it is deeply important and the importance has to do with a longing for meaning. I should add that, as you might expect, men in particular told us that they almost never talk to anybody else about the subject. The only exception was when their defences were down, for example when they had too much to drink. A young man I spoke to gave a very familiar response, 'If my mates in the football club knew I was talking like this they'd think I was crazy.' The social construction of masculinity has a lot to answer for here.

### **Clarifying the distinction between religion and spirituality**

Though the sense of 'something there' can be suppressed or even repressed, it seems that it is very difficult to destroy. This indestructibility links in with Alister Hardy's notion that spiritual awareness is biologically built into us. Hardy's view, first put forward in his Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen University during the mid 1960s (Hardy, 1966) was that it had evolved biologically through the process of natural selection because it has survival value. Interestingly, during the past ten years a number of neurophysiologists, using modern brain-scanning techniques, believe they have identified a physiological correlate of spiritual awareness in the brain. I am thinking for example of the work of V S Ramachandran at the University of California (Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998) and Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg at the University of Pennsylvania (Newberg, d'Aquili & Rause, 2001). From a different perspective the French anthropologist Pascal Boyer (Boyer, 1994) has suggested on the basis of his studies of African religion that religious belief is dependent on a cognitive structure that is built in as a module in the brain. The analogy appears to be with Noam Chomsky's well-known 'Language Acquisition Device' (LAD) which he suggests is the physiological precursor of language. Hence the many different languages of humankind emerge from the same LAD, common to all members of the human species.

If these people are right, then spiritual awareness has a similar structural precursor. It is not a mere cultural choice that we can take up or discard according to personal preference. It is not a plaything of language that can be deconstructed out of existence. It is there in everybody, including both religious people and those who think religion is nonsense. Of course at this stage these ideas are at the level of informed conjecture, but they represent an increasing trend in scientific circles to interpret spiritual awareness as something positive, rather than illusory or pathological.

The biological precursors of human competences always of necessity express themselves in some cultural form such as a specific language, musical tradition, scientific, religious, humanistic or political belief. From this perspective spiritual awareness is the human predisposition that amongst other things permits the possibility of religious belief. Traditionally, spirituality expresses itself through the language of a specific religious culture such as Christianity or Islam. But this is not the only form it takes. Indeed it goes beyond religion in general, for it has to include the experience of people who reject religion. These considerations have brought me to conclude that most research into spirituality in Western populations has been hampered by the assumption that it will be constructed and express itself in traditional religious terms, usually those of Christianity.

Three or four years ago, Dr Rebecca Nye and I started investigating the question of forms of spirituality that do not necessarily express themselves in religious language (Hay & Nye, 1998). We were attempting to study the spirituality of groups of young children aged six and ten in primary schools in Nottingham and Birmingham. Our major difficulty was the need to explore the theme without depending on overtly religious language or symbolism that, amongst largely secularised children, was either unknown or discarded. We tackled the issue in two stages.

Firstly we identified three areas of ordinary everyday experience that we intuitively felt were likely to be strongly associated with spirituality. We selected these areas because they are particularly relevant to children, but they apply also to adults. They are also relevant to this talk in the sense that children as well

as adults sometimes become ill and end up in hospital. These areas were as follows:

#### **a) Awareness of the here-and-now**

Much of our lives, perhaps 99% of adult life, is spent planning, hoping, fearing, reflecting upon what has gone on in the past or what may happen in the future. In contrast, in monotheistic religions like Christianity, contemplative prayer is defined as a raising of the heart and mind to God, in the here-and-now. Buddhists undertaking *vipassana* meditation explicitly set out to remain in single pointed awareness of what is happening in the here-and-now of their experience. And this reminds us once again that spiritual activity is not necessarily religious in intention, for of course it is perfectly possible for someone with secular beliefs to practise awareness meditation. Nowadays many people do.

#### **b) Awareness of mystery**

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger pointed out how our Western culture tends to forget the mystery of Being. Spirituality is traditionally closely associated with the profoundest and most mysterious aspects of human existence and religions characteristically claim to respond to those issues. At their centre lie questions like 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' 'Who is this body that I call "me" and that has a name, a profession, a nationality, a culture, a gender, a social status, that at times can seem utterly arbitrary?' For much of the time the fundamental mysteriousness of existence lies concealed from us by an over-layer of education. Young children are in touch with this because they have not yet been given explanations. But even for adults, the answers that we learn in school or college in no way comprehend the existential issues with which spirituality deals and which often arise for us when we are threatened by meaninglessness or are in fear for our lives. In such situations, and it occurs to me that of course a spell in hospital is a good example, all kinds of props that so to speak hold us steady and help us to avoid confronting these existential questions are knocked away cf. loss of bodily functions, loss of relationships, loss of role, loss of certainty about the future.

#### **c) Awareness of value**

What in the end matters most of all to us? It is characteristic of religion that it claims to be concerned with what is more important than anything

else but quite often this remains at a shallow, theoretical level. An old Zen story reminds us of the earthiness and immediacy of spirituality. A master asks a young monk who is well advanced in his study of the Buddhist sutras, what is the most important thing of all. 'To follow the Buddha' he says. In response the master plunges the young man's head into a trough of water. He comes up gasping. Again he is asked what is the most important thing of all. 'To understand the eightfold path'. Once more his head is held under the water. What is the most important thing? 'Enlightenment', he shouts. Again his head goes under the water and he comes up choking, fearing he will drown. What is the most important thing? 'To be able to breathe' he screams, and in that moment becomes enlightened. All spiritual questions have this quality of intense immediacy and again we notice that at least from some spiritual perspectives, there are dimensions of immediate experience that are equally or more important than theoretical beliefs.

Having selected these areas of life as intuitively associated with spiritual experience, we showed the children photographs of youngsters of much the same age as themselves in situations where we might expect spiritual awareness to emerge most strongly.

We undertook a detailed line-by-line analysis of the transcripts with the help of a computer programme designed to help with the sorting and organising of qualitative meanings in the texts. The overarching concept that linked all the children's spiritual talk was what we referred to as 'relational consciousness'. My research colleague Rebecca Nye describes this as having two aspects (Hay & Nye, 1998):

1. An unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness, relative to other passages of conversation spoken by that child.
2. Conversation expressed in a context of how the child related to things, other people, himself/herself and God.

'Relational consciousness' caught us by surprise, because we had some notion of spirituality as a solitary affair, something very private.

What impressed us very strongly was how 'relational consciousness' not only seems to be closely

related to, if not identical to spiritual awareness; it also underlies the ethical impulse. In our research we always ask people to tell us in what way their spiritual experience has affected their lives. By far the commonest of all answers is that they say they want to behave better. One way of putting this is to say that the 'psychological distance' between themselves and other people, the environment and (if they are religious believers) God, becomes much shorter. If someone else, or the environment, is harmed they feel that they too are damaged in some way.

This finding reminds us of the traditional intuition that there is a close link between religion and ethics. At the same time it does not insult the views of those who say that you can have morals without religion. From this perspective, relational consciousness is the biologically inbuilt precursor that makes both religion and ethics possible. You *can* have one without the other.

## Concluding reflections

I want to end by making some remarks about the forgetting of spirituality in our civilisation, because it has relevance to the task of caring for the sick. One of the most important sources of our forgetfulness is the extreme individualism of post-Enlightenment Western culture. The sources of this are manifold but they appear repeatedly in our history. Probably the best-known British protagonist of this point of view is the Seventeenth Century materialist philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his masterpiece *Leviathan* (1651). His view that 'minds never meet, that ideas are never really shared and that each of us is always and finally isolated from every other individual' (Hampton, 1986) assumes that all human behaviour is ultimately motivated by self-interest. Potentially, life is a war of all against all and that is why Hobbes advocated the necessity for a despotic ruler to prevent the outbreak of anarchy. In his own day Hobbes was criticised in the following terms:

.....[he] might as well tell us in plain termes, that all the obligation which a child hath to a parent, is because he did not take him by the heels and knock out his braines against the walls, so soon as he was born (quoted in Hampton, 1986)

Well, that is undeniably one side of the human story, but it is diametrically opposed to the *spiritual* di-

mension of what it is to be human, where, as recent research is showing, tender relationship is paramount. The extraordinary awareness of co-operative relationship in the new born infant has recently been demonstrated by Dr Emese Nagy in Budapest. Her remarkable research film shows clearly recognisable signalling between adults and infants only a few hours old (Nagy & Molnar, 1994). That is to say, the evidence implies increasingly strongly that relational consciousness is an inbuilt human competence that does not have to be taught. Indeed what I am suggesting is that it is a predisposition that paradoxically becomes damaged as the result of socialisation into an individualistic culture.

That great Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1961), had already enunciated something similar in his Gifford Lectures in Glasgow University in 1954:

.....the unit of personal existence is not the individual, but two persons in personal relation; and that we are persons not by individual right, but in virtue of our relation to one another..... The unit of the personal is not the 'I' but the 'You and I'.

Similarly,

A community ..... is a unity of persons as persons. Unlike a society, it cannot be defined in functional terms, by relation to a common purpose. It cannot be constituted and maintained by organisation but only by the motives which maintain the personal relations of its members. It is constituted and maintained by mutual affection.

The research that I have been describing demonstrates the centrality of relational consciousness to an understanding of spirituality. This suggests to me that a community that is concerned with the spiritual care of the sick needs to constitute itself along the lines described by Macmurray. Spirituality demands more than functionality and organisation, it can only flourish in an atmosphere of mutual affection.

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