

## Summary – Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church

The theoretical basis of this study is that spirituality is 'built into' human beings, hard-wired, and therefore everyone has the capacity for spiritual experiences. However, it may not always be connected to religious beliefs and practices. Because of this basic assumption, the team refrained from attempting to define spirituality at all during the research.

The report begins by reflecting on the now-familiar statistics of church attendance decline. It contrasts these with what appears to be a significant increase in people's spiritual experiences. However, the team acknowledges that this increase is probably due more to a sense of increased social acceptability regarding spirituality, rather than an actual increase in spiritual experience.

There follows three case studies, drawn from the total of 31 one-to-one interviews carried out. In the first one, the interviewers reflect on the **special environment created by the interview situation**, that lets the interviewee reflect on their life and experiences. They point out that there is little social support for attempts to create such a space in ordinary life, positing a **'taboo' on speaking about spirituality**. I think this is a little strong, considering the proliferation of 'alternative' spiritualities that often make great conversation pieces and identity-markers in our society.

The subject went on to explain how she felt that her faith was like "money in the bank", an emergency reserve, which I might have thought indicated a typically po-mo 'utilitarian' attitude (cf. Angela Tilby's point about making religion into a resource for material and temporal gains). The researchers, however, make no such point, although they later talk about her being "able to use the resources of the Christian culture" (p. 12).

The second case study is of a man **"struggling with issues of belief and transcendence without the assistance of a religious meta-narrative"**, a good way of framing his situation although he inevitable must have some idea of Christian worldviews, having been brought up in a culture influenced by Christianity. The team go on to sum up his dilemma as **"desire for belief and yet... inability to believe"**. Out of the three examples, this one is probably the one that is the most typical.

The third case study is of a man whose conversation is said to illustrate the way that people with very little or absolutely no contact with the church talks about spirituality; ie. in terms of ghosts, ESP, premonitions, and what the researchers refer to as 'tangible' phenomena. That seems to be an inappropriate word, although it is clear that the vocabulary, and perhaps the inspiration, for this sort of spirituality, comes not from a 'religious' source, but rather from a 'supernatural' one. (These two can of course be said to be the same, but for historical and cultural reasons they tend to be held as separate categories in the West). Whether this vocabulary is typical or not seems to me to be an empirical issue not engaged with in this paper, and the point is therefore not borne out.

Further on in this section the researchers make another slip when they label another of this interviewee's experiences as 'religious' (as opposed to the others, ghosts etc.) without qualifying why this is to be seen as religious, or whether this was the interviewee's own categorisation.

The interviewee's lack of literacy with more traditionally religious terms such as 'belief' is apparent later on, when he confuses 'faith' and 'belief'. This is, to my mind, an interesting

point and it would be interesting to see if this is not typical. The whole difference between spirituality and the rest of life is in the difference between those two words: belief is an everyday experience, phenomenologically speaking, common to all people, whereas faith is by definition a mystery, something that cannot be explained or proven.

At the end of this section, the team make an interesting point about the tension often experienced by interviewees, **between maintaining one's integrity as a member of a logical, scientific culture, and allowing one's spiritual awareness to flourish.**

The next part of the paper deals with general aspects of people's **spiritual search.**

Factors mentioned include:

- ✦ **Timidity** – researchers say this almost led them to believe that spirituality did not matter to people, and that a bias in their research might result from their insistence that interviewees called themselves either spiritual or religious
- ✦ **Confusion** about the meaning of the word 'spiritual'
- ✦ Most people's spirituality was in **'Quest Mode'** – they felt themselves to be on a journey, the goal and even route of which was more or less unknown
- ✦ The Christian God versus the generic God – a point essentially about **vocabularies**, and, I would say, dissolution of, and outright lack of, fluency with Christian vocabulary and language
- ✦ **Theodicy** is a problem for many people, many more than those who feel that science has made God redundant

Another section sums up the **attitude** displayed in the research towards churches and churchgoers. These often take the form of binary oppositions. The team suggests that most of the vitriol directed at the churches stems from disappointment.

In groups, people were more openly hostile, which the researchers put down to a wish to conform with social stereotypes. (That is an interesting hypothesis that could have been developed further). Among the very common critiques were hypocrisy, bigotry, archaism, and obsession with control.

All who partook in the research had either abandoned their church connection or never had one. Their relationship to the church fell into one of three groups:

- ✦ **Believing/not belonging**
- ✦ **Not believing/not belonging**
- ✦ **Untouched by the church**

Knowledge of the Bible was scant, even among explicitly Christian interviewees, but in contrast, there was still a measure of respect and affection for church buildings. As with the sporadic attendance patterns of those who had abandoned their church connection, the feelings about the buildings seem to be motivated more by a concern for **heritage, identity, history and belonging**, than anything explicitly religious or spiritual (unless those things can be said to be spiritual). Other attitudes include distaste for the perceived hypocrisy of churchgoers, the lack of openness in churches, fear of evangelical rigidity, fear of social isolation and embarrassment.

The final part of the report is entitled reflections on mission, and it is less relevant for the current concern with spirituality. Among interesting points made in this section, the following are worth mentioning:

- ✦ **Secularity can be seen as a social construction**, in which religious vocabulary and ritual have little force, and people's spiritual awareness has been overridden by secular cultural assumptions. Secularity, the researchers claim, can obscure the natural spirituality in people. Po-mo is here a help to Christian mission as it allows the deconstruction of secularity.
- ✦ The authors say they are developing the idea of culture as a 'valve', which both inhibits and encourages, makes possible and makes impossible, statements and behaviours. In this hypothesis, traditional Christian language has functioned to open up people's spiritual awareness, and the current permitted language fails to do this in the same way, closing it off instead. I think this is a little limited. I have my doubts about this.
- ✦ The importance of **relational**, as opposed to individual, consciousness to spiritual experiences
- ✦ The lack of a plausible, public **language of spirituality**