RSA

Action and Research Centre

Spiritualise

**Revitalising spirituality
to address 21st century
challenges**

Dr Jonathan Rowson

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About the RSA

The RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) believes that everyone should have the freedom and power to turn their ideas into reality – something we call the Power to Create. Through our research and 27,000-strong Fellowship, we seek to realise a society where creative power is distributed, where concentrations of power are confronted, and where creative values are nurtured. The RSA Action and Research Centre combines practical experimentation with rigorous research to achieve these goals.

About the author

Dr Jonathan Rowson is Director of the Social Brain Centre at the RSA. After degrees spanning a range of social science disciplines from Oxford and Harvard, Jonathan's Doctoral research at the University of Bristol featured an analysis of the challenge of overcoming the psycho-social constraints that prevent people becoming 'wiser'. He writes for *The Guardian's* Behavioural Insights Blog, was formerly a columnist for *The Herald* newspaper, has authored three books, and is a chess Grandmaster and former British Champion (2004–6). You can contact him with queries relating to this report at jonathan.rowson@rsa.org.uk or follow him on Twitter @jonathan_rowson

Acknowledgements

Background and purpose
of the RSA's two year project

Spirituality, Tools of the Mind and the Social Brain

> "We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving or inspiring."
> **Charles Taylor**[1]

The RSA's Social Brain Centre seeks to improve public awareness of how prevailing understandings of human nature, need and aspiration shape practice and policy. The general shift in perspective that informs our work is the awareness that human beings are much less self-determined, conscious and cognitive and much more social, unconscious and embodied than we typically assume in most walks of life. Our work in a range of policy domains – recently including climate change and educational inequality – is about 'behaviour change' but looks, as we do here, at human behaviour outside of a neo-behaviourist paradigm, from as wide a range of perspectives as possible.

Spirituality, Tools of the Mind and the Social Brain was a two year project funded by the John Templeton Foundation and the Touchstone Trust. The project's main aim was to examine whether new scientific understandings of human nature might help us reconceive the nature and value of spiritual perspectives, practices and experiences. Our objective was to help give the idea of spirituality improved intellectual grounding, so it could speak more directly to issues of shared personal and public concern.

The project comprised a literature review on how new conceptions of human nature might inform spirituality; a Student Design Award called 'Speaking of the Spiritual'; four research workshops by invitation – on spiritual commitment, experiences, practices, and spirituality's place in the public realm; six public events – on belief, the body, death, the soul, love, and the political dimensions of the spiritual; and this final report attempts to synthesise those diverse forms of input and research as a legacy document, to capture the contributions of around 300 people who gave substantive insights at various stages of the project.[2]

The inquiry was not geographically bounded and included perspectives from a range of countries and traditions, but the UK was the default

1 Taylor, C. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. p.5.
2. For a relatively personal account of the experience leading this project, please see transcript of the author's speech at the final public event: Rowson, J. (2014) How to Talk to Spiritual Swingers, Religious Diplomats and Intellectual Assassins. *RSA blogs*, [blog] 8 December. Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/spiritual-swingers-religious-diplomats-intellectual-assassins/

reference point. Spirituality has universal foundations and relevance, but the challenge of how we conceive of it and speak of it seem particular to the cultural and institutional conditions of a formerly imperial, European capitalist democracy in the Anglosphere. The UK is much less conventionally religious than the US, and intellectually more empirically driven and less theoretically-inclined than much of continental Europe, but significant connections between church and state remain, politically and educationally, and the public conversation about spirituality in public life has often focused on questions at that relatively unedifying level.

The research methodology was neither an empirical inquiry into the understanding of spirituality in the population as a whole, nor an expert testimony into the nature of spiritual experience and practice, both of which have been widely researched.[3] The pragmatic approach was to involve people who would best help us achieve our aim and objective, through their participation in the workshops or as speakers at the project's public events.[4]

Our inquiry was motivated by the fact that, while survey data is not clear, many if not most people appear to self-identify as being in some way 'spiritual', without quite knowing what that means. Moreover, many seem to recognise that the world's major problems have 'spiritual' elements that are not adequately acknowledged or addressed, partly because we don't seem to know how to conduct the debate at that kind of fundamental level. The project therefore aims to make the exploration of deep and difficult features of human existence bigger parts of our public and political conversations. For instance:

Scratch climate change confusion long enough and you may find our denial of death underneath; we are terrified by an unconscious awareness of an existential threat, and we may need to look at climate change on those terms to really deal with it.[5]

Look deeply into unfettered capitalism and there seems to be a deluded self, scrambling to make itself real; buying itself into existence, until it finds it is fading again, until we buy some more. But we give little thought to the inherent fragility and virtuality of this self, and speak little of how to work towards its integration and transcendence.[6]

Pay attention to the myriad addictions of apparently normal behaviour and what passes for everyday consciousness begins to look like a low-level psychopathology; we are literally caught up in our smart phones, our social medicines, our curated identities, but perhaps none bring deep satisfaction in the way that gradual mastery of consciousness through spiritual practice can.[7]

3. Heelas, P., Woodhead, L., Seel, B., Szerszynski, B., Tusting, K. (2004) *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality (Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World)*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing; Bucko, A., Fox, M. (2013) *Occupy Spirituality: A Radical Vision for a New Generation*. North Atlantic Books; Tacey, D. (2004) *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge.

4. For a list of participants please see the Acknowledgments section.

5. Meyers, T.C. (2014) Understanding Climate Change as an Existential Threat: Confronting Climate Denial as a Challenge to Climate Ethics. *De Ethica* (1)1. [Online] Available at: www.de-ethica.com/archive/articles/v1/i1/a06/de_ethica_14v1i1a06.pdf

6. Loy, D. (2002) *A Buddhist History of the West*. Albany: SUNY. See also See Christopher Lasch in *The Minimal Self* and *In The Culture Of Narcissism*.

7. Leary, M. (2004) *The Curse of the Self: Self-awareness, egotism, and the quality of human life*. Oxford New York: University Press.

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And reflect on the epidemic of loneliness in big cities and you sense that love has lost its way. We are all surrounded by strangers who could so easily be friends, but we appear to lack cultural permission not merely to 'connect' – the opium of cyberspace – but to deeply empathise and care.[8]

These ideas, and more, are contextualised and developed below. This spiritual perspective matters now because the challenge of finding a more substantial and grounded public role for the spiritual arises in the context of a weakening of public institutions, acute ecological crises, and widespread political alienation and democratic stress.

And yet, as things stand, without the forms of tradition and institutional support afforded by religion, it is hard to see how the spiritual could be anything other than a private matter. With only a shallow engagement in the subject, we risk 'branding' the spiritual as something insubstantial and completely distinct from religion rather than something important that stands in critical relation to it. Our collective understanding of spirituality is oblique, nebulous and fissiparous when we need it to be fundamental, robust and centripetal.

It feels implausible to imagine we will return to religion in its current form en masse, so we are in this curious post-secular state where socially and politically we need the emphasis on solidarity, practice and experience previously found in religion to defend the integrity of the public realm, but culturally and intellectually we can't go back if the condition of entry is adhering to beliefs that we don't identify with.[9]

This report therefore seeks to reimagine the spiritual with an argument in four main parts:

1. Spirituality is ambiguously inclusive by its nature and cannot be easily defined, but at heart it is about the fact that we are alive at all, rather than our personality or status; it's about our 'ground' in the world rather than our 'place' in the world. It is possible and valuable to give spirituality improved intellectual grounding and greater cultural and political salience. The primary spiritual injunction is to know what you are as fully and deeply as possible.

2. Some recent developments in neural and cognitive sciences do significantly help to contextualise the nature and value of spiritual perspectives, experiences and practices. We selected six:
   - Our deeply social nature highlights that 'beliefs' are not propositional.[10]
   - Cultural cognition helps explain why the sacred won't go away.
   - Automaticity reveals why the spiritual injunction to 'wake up' matters.
   - Embodiment sheds light on the widespread experience of meaning.

"Look deeply into unfettered capitalism and there seems to be a deluded self, scrambling to make itself real; buying itself into existence, until it finds it is fading again, until we buy some more"

8. Cacioppo, J. and Patrick, W. (2008) *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection.* London: W. W. Norton & Co.

9. I'm grateful to Ian Christie for commenting, to the effect: It is not clear what follows because, en masse, the world already is religious and western intellectuals often forget that the liberal humanist-atheist/agnostic is a newcomer on the global stage, and might not be a long-lasting presence. Moreover, perhaps the condition of entry to religion is not as demanding of 'belief' but rather of openness to faith (ie requiring less certainty).

10. More precisely, 'beliefs' of faith , trust and value are not propositional in the way that scientific 'beliefs' are.

- Our divided brains contextualise the need for perspective and balance.
- Neural plasticity indicates why we need to take spiritual practice seriously.

3. Spirituality struggles to differentiate itself from religion on the one hand, and wellbeing on the other. To become a viable part of public discourse, we need to map out distinctive terrain that goes beyond emotions but doesn't collapse into ethics or aesthetics. Our inquiry led us to four main features of human existence that help with this process, and unpack what it means to say the spiritual is about our 'ground' not our 'place':
   - Love – the promise of belonging
   - Death – the awareness of being
   - Self – the path of becoming
   - Soul – the sense of beyondness

4. We need the spiritual to play a greater role in the public realm, because it highlights the importance of connecting personal and social and political transformation. Spirituality already informs various spheres of public life in subtle ways, for instance, addiction, psychiatry, nursing, education and social and environmental activism.[11] The overarching societal role of spirituality however is to serve as a counterweight to the hegemony of instrumental and utilitarian thinking. At an economic level, that means intelligently critiquing the fetishisation of economic growth and global competition. At a political level, it means that citizens need to be the subjects of social change, not just its objects, with spiritual perspectives playing a key role in shaping and expressing the roots and values of democratic culture. Within organisations of all kinds, the spiritual deepens our vision of intrinsic motivation and gives structure and texture to human development and maturation.

The writer Marilynne Robinson captures the underlying motivation of what follows in the remainder of this report:

"I want to overhear passionate arguments about what we are and what we are doing and what we ought to do…I miss civilisation, and I want it back."[12]

11. Edwards, M. (1999) *Future Positive, international cooperation in the 21st Century*. Routledge.
12. Quoted in London Review of Books, 23 October 2014 p.20. See: www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n20/contents

1. Facing up to widespread spiritual confusion

> "We do not have any clear, common and simple relation to reality and
> to ourselves…that is the big problem of the Western world."
> **Heidegger**[13]

Part one aims to give an overview of what it means to describe our cultural condition as 'post-secular' and clarify where spirituality fits in that context. It unpacks the connections between spirituality and religion on the one hand, and spirituality and wellbeing on the other. This section also argues that spirituality is a phenomenon and term worth fighting for, not in spite but because of some of the awkwardness it gives rise to. Some of the main features of spirituality – meaning, self-transcendence, transformation, the sacred – are presented, and it is argued that the role of the spiritual is to challenge the significance of our 'place' in the world (our identity and personality) and highlight the importance of our 'ground' (being human).

Who needs spirituality?

> "I don't believe in God, but I miss him."
> **Julian Barnes**[14]

Debates about secularisation are fierce and unresolved, and mostly beyond the scope of this report, but it would appear that two things are fairly clear. First, the conventional secularisation narrative about the inexorable dwindling of religion, the universal triumph of reason and the death of God is not happening, and second, it is not at all clear what is happening instead.

Charles Taylor's monumental work *A Secular Age* offers a useful account of three forms of secularisation. The first is about the gradual withdrawal of religion from public institutions. The second is about a decline in religious belief, practice and commitment, with some individuals

13. Heidegger, M. (1963) Martin Heidegger Talks Philosophy with a Buddhist Monk on German Television. [Video file]. Open Culture: Philosophy, Religion section, 9 May 2014. Available at: www.openculture.com/2014/05/martin-heidegger-talks-philosophy-with-a-buddhist-monk.html

14. Barnes, J. (2008) *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*. London: Jonathan Cape.

turning away from God and withdrawing from religious community. The third is not about belief as such, but the shared societal conditions of belief, in which "belief in God is no longer axiomatic". This third form of secularisation is not about people no longer believing in God, but a deeper recognition of what it means to have a religious worldview in the context of so many worldviews, when they are often not the easiest to have or defend publicly.[15] As Taylor puts it: "Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place."[16]

This project speaks directly to this third form of secularisation, these wavering 'conditions of belief' in which society's spiritual diffusion means there is no shared touchstone to illuminate the purpose of our lives. In this respect 'spirituality' is a typically postmodern phenomenon; there is a disorienting sense of fragmentation but also a shared hunger for a larger framework of meaning and excitement that we may be giving birth to something new.[17]

The reason that this larger framework of meaning is slow in emerging is partly because we appear to be transfixed by the first two forms of secularisation and view society as if one was either religious or not religious, with a limited notion of what either option might mean. Survey findings are therefore confounding, full of question-begging or apparently contradictory information, because they don't acknowledge the third form of secularisation, namely that 'the conditions of belief' have radically changed.

For instance, a 2013 opinion poll of 2,036 British adults, *The Spirit of Things Unseen,* conducted by the Christian think-tank Theos, highlighted that 59 percent of people believe in "some kind of spiritual being or essence", but the methodology doesn't allow us to probe for what is meant by this. That would be helpful to know given that even among those identifying as "non-religious", 34 percent believe that a spiritual being or essence exists. Similarly, only 13 percent of people (and 25 percent of the non-religious) agree that "humans are purely material beings with no spiritual element", but the meaning of 'spiritual element' here is question-begging.[18] A related 2012 study, *The Faith of the Faithless*, again by Theos, found "over a third of people who never attend a religious service (35 percent) express a belief in God or a Higher Power", and, nearly a quarter of atheists (23 percent) and nearly half of those who never attend religious services (44 percent) believe in a human soul; but what does it really mean 'to believe in a human soul'?[19]

Such figures are dizzying and confounding, and don't really help us make sense of where we are spiritually as a society. A distinction made by Professor Linda Woodhead helps to explain why. Most existing data emerges from assumptions within 'The Old Sociology of Religion', premised on the idea of gradual but comprehensive and inexorable

15. Taylor, C. (2007) op. cit. p.3.
16. Ibid.
17. Anderson, W.T. (1995) *The Truth about the Truth*. Tarcher.
18. Theos (2013) *The Spirit of Things Unseen: belief in post-religious Britain*. London: Theos. [Online] Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/publications/2013/10/17/the-spirit-of-things-unseen-belief-in-post-religious-britain
19. Spencer, N. and Weldin, H. (2012) *Post-religious Britain?:The faith of the faithless*. London: Theos. [Online] Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/publications/2012/11/28/post-religious-britain-the-faith-of-the-faithless

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secularisation, but 'The New Sociology of Religion' recognises that the process is far less linear. Sociology of religion emerged in the context of social 'differentiation' in which the core elements of modern society were taking shape; religion was separating from education and health and political institutions, such that society had more distinct parts with distinct functions. But we now have to recognise the countervailing force of 'de-differentiation', namely that there is cross-pollination across different sectors of society, and such boundaries are inherently blurred:

> "You need to have a theory of social complexity to try and understand where religion is in a society and what's happening to it. People often imagine that religion is still a completely separate function…this completely unique sphere of society that you deal with – churches and mosques and… that's what religion is and it's absolutely bounded. Well, religion isn't like that. So de-differentiation is where neat boundaries between different social spheres – like education, law, entertainment – get blurred and fuzzy. And, of course, they were a characteristic of the age of the great sociologists; that was the time when societies were differentiating. But now we're seeing the opposite process, and that affects religion as well as other spheres."[20]

To further compound the lack of clarity, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk suggests we can perhaps even go further than recognising societal de-differentiation to argue that there is not really any such thing as 'religion':

> "The return of religion after the 'failure' of the Enlightenment must be confronted with a clearer view of the spiritual facts…A return of religion is as impossible as a return to religion – for the simple reason that no 'religion' or 'religions' exist, only misunderstood spiritual regimens, whether these are practised in collectives, usually church, ordo, umma, sangha – or in customised forms – through interaction with the 'Personal God' with whom citizens of modernity are privately insured. Thus the tiresome distinction between 'true religion' and superstition loses its meaning. There are only regimens that are more or less capable and worthy of propogation. *The false dichotomy of believers and unbelievers becomes obsolete and is replaced by the distinction between the practicing and the untrained, or those who train differently.*" (emphasis ours)[21]

"The false dichotomy of believers and unbelievers becomes obsolete and is replaced by the distinction between the practicing and the untrained, or those who train differently"

Peter Sloterdijk

With "those who train differently" in mind, Woodhead and Heelas used extensive ethnographic research in Kendal as a case study for the broader contention that there has been 'a spiritual revolution', with spirituality based on personal experience and wellbeing replacing church attendance.[22] David Tacey[23] makes a similar claim for 'the spirituality revolution', as do Buck and Kay in *Occupy Spirituality*.[24] While there

20. Woodhead, L. (2014) Linda Woodhead on the New Sociology of Religion. Interview on *Social Science Bites*, 5 November. [Online] Available at: www.socialsciencespace.com/2014/11/linda-woodhead-on-the-new-sociology-of-religion/
21. Sloterdijk, P. (2013) *You Must Change your Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press. p.3
22. Heelas, P, Woodhead, L., Seel, B., Szerszynski, B., Tusting, K. (2004) op. cit.
23. Tacey, D. (2004) op. cit.
24. Bucko, A. and Fox, M. (2013) *Occupy Spirituality: A Radical Vision for a New Generation*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

clearly is a change in our approach to the spiritual, the extent of 'the revolution' is far from clear, mostly because the methodology assumes that it is enough for somebody to call their activity 'spiritual' for it to count as such, which seems to be taking empiricism too far.

Considering all these factors, the main conclusion has to be that we are thoroughly confused about how to make sense of where we are on such matters. Meredith McGuire has even stated quite directly that, as things stand: "We do not yet have the language or conceptual apparatus for refining our understanding of spirituality."[25] In light of the confusion over secularisation, from the outset our project distinguished between spiritual perspectives ('beliefs'), practices and experiences to highlight that whatever the spiritual is, it's not just about what you believe to be true. More generally, it is in the context of such confusion over religion and belief, that it seems timely and valuable to strengthen the language and conceptual apparatus around what we mean by 'spiritual'.

Beyond Belief: Taking Spirituality Seriously

RSA Public Event Series on Spirituality (1 of 6)
16 October 2013

> I prefer to see all of this really as a conversation about: what is our human nature, what are we as human beings – fully responsive to the predicament and uncertainty of our lives
> Madeleine Bunting, panellist at the Beyond Belief event

The RSA project on spirituality launched into the public sphere with its first of six public events: Beyond Belief: Taking Spirituality Seriously. A panel of speakers from diverse spiritual backgrounds offered varying perspectives on how to rethink the nature and value of spirituality for the 21st century.

Introductory statements by Jonathan Rowson revealed the leading question of the project: why is spirituality important and why should we take it seriously? He also began by framing, "Spirituality for me is about our ground and not our place… by our ground I mean the most basic facts of our existence, that we're here at all, that we have this body that somehow breathes, that we exist through and for others, that we're a highly improbable part of a rather mysterious whole,

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25. McGuire, M. (1997) Mapping Contemporary American Spirituality: A Sociological Perspective. *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 5 (1), pp. 1–8.

and of course, that we will one day die." Collectively, he believes, we have somehow lost sight of this ground, captivated instead by economic growth and other superficial indicators of human progress that are "unrecognisable at a personal scale". In this context, spirituality is really about reconnecting and tapping into the universal human importance of this shared ground.

Madeleine Bunting followed Jonathan by recognising the spirituality project as "very important" and "brave", and by redefining the term belief, not as an agreement of a thing's existence, but rather as an expression of commitment, confidence, and trust, similar to the way a mother tells her child, "I believe in you." She also denounced the artificial division between the physical and the spiritual, whereby the spiritual is seen as categorically separate from one's "ordinary" life. For the value of spirituality to manifest, she believes, the spiritual must integrate with and inform the ordinary. In this manner, personal transformation via spiritual practice naturally leads to social transformation. Madeleine lamented, however, that our inability to agree on a common language, and the sense of embarrassment or fear we experience when discussing it, reveals our lack of cultural preparation in spiritual matters. Religious traditions can address this by offering structured methods for sustaining engagement with the spiritual.

Elizabeth Oldfield, director of Theos, lauded the RSA spirituality project as honest and authentic in its acknowledgment of "our frailty, our sadness and our sorrow", a view of human nature that she deems psychologically realistic. This darker side of our nature is referred to in Christianity as sin, which Elizabeth warmly and humorously encapsulates with reference to Francis Spufford's acronym HPTFTU: the Human Propensity to F*** Things Up. Spirituality rightly acknowledges and problematises the dark side of human nature, an aspect that "no amount of wealth, health, or apple products can fix". It does so, she claims, by working to delegitimise the self by moving us beyond our ego and personality. Spiritual practices thus "prevent us from being ultimate," an understanding that may, in turn, result in deep relief. Elizabeth wonders, however, if spirituality can exist without belief in or a relationship with God.

Robert Rowland Smith commenced by drawing curious attention on the previous panellists' different fears in discussing the topic of spirituality publicly. Spirituality means more than being ethically good, he points out, and likewise, being "a good human" brings us no closer to the spiritual. Robert comically and poignantly remarked: "It's not enough to run yourself a bath, put in some aromatherapy oils, light the candles… breathe deeply, think about Gandhi, and poor suffering children in Africa, and how you're going to donate some money in order to be spiritual." In essence, Robert finds that genuine spirituality results in humanity itself being fundamentally reframed or altered. He states: "There has to be a point when the human gives over, and is no longer in play as the human." In this sense, spirituality connects the human to the divine through a requisite dissolution of (at least our conventional sense of) our humanity.

From left to right: Dr Jonathan Rowson, Elizabeth Oldfield, Madeleine Bunting and Robert Rowland Smith at the Beyond Belief: Taking Spirituality Seriously RSA event

www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2013/social-brain-and-spirituality

Summary by Andres Fossas

Spirituality needs definition, but it doesn't need a definition

"Spirituality illuminates facets of culture in ways other concepts cannot supply."
Keiran Flanagan[26]

"What is the purpose of a definition?"
Amartya Sen, speaking at the RSA[27]

Some words are easy to define and operationalise, some are hard to define and operationalise, and some should not be defined or operationalised at all. This project takes a position on spirituality that is somewhere between the latter two options. The point is not that you *cannot* define spirituality, because many have; rather, the question is whether you *should*, which involves deciding whether what is gained – a shared reference point for analytical traction – is greater than what is lost – the inclusively ambiguous, deliberately discomforting and inherently expansive and elusive qualities of the concept.

The late Rabbi Hugo Gyn alluded to this tension when he said: "Spirituality is like a bird: hold it too tightly and it chokes; hold it too loosely and it flies away."[28] Finding the right balance is no mere academic matter, because a compelling language of the spiritual is the frontline of the battle for a richer and deeper public conversation about what we are living for. In our first public event, former *Guardian* associate editor Madeleine Bunting put it like this:

"I don't think this is just a trivial point about semantics, I think the language that we find to discuss these issues is terribly, terribly important. It's probably the most important thing right now, because we have lost contact with this conversation, we don't know how to talk about it, and if we can find a language which really begins to cut through, then the conversation can begin to happen…"[29]

There are always challenges relating to the use of 'we', but this report argues that, despite various reservations, late capitalist democracies like the UK need to fight for the continued use of 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' precisely because the reasons not to use the term appear to be defensive responses guarding against the subversive qualities of the spiritual.

First, some believe 'spiritual' has too much religious baggage. In our first workshop, while alluding to the close associations of spiritual with religion, anthropologist Matthew Engelke remarked: "The word spiritual has a history, and that history has a politics." But we can be mindful of history without being hostage to it, and even arch-atheist Sam Harris sees value in retaining the word:

26. Flanagan, K. (2007) *A Sociology of Spirituality*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing. p.5
27. Sen, A. (2009) T*he many avatars of the Indian creative mind*. Audio available from the British Library's Drama and Literature recording section, email drama@bl.uk or telephone 020 7412 7617.
28. I am grateful to Mark Chater for drawing my attention to this saying.
29. Bunting, M.(2013) speaking at the RSA's event Beyond Belief: Taking Spirituality Seriously, 16 October. [Video file] Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyQILTtDUos

"Many atheists now consider 'spiritual' thoroughly poisoned by its association with medieval superstition (but) we must reclaim good words and put them to good use – and this is what I intend to do with 'spiritual.'…There seems to be no other term (apart from the even more problematic 'mystical' or the more restrictive 'contemplative') with which to discuss the deliberate efforts some people make to overcome their feeling of separateness."

Second, some feel the term 'spirituality' is now thoroughly tainted with new-age associations, and the attendant patterns of individual choice and consumption. Spirituality has been described by Giles Fraser as "religion without the difficult bits for feckless consumers"[30] and by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King more explicitly as "capitalist spirituality" which they argue is "an attempted takeover of the cultural space traditionally inhabited by 'the religions'" by a specific economic agenda…this concept smuggles in social and economic policies geared towards "the neoliberal ideals of privatisation and corporatisation applied increasingly to all spheres of human life".[31]

These associations are an important challenge, but consider the response to an earlier RSA publication on spirituality from *The Guardian's* religious editor Andrew Brown: "I think your argument is important, and manages to a surprising extent to remove spirituality from religion without turning it into another marketing category – surely the subversion of spirituality into a marketing strategy for new age is one of the most depressing features of our world?"[32]

The point is that it's not so much that a marketised spirituality has hijacked religion, but that, while religion was looking the other way, consumerism hijacked spirituality. The term has therefore been somewhat contaminated, but not fatally so, which is why it needs to be reimagined as part of a constructive critique of capitalism, which is what we tried to do throughout the project, as indicated in part four of this report. Indeed, Professor Oliver Davies argues: "As a dynamic form of shared language use, it carves out an enabling space of non-materialistic and anti-materialistic community."

A third challenge is that 'spiritual' is too oblique and nebulous, and insufficiently exacting to be valid as a universal currency for constructive conversation. For instance, sociologist Keiran Flanagan writes: "The trouble with spirituality is that its opacity admits too much but precludes too little"[33] and Buddhist scholar David Loy writes: "That word (spiritual) is not respectable in some circles and too respectable in some others."[34]

But that unevenness of meaning across the population is precisely what you would expect given that our understanding of spirituality is

"It's not so much that a marketised spirituality has hijacked religion, but that, while religion was looking the other way, consumerism hijacked spirituality"

30. Fraser, G. (2005) *God's been mugged. The Guardian*, Television industry section, 6 June. [Online] Available at: www.theguardian.com/media/2005/jun/06/broadcasting.religion.

31. Carrette, J. and King, R. (2012) 'Spirituality and the re-branding of religion'. In: Lynch, G., Mitchell, J. and Strhan, A. (eds.), *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader*. 1st ed. Abingdon: Routlege. pp.72–83.

32. Rowson, J. (2014) Can Spirituality Inform Public Policy? Yes, no, and maybe. *RSA blogs*, 29 September [blog]. Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/spirituality-inform-public-policy/

33. Flanagan, K. (2007) op. cit. p.11.

34. Loy, D. (2000) *Lack and Transcendence*. Humanity Books. p.xvii.

directly related to the manner and intensity in which one engages with it. If you don't like 'spiritual', that might be as much to do with you as with the term, particularly with regard to comfort with uncertainty, because the value of the term is that it gives permission to speak of things that are unknowable.

In this respect, Philip Sheldrake argues that spirituality does not merely offer an enabling space but also a reference point for the broadest possible context: "Rather than being simply one element among others in human existence, 'the spiritual' is best understood as the integrating factor – life as a whole."[35]

The fourth problem is that some actively dislike the vagueness of the word and the tendentious uses of it that can result from vagueness. In response to an earlier RSA blog post about spirituality, one commentor wrote: "I'm starting to really loathe this word 'spiritual'. It is the archetypal Humpty Dumpty word: it means exactly what the writer wants it to mean, neither more nor less."[36]

This issue is mostly a matter of intellectual style, but there is no need to be so uncharitable and unimaginative with respect to vagueness. As Flanagan argues: "As a phenomenon, spirituality is something subjective, experiential, non-rational, unverifiable and serendipitous in its eruptions."[37] These are all qualities that cannot be readily structured and lend themselves better to the quality of *negative capability*: "When a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason."[38]

As an instructive example of the cultural need for negative capability in practice, Chris Harding highlights Japan after Fukushima, in a cultural context which lacked psychiatry and religion as we understand them. The response to the disaster, how to make sense of it, needed a higher order framing, both in terms of who to speak to and how to create meaning out of those discussions. In this respect, Harding argues that in Japan there is a general scepticism towards concepts and "grounded ideas that are too instrumental", but the term spirituality is *appreciated* because it is open and capacious, rather than criticised for being vague.

More generally, in situations that are otherwise politically or culturally sensitive, the inclusive ambiguity of spirituality is a positive advantage. In our workshops it was noted that in mental health and educational contexts the term is useful because it allow people to speak about fundamental matters without the challenges relating to particular religious positions. However, as a counter point, Elizabeth Oldfield was keen to highlight that religion should not be seen as inherently divisive, but could also be seen and experienced as "a secure base from which to explore, not a fence beyond which lies infidels".

The deeper point is that 'spiritual' points to the judicious value of vagueness for our understanding of ourselves more broadly:

35. Sheldrake, P. (2012) *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.5.
36. Jayarava in a comment posted on the following RSA blog: Rowson, J. (2014) 29 September op. cit. [blog] Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/spirituality-inform-public-policy/
37. Flanagan, K. (2007) op. cit. p.2.
38. Keats, J. (1989) *The complete poetical works and letters of John Keats.* London, Houghton Mifflin.

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"There is huge value in vagueness…there is something important about staying in the vague for as long as it takes. There are obviously dangers of vagueness but I think that spirituality may not be as dangerous a topic when it is regarded in a vague way as some others because, after all, spirituality has always been something that deconstructs our lives. Long before postmodernism was invented, the spirit was deconstructing daily reality in culture. Hence it is not a problem for me that I am vague about what I mean, or what anyone means by spirituality."[39]

A fifth problem is that some argue that the concept is somehow too ambitious and aspirational and therefore needlessly contentious. For instance a major proponent of mindfulness meditation in the west, John Kabat Zinn, has been quite careful *not* to present mindfulness as 'spiritual', which he believes creates needless confusion: "My working definition of spiritual is what it means for us to be truly human. And I leave it at that. I mean, who knows?"[40]

Well quite, but some do claim to know, or at least want to pose that fundamental question, and much of the value of 'spiritual' is precisely that it allows us to talk about what it means to be fully human, and therefore say things that may otherwise be difficult to say. The invitation to explore what it means to be fully human is arguably the whole point of the term as indicated by Sheldrake: "Spirituality is a word that, in broad terms, stands for lifestyles and practices that embody a vision of human existence and of how the human spirit is to achieve its full potential. In that sense, 'spirituality' embraces an aspiration approach, whether religious or secular, to the meaning and conduct of human life."[41]

While deeper aspiration is central to the spiritual, the corollary is that 'spiritual' should not be used as a casual honorific or status claim to close down difficult questions. If you think some aspect of your behaviour is 'spiritual', that doesn't automatically set it apart from other activities and you can't just help yourself to the term (spiritual) to justify whatever you like. The spirit of the spiritual should be an invitation to inquiry, not a defensive or evasive manoeuvre.

From considering these five objections to the use of the term – religious baggage, crypto capitalism, unevenness of understanding and appreciation, vagueness, and unhelpful status claim – it becomes clear that not in spite of these objections but *because of them*, there is a strong case for using 'spiritual' and 'spirituality'.

Religious 'baggage' points to the challenge of accessing institutional wisdom without the risk of being subsumed by it. By directly challenging materialism in all its guises, spirituality is as much about challenging consumerism as propping it up. Varying appreciation for the spiritual signifies the cultural challenge to talk about what really matters to us. The vagueness of the term is socially and culturally valuable, giving permission for conversations on fundamental matters. And yes, the spiritual is grounded

"Much of the value of 'spiritual' is precisely that it allows us to talk about what it means to be fully human, and therefore say things that may otherwise be difficult to say"

39. Samuels, A. (2004) A new anatomy of spirituality: clinical and political demands the psychotherapist cannot ignore. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 2(3), 201–211.
40. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013) Is Mindfulness a Spiritual Practice? [Video file]. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZaCnwNjC_k (at circa 2:00).
41. Sheldrake, P. (2012) *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.1.

in conceptions of what it means to be fully human and the ongoing challenge of making sense of what that means.

If the goal is to shape reality as much as to reflect it, it makes no sense to strictly define 'spiritual' because these functions served by the term are mostly weakened by definition. In our final public event, Marina Benjamin made a related point very clearly – that whatever we deem 'the spiritual' to be, it will change as society changes.

With this in mind, I feel we can give definition without giving a definition, and I am grateful to psychiatrist Andrew Powell for highlighting that the spiritual is a signpost, not a sign, which led me to the following encapsulation: "The capacious term 'spirituality' lacks clarity because it is not so much a unitary concept as a signpost for a range of touchstones; our search for meaning, our sense of the sacred, the value of compassion, the experience of transcendence, the hunger for transformation."[42] In all of these dimensions, there is scope for flex and change, and spirituality remains a moving feast.

Why 'Spiritual but not religious' might be a wrong turn

In our first workshop Oliver Robinson gave a remarkably succinct overview of where the idea of 'Spiritual but not religious' came from, based on "a 400 year long wave of ideas" traversing Religious pluralism, Romanticism, Quakerism, Mysticism, The American Transcendental tradition, Evolving interpretations of Science, Counter-cultural movements and the modern tendency of people to identify with the label 'spiritual but not religious' (around a quarter of the populations of Europe and the US). He ends a chapter from a forthcoming book on which his talk is based as follows:

> "Science and spirituality are streams of culture with a common source in the progressive, rebellious ethos of modernity. They are both premised on the values of exploration, questioning, continued innovation, and of never-ending search. For this reason they are both sceptical of religion as a vehicle for truth, and doubtful of holy books from the past as sources of wisdom. From this common starting point they then head off in contrasting directions, while maintaining meaningful points of connection. While science has been the rational head of modernity that has explored the world rigorously and schematically, spirituality has been its pulsating, emotional heart, exploring the mystical, transcendental, intuitive and ineffable."[43]

While the terms 'spirituality' and 'religion' were previously undifferentiated, modern conceptions tend to see them as either polar opposites, or as one (spirituality) being a core function of the other (religion). The observed shift has paralleled an increased public and academic interest in spirituality. The number of citations in the psychological research

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42. We are grateful to Andrew Powell who very helpfully distinguished between spirituality as a sign and as a signpost. This is explained more in the following RSA blog: Rowson, J. (2014) The Spiritual and the Political: Beyond Russell Brand. *RSA blogs*, 26 January [blog]. Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/spirituality-russell-brand/.

43. Robinson, O.C. (in press). *Science and spirituality: A complex harmony*. London: IFF Books.

literature with the word "religion" in the title doubled between 1970 and 2005, while the number of citations with the word "spirituality" in the title experienced a 40-fold increase over the same time period.[44] While we shouldn't ask for too much from a single study, research by Nancy Ammerman in the US indicated that those who self-define as 'spiritual but not religious' are often neither spiritual nor religious in practice because they approach the spiritual outside of an enduring social context.[45]

In this context of proliferating research on spirituality, Zinnbauer and Pargament presented the following emerging polarities between the modern usages of the terms:[46] Substantive religion vs. functional spirituality; Static religion vs. dynamic spirituality; Institutional objective religion vs. personal subjective spirituality; Belief-based religion vs. emotional/experiential-based spirituality; Negative religion vs. positive spirituality.

These juxtapositions are useful because they corroborate the felt sense that 'spirituality' is somehow fresh and desirable, with religion moribund and unfashionable, but on closer inspection this seems a shallow analysis. Indeed, Elizabeth Oldfield remarked in our first workshop that there is a danger of spirituality and religion defining one another mutually, such that the more that 'spirituality' starts to look open, inquiring and inclusive the more religion starts to be increasingly dismissed as narrow, sectarian, reactionary, patriarchal; although in recent years prominent thinkers like Terry Eagleton and John Gray have resisted this tendency.[47]

While there has been a growing normalisation of the idea that a person can be 'spiritual but not religious', this designation may actually compound the problem of intellectual embarrassment surrounding the spiritual. What it typically means is, 'I don't wish to identify with an ancient and compromised institution'; or maybe 'I don't want to have any rules set for me by joining in with an institution', ie the rationale shares features in common with not wanting to join political parties or other forms of associations where the binding quality lies in a shared commitment to *something*.

Whatever the theoretical construct underpinning 'spiritual', people self-describing in this category get attacked from both sides; from atheists for their perceived irrationality and wishful thinking, and from organised religion for their rootless self-indulgence and lack of commitment; and meanwhile we overlook the myriad shades of identification and longing within and outside this category, to our loss.

We struggle to speak of the spiritual with coherence mostly because it has been subsumed by historical and cultural contingency, and is now smothered in an uncomfortable space between religion and the rejection of religion, but nonetheless it seems foolish to think of religion as the

"While there has been a growing normalisation of the idea that a person can be 'spiritual but not religious', this designation may actually compound the problem of intellectual embarrassment"

44. Oman, D. (2013) Defining Religion and Spirituality. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (eds.) *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, (2nd ed.). pp. 23–47. New York: Guilford.

45. Brown, M. (2013) Religious vs. spiritual: Study says the truly 'spiritual but not religious' are hard to find. *Deseret News*. [Online] Available at: www.deseretnews.com/article/865584720/Religious-vs-spiritual-Study-says-the-truly-spiritual-but-not-religious-are-hard-to-find.html

46. Zinnbauer, B. & Pargament, A. (2005) *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*, Chapter 2: Religiousness and Spirituality, Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (eds.). New York: Guilford Press.

47. See for instance, Eagleton, T. (2014) *Culture and the Death of God*, Yale University Press, or Gray, J. (2014) A Point of View: the child-like faith in reason. *BBC News Magazine*, 18 July [Online] Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28341562 (retrieved 16 December 2014).

dispensable 'bathwater' holding the precious 'spiritual baby'. A fuller view highlights the human need for institutional support and guidance, shared myths, rituals and practices, historical perspectives and cultural influence – these are not unimportant things.

It seems fair to argue that religions are the particular cultural, doctrinal and institutional expressions of human spiritual needs, which are universal. Doing so gives us cause to rethink our idea of 'belief' and what it means to be religious rather than reject religion wholesale. In this respect, is it not the sign of a spiritually degenerate society that many feel obliged to define their fundamental outlook on the world in such relativist and defensive terms as 'spiritual but not religious'? Compare the designations: 'educated, but not due to schooling' or 'healthy, but not because of medicine'.

A strong counter-argument is that if the complex relationship with religion is part of the reason 'spirituality' struggles to be clearly defined, and also why some are wary of spirituality more generally, there is a case for trying to pin down spirituality analytically and differentiating it from religion clearly and comprehensively. Many have attempted to build such juxtapositions with religion, suggesting that spirituality is part of a broader 'subjective turn' in the social sciences, in which individualism becomes the norm, and engagement with spiritual matters is de-institutionalised, stripped of doctrine, ritual and communal practice.[48]

Author Sam Harris attempts to do this in his recent impressive account of spirituality for atheists, but his focus is almost exclusively on individual spiritual experience and mindfulness-based-practices as a path towards them. While the expansion of consciousness and self-transcendence are key aspects of spirituality, they are only part of the picture.[49]

Philosopher David Rousseau's framework of modern-day spirituality is a more thorough and comprehensive attempt.[50] He frames spirituality as a highly complex phenomenon made up of thirteen individual parts and suggests that confusion arises because people tend to refer to each of these highly different parts with the same name: "spirituality", without acknowledging the distinctions between the parts, including spiritual experiences, spiritual behaviour, and spiritual growth. Doing so illuminates a key difference between spirituality and religion, namely that specific doctrines are constitutive of religion but are not constitutive of spirituality, but that begs many questions about how exactly doctrine functions within religion, and whether we can really live without proxy doctrines in secular form.

Good theories can be highly practical, and Rousseau's map of spirituality is one of the best such maps available, but in the case of spirituality there seems to be a fundamental problem with this kind of approach. No matter how well a theory of spirituality coheres theoretically nobody can definitively control what spirituality is, or should be. Words and concepts live, breathe and change as they come into contact with the world and all the more so with spirituality which is a fundamentally reflexive notion. We need an evolving first-person experience or engagement with the

48. Flanagan, K. (2007) op. cit.
49. Harris, S. (2014) *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*. Simon & Schuster.
50. Rousseau, D. (2014) A Systems Model of Spirituality. Zygon: *Journal of Religion & Science*, 49(2), 476–508.

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spiritual for a personal understanding to emerge, which may again change as one comes into contact with alternate views and practices in other people.[51]

Spiritual is more about meaning than 'happiness'

"For a civilisation so fixated on achieving happiness, we seem to be remarkably incompetent at the task."
Oliver Burkeman[52]

Perhaps the main substantive learning point from the Student Design Award competition was that despite a detailed brief on what spiritual might mean, in their design products and rationales the students aged 20–26 did not seem to differentiate between spirituality and wellbeing. It is not clear whether this was a failure of the brief, or a broader lack of awareness about what the spiritual might refer to other than feeling good.

This conflation contrasts sharply with the (older) participants of the workshops and speakers at the public events, most of whom were very keen to emphasise that the role of spiritual perspectives, practices and experiences is not, as such, to make people happy. Indeed, in our workshops we had many examples to illustrate this point.

Professor Oliver Davies described the commitment and sacrifice of taking two years off his work to support his adopted son who was going off the rails as the most spiritual period of his life. He said it was much more intensely spiritual than other experiences relating to 'bliss', or thrill seeking at other stages of life.

Such commitments can be deeply meaningful and therefore rewarding, but they are not about being 'happy'. This point chimes with research by Baumeister and his team of researchers who asked 400 Americans between the ages of 18 and 78 whether they felt that their lives were meaningful and/or happy; there was a big difference between the two. "Clearly happiness is not all that people seek," the study reads, "and indeed the meaningful but unhappy life is in some ways more admirable than the happy but meaningless one." Baumeister suggested this might be because happiness is often about being a "taker" while meaningfulness in life corresponds with being a "giver".[53]

Jules Evans complemented this perspective on meaning with his own vivid account of his social anxiety crisis, but argued that as his research work in this area progresses he is drawn less to the importance of discrete experiences and more to the longer-term changes in how we see and relate to the world, of which those experiences are a part: "Thinkers like

"Clearly happiness is not all that people seek"

Roy Baumeister

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51. The only available evidence of people identifying as "spiritual but not religious" in the UK was based on a sample of 7,403 respondents aged 16-97. The SBNR group had worse mental health than the religious group and the "neither religious nor spiritual". This finding is robust, but the broader implications are questionable, due to the contested definitions of mental health and spirituality used. King, M., Marston, L., McManus, S., Brugha, T., Meltzer, H. & Bebbington, P. (2013). Religion, spirituality and mental health: results from a national study of English households. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 202(1), 68–73.

52. The full brief 'Speaking of the Spiritual' for the Student Design Awards competition is available online here: www.thersa.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/706767/RSASDA2012-13_SpeakingOftheSpiritual.pdf

53. Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Muraven, M. & Tice, D. M. (1998). Ego depletion: is the active self a limited resource? *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 74(5), 1252.

Thomas Keating suggest that there really is no substitute for crisis and humiliation in fuelling our capacity for discernment and practice – he says that he has got to the point where he prays for humiliation as a form of grace."[54]

Madeleine Bunting refers to the 'aspiration error' that arises from the danger of conflating or confusing the aims of spirituality with those of psychological wellbeing. While we may rightly wish to be happy, the spiritual helps to make sense of why pursuing happiness directly is often self-defeating; it is often fundamentally ungrounded in reality. While happiness is fine as far it goes, and it is true that you are likely to feel better, for instance, by following nef's 'five a day for your mind', human suffering has deep roots in our inherent vulnerability to life's contingent circumstances that we arguably don't face up to as much as we perhaps should.

Mark Vernon deepened this point as follows: "Spiritual commitments in a theological setting are ultimately about a commitment to what might be called Being Itself. The religiously-inclined probably have a sense of the contingency of life, the universe and everything that implies the need for an underpinning of existence – that which is not contingency but necessary, namely God. That is all rather scholastically expressed: perhaps the more human way of putting it is that spiritual commitments offer a way to find consolation and meaning in a world of impermanence and suffering."

Professor Chris Cook has researched the role of the spiritual in various forms of recovery. In his clinical experience of people raped or abused, he finds that they are often healed most effectively by particular forms of human encounter: "Moments of disclosure of this kind of trauma were in some indefinable way 'spiritual' – that is, although not explicitly labelled spiritual/religious – they nonetheless have a 'spiritual' quality about them." Relatedly, Professor Margaret Holloway spoke of "wounded healers" in the context of social work – that those who had been through suffering were often the most effective at allaying suffering in others. In this respect, the sense of the experience of meaning arises from "knowing you are needed". From her research, the following develops this point:

"Very simply, it is out of shared weakness and vulnerability that the healer reaches out to heal. The model teaches us to value rather than avoid our own pain, perhaps from a similar personal experience, as the key element which enables the healer to connect and communicate with the dying or bereaved person."[55]

While the idea that the spiritual is not so much a path to greater happiness but a way to find meaning in and through suffering sounds Buddhist, there is also a related Christian perspective. In his outstandingly written book, *Unapologetic* Francis Spufford argues that the best modern interpretation of the word 'sin' is "the human propensity to f**k things up", by which he means not merely that things go wrong, but that we actively destroy things that are of value in our lives. He argues that this 'HPtFtU' is fundamental to the human condition, and that acknowledging it does not lead to gloom, but on the contrary to a kind of liberation:

54. Fr Thomas Keating, American Trappist monk and spiritual writer.
55. Holloway, M. (2007) *Negotiating Death in Contemporary Health and Social Care.* Bristol: Policy Press. p.178.

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"I've found that admitting there is some black in the colour chart of my psyche doesn't invite the block of dark ink to swell, or give a partial truth more power over me than it should have, but the opposite. Admitting there's some black in the mixture makes it matter less. It makes it easier to pay attention to the mixedness of the rest. It helps you stop wasting your time on denial, and therefore helps you stop ricocheting between unrealistic self-praise and unrealistic self-blame. It helps you to be kind to yourself."[56]

Mindfulness teacher and author Dr Danny Penman suggests that this kind of self-acceptance is a pre-condition of growth, which is also a fundamental aspect of humanistic psychology, captured in the classic saying of Carl Rogers: "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

RSA Student Design Awards: "Speaking of the Spiritual"[57]

Brief: "Design a service, product, environment, or communications campaign that addressess spiritual needs in contemporary contexts."

Entrants: A total of 49 teams entered the competition, with an average of three students (aged 20–25) per team. Among the universities represented were Kingston University, Buckinghamshire New University, Plymouth University, Norwich University of the Arts, and the Architectural Association in London.

Judges: Dr. Jonathan Rowson, RSA; Melanie Andrews, RSA; Michael Anastassiades, industrial designer; Dinah Casson, environmental and exhibition designer; Rose Sinclair, Programme Leader, Department of Design, Goldsmiths University of London.

Co-winners: Robert Watts, Plymouth University and Alexander Hampl and David Sindlinger, Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University.

Analysis: While the brief was about using design to help reconceive the spiritual in the modern age, most submissions suggested the students did not significantly differentiate between spirituality and wellbeing. Some of these submissions were still very strong, including the co-winner Robert Watts' walking guides of Plymouth, but the general impression was of a range of good designs that didn't really speak of the spiritual.

56. Spufford, F. (2013) *Unapologetic: Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense*. London: Faber & Faber.
57. The full brief for this competition is available online here: www.thersa.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/706767/RSASDA2012-13_SpeakingOftheSpiritual.pdf

A notable exception were the co-winners Alexander Hampl and David Sindlinger, whose modern representations and reimaginings of famous works of art, including Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and Michelangelo's *David* (both shown), proposed to redirect public attention from the material to the spiritual via public displays of such pieces. Their modern representation of Michelangelo's *David*, for instance, was intended to spark curiosity and inquiry from passing pedestrians who might initially believe the image to be an advert for the latest fashion or seductive cologne; upon closer examination however, the piece is found to represent the qualities and attributes of the original sculpture, that, in some cases, lie in stark contrast to modern day consumerist values. Similarly with a group huddle in what looks like a creative industry photo shoot, but is in fact a representation of Jesus' last supper.

Summary by Andres Fossas

The heart of the spiritual – it's about our 'ground' not our 'place'

"A talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change."
Richard Rorty[58]

As argued above, spirituality means many different things to many different people, but to illustrate some of its common ground, it is helpful to look at it through the issue that apparently is most divisive – beliefs – on which there are broadly three spiritual perspectives.[59]

58. Rorty, R. (1989) *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.7.
59. In our second workshop Professor Oliver Davies argued that social cognition suggests language is physical, functioning below culture, and this function is fundamentally bonding. In this sense, we need terms like spiritual to capture our shared predicament, and spirituality is 'radically inclusive'. However, because religions deeply understand that point, those in power have sometimes sought to determine what is to be included within 'the spiritual' as a form of divide and rule.

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First, in religious spirituality, religions are the cultural and institutional expression of the spiritual. Second, although it is a problematic category, as argued above, the 'spiritual but not religious' perspective captures the large and heterogeneous group that does not have settled shared beliefs, nor culturally recognised institutional forms.

Thirdly, and significantly for homing in on the most aspects of the spiritual, there is an emerging 'secular spirituality' which is typically atheistic or humanistic but does not disavow the idea that some forms of experience, ritual or practice may be deeper or more meaningful than others; a perspective that still finds value in the term 'spiritual' as a way to encapsulate that understanding. Consider, for instance, humanist celebrants giving dignity to marriages and funerals, or the completely open nature of the 'higher power' that participants in alcoholics anonymous are asked to place their faith in,[60] or ecstatic dancing, sublime art, the charms of nature, the birth of a child, or even the sexual union that led to it. For all the problems with the word spiritual, there are forms of life where we seem to need it to point towards an appreciation that would otherwise be ineffable.

Do these three perspectives on spirituality share touchstones of any kind? It seems to me that they do, but clearly it's not God, or particular places or stories, practices, or even ethics. What they seem to share, whether the issue in question is the sacred, or transcendence or meaning, is the importance of our 'ground', rather than our 'place'. This distinction stems from Buddhism, but it can also be inferred in existential and phenomenological thought, particularly Tillich's notion that God is Being-itself and therefore our ultimate, not merely partial or proximate concern, ie the concern upon which all our other concerns converge. And the distinction is evident in Heidegger's emphasis on being as such, rather than beings, of the philosophical primacy of the lived experience of being human, or as he puts it, "being-there".[61]

By our ground I mean the most basic facts of our existence: that we are here at all, that we exist in and through this body that somehow breathes, that we build selves through and for others, that we're a highly improbable part of an unfathomable whole, and of course, that we will inevitably die. Another way to characterise the relevance of our ground comes from the psychotherapist Mark Epstein who refers to the spiritual as "anything that takes us beyond the personality".

As anybody who has faced a life threatening illness will know, reflecting on our ground heightens the importance of not postponing our lives, of using the time we have for what really matters to us. And yet, research on the main regrets of the dying indicates the sad fact that we rarely actually do this – most of us do in fact postpone our lives.

And why? Because the world perpetuates our attachment to our place, by which I mean our constructed identities, our fragile reputations, our insatiable desires. We get lost in our identification with our place, and all the cultural signifiers of status that come with it: our dwellings, our salaries, our clothes, our Twitter followers. As T.S. Eliot put it:

"…humanist celebrants giving dignity to marriages and funerals, the completely open nature of the 'higher power' that participants in alcoholics anonymous place their faith in, or ecstatic dancing, sublime art, the charms of nature, the birth of a child, or even the sexual union that led to it…"

60. I am grateful to Chris Cook for this point.
61. Tillich, P. (1952) *The Courage to Be*. Yale University Press; Heiddeger, M. (1978) *Being and Time*. Wiley-Blackwell.

"We are distracted from distraction by distraction, filled with fancies and empty of meaning."[62]

And this shouldn't surprise us. In 21st century Britain the average urban adult is exposed to around 300 adverts a day, and we find ourselves caught up in what economist Tim Jackson calls "the social logic of consumption".[63] There is no simple causality in such matters, but while our attachment to our place fuels consumption, our experience of our ground may provide immunity to the idea that we need to consume to validate ourselves.

Our failure to come back to the basic conditions of our existence may also be closely connected to the gradual and relentless shift in the public being described as consumers rather than citizens, a shift meticulously documented by the Public Interest Research Centre in national broadsheet references.[64] Consumption predates capitalism, and is part of being human, but consumerism is less benign, a vision of human life that takes us away from our existential ground and threatens our ecological ground in the process.

The Buddha put it like this:

"People love their place: they delight and revel in their place. It is hard for people who love, delight and revel in their place to see this ground: this conditionality, conditioned arising."

Secular Buddhist writer Stephen Batchelor comments as follows:

"People are blinded to the fundamental contingency of their existence by attachment to their place. One's place is that to which one is most strongly bound. It is the foundation on which the entire edifice of one's identity is built. It is formed through identification with a physical location and social position, by one's religious and political beliefs, through that instinctive conviction of being a solitary ego. One's place is where one stands, and whence one takes a stand against everything that seems to challenge what is 'mine'. This stance is your posture vis-à-vis the world: it encompasses everything that lies on the side of the line that separates 'you' from 'me'. Delight in it creates a sense of being fixed and secure in the midst of an existence that is anything but fixed and secure. Loss of it, one fears, would mean that everything one cherishes would be overwhelmed by chaos, meaningless, or madness…"[65]

Much of modern life perpetuates this sense that your place is all you have, and not just in a consumerist way. For example respected sociologist Anthony Giddens refers to the need for "ontological security" in terms of having a job and a place to live,[66] but from a spiritual perspective that

62. Eliot, T.S. (1943) *Four Quartets*. Harcourt.
63. Jackson, T. (2011) *Prosperity without Growth*. Routledge.
64. Shurbsole, G. (2012) Consumers outstrip Citizens in the British media. *openDemocracy*, 5 March [Online] Available at: www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/guy-shrubsole/consumers-outstrip-citizens-in-british-media
65. Batchelor, S. (2010) *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*. New York: Spiegel and Grau. pp.127–129.
66. Giddens, A. (1998) *The Third Way*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

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is still 'place', not ground. What is radical about spiritual teaching is its insistence to look deeper at the conditions not of existence as such. Batchelor explains as follows:

> "Gotama's quest led him to abandon everything to do with his place – his king, his homeland, his social standing, his position in the family, his beliefs, his conviction of being a self in charge of a body and mind – but it did not result in psychotic collapse. For in relinquishing his place (alaya), he arrived at a ground (tthana). But this ground is quite unlike the seemingly solid ground of place. It is the contingent, transient, ambiguous, unpredictable, fascinating, and terrifying ground called 'life'. Life is groundless ground: no sooner does it appear, than it disappears, only to renew itself, then immediately break up and vanquish again."

Taking the spiritual seriously in this way means "an existential readjustment, a seismic shift in the core of oneself and one's relation to others and the world". This is not spirituality as comfort, the 'candles in the bath' we joked about in our first public event, but rather a completely different way of living:

> "The groundless ground is not the absence of support. It supports you in a different way. Whereas a place can tie you down and close you off, this ground lets you go and opens you up. It does not stand still for a moment. To be supported by it, you have to be with it in a different way. Instead of standing firmly on your feet and holding tight with both hands in order to feel secure in your place, here you have to dart across its liquid, shimmering surface like a long-legged fly, swim with its current like a fast-moving fish. Gotama compared the experience to 'entering a stream'."[67]

The take home message from the ground/place distinction is not to give up material life, but to understand more deeply what the spiritual/ material juxtaposition is really about and why what emerges is radically inclusive. Much of our lives are about patterns of identity formation and social reputation in the material world, but there is also a neglected aspect about the contingency of being here at all that the spiritual speaks to, regardless of religious belief.

In Batchelor's account of Buddhism this contingency is expressed in a particular way, above, but similar ideas are implicit in most world religions, in many who identify as 'spiritual but not religious' and in the nascent forms of atheistic spirituality. In each case the spiritual injunction is to look at, know, and feel your existential 'ground' – to know what it is not to be a particular person at a particular place in time, but to be human as such.

It would be unfortunate, however, if people were to feel that all that spirituality is, is captured by this ground/place distinction. As with Andrew Powell's distinction between signpost and sign above,

"This is not spirituality as comfort, the 'candles in the bath' we joked about in our first public event, but rather a completely different way of living"

67. Batchelor, S. (2010) *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*. New York: Spiegel and Grau. p.128.

the reference to your 'ground' is, to use an old Zen distinction 'the finger pointing to the moon', not 'the moon' as such. Knowing the spiritual is about 'being here' is important, but exploring our ground opens up the diverse aspects of the spiritual; the beliefs, the sacred, the awakening, the experiences, the perspectives and the practices, all of which can be inferred and appreciated from a deeper and fuller understanding of human nature, which we turn to now.

2. In search of our spiritual 'ground' – what are we?

> "…The prevalent sensation of oneself as a separate ego enclosed in a bag of skin is a hallucination which accords neither with Western science nor with the experimental philosophy-religions of the East…"
> **Alan Watts**[68]

This second part of the report is about the connection between our understanding of human nature, and our appreciation of the spiritual. From our literature review we distilled six main relationships that we felt were worth unpacking in some depth; between the social brain and the nature of belief, cultural cognition and the sacred, automatic behaviour and the need to 'wake up', embodied cognition and the experience of meaning, hemispheric lateralisation and the need for balance, and neuroplasticity and the role of spiritual practice. The emerging scientific vision of what we are and how we behave arises from a range of disciplines and should not be seen as an axiom for the validity of the spiritual, but more like supporting context for the idea that the spiritual is fundamental to human experience, rather than deviant, niche or outdated. The emerging early 21st century view of our 'ground' indicates we are fundamentally embodied, constituted by evolutionary biology, embedded in complex online and offline networks, largely habitual creatures, highly sensitive to social and cultural norms, riddled with cognitive quirks and biases, and much more rationalising than rational.

Such a shift in perspective is important because every culturally sanctioned form of knowledge contains an implicit injunction. The injunction of science is to do the experiment and analyse the data. The injunction of history is to critically engage with primary and secondary sources of evidence. The injunction of philosophy is to question assumptions, make distinctions and be logical. If spirituality is to be recognised as something with ontological weight and social standing, it also needs an injunction that is culturally recognised, as it was for centuries in the Christian west and still is in many societies worldwide.

The spiritual injunction is principally an experiential one, namely to know what we are as fully as possible. Such self-knowledge is a deeply

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68. Watts, A. (1966) *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*. London: Sphere Books Ltd. (in the preface).

reflexive matter. The point is not to casually introspect, but rather to strive to connect our advanced third-person understanding of human nature with a growing skill in observing how one's first-person nature manifests in practice, and to test the validity and relevance of this experience and understanding in second-person contexts. In this sense, spirituality is about I, we and it, and this process of trying to know oneself more fully, both in understanding and experience, is therefore no mere prelude to meaningful social change, but the thing itself.

The point of reconsidering spirituality through such lenses is not to explain away spiritual content. We do not want to collapse our deliciously difficult existential and ethical issues into psychological and sociological concepts. The point is rather to explore the provenance of those questions and experiences with fresh intellectual resources.

The social brain: why 'beliefs' are not what we typically assume

"I'm not only agnostic about the answer, I'm agnostic about the question."
Jonathan Safran Foer responding to: "what do you believe?" on Radio 4[69]

Immanuel Kant said that the impact of liberal enlightenment on our spiritual life was such that if somebody were to walk in on you while you were on your knees praying, you would be profoundly embarrassed. As indicated above, that imagined experience of embarrassment is still widely felt, and this unease with the spiritual has partly arisen out of secularised Christian epistemological and moral frameworks which were taken up with the enlightenment, particularly the dichotomies between mind and body; reason and desire; and culture and nature; all of which were value-laden and implicated in the political projects of the enlightenment.[70]

Those divisions are relevant to what Andrew Marr suggests may be the position of many if not most people in modern European societies who live in "a tepid confusing middle ground between strong belief and strong disbelief".[71] We may experience something resembling 'belief' in our bodies, without being able to make sense of it rationally in our minds, or articulate it clearly in public discourse, and we lack any external reference point to arbitrate on any resulting confusion.

One major challenge in making the spiritual more tangible and tractable is, therefore, to enrich our currently impoverished idea of what it means to believe. To believe something is often assumed to mean endorsing a statement of fact about how things are, but that is both outdated and unhelpful. Consider the story of two rabbis debating the existence of God through a long night and jointly reaching the conclusion that he or she did not exist. The next morning, one observed the other deep in prayer and took him to task. "What are you doing? Last night we established that God does not exist." To which the other rabbi replied, "What's that got to do with it?"

69. Andrew Marr (2012) Faith and Doubt: Richard Holloway, Karen Armstrong, Jonathan Safran Foer and Helen Edmundson. BBC Radio 4 *Start the Week*, 27 February [Audio file] Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01cjm4c
70. I'm grateful to Ruth Sheldon for this perspective.
71. Marr, A. (2012) op. cit. [Audio file] Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01cjm4c

The praying non-believer illustrates that belief may be much closer to what the sociologist of religion William Morgan described as "a shared imaginary, a communal set of practices that structure life in powerfully aesthetic terms". Within the same discipline Gordon Lynch suggests this point needs deepening: "The unquestioned status of propositional models of belief within the sociology of religion arguably reflects a lack of theoretical discussion… about the nature of the person as a social agent."[72]

In this respect, it is notable that David Hay, in his report on the state of spirituality in adults in Britain in 2002, described the key feature of spiritual understanding as 'relational consciousness', of which he says this:

> "'Relational consciousness' caught us by surprise, because we had some notion of spirituality as a solitary affair, something very private…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."[73]

To put the point bluntly, the idea of the individual is not as true to human experience as the idea of individual in relation. This idea of fundamental intersubjectivity goes back to Hegel, but was expressed also by John Macmurray, a Scots philosopher who Tony Blair cited as a major intellectual influence: "The unit of personal existence is not the individual, but two persons in personal relation…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'."[74]

In the RSA's Social Brain Centre's November 2011 publication *Transforming Behavior Change*, we examine this issue in detail (pp.10–13) with a full range of references; the case for 'the nature of a person as a social agent' stems from research in a broad range of disciplines in social and natural sciences, and is summarised in that report as follows:

> "…From archaeology and anthropology we learn that the relatively large human brain size is a function of the complexity of our social networks, and the role of alloparenting in fostering trust. From social neuroscience, we learn that our nervous systems do not end at our skins but are in constant communication and interchange with other nervous systems. From molecular neuroscience, we learn that humans have a relatively large number of spindle neurons that appear to be important in rapidly resolving social ambiguity. From studies with monkeys we learn of mirror neurons as the neural basis of imitation and empathy, and infer their existence in humans based on corroborating evidence from social psychology. From neuropsychology we learn that consciousness appears to be purpose-built

"David Hay, in his report on the state of spirituality in adults in Britain in 2002, described the key feature of spiritual understanding as 'relational consciousness'"

72. Lynch, G. (2012) *The sacred in the modern world: A cultural sociological approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
73. Hay, D. (2002) The Spirituality of Adults in Britain – Recent Research. *Scottish Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy*, 5(1) [Online] Available at: www.sach.org.uk/journal/0501p04_hay.pdf
74. Macmurray, J. (1961) *Persons in Relation*. London: Faber & Faber.

not for motor control, but for facilitating social interaction by simulating events, processing sentences and sequences, and thereby facilitating social interaction. This knowledge, taken together, contextualises what it means to say that our brains are functionally social."

As a neat way to encapsulate that body of research, one of the world's leading social neuroscientists John Cacioppo uses the following metaphor:

"The telereceptors of the human brain have provided wireless broadband interconnectivity to humans for millennia. Just as computers have capacities and processes that are transduced through but extend beyond the hardware of a single computer, the human brain has evolved to promote social and cultural capacities and processes that extend far beyond a solitary brain. To understand the full capacity of humans, one needs to appreciate not only the memory and computational power of the brain but its capacity for representing, understanding, and connecting with other individuals. That is, one needs to recognise that we have evolved a powerful, meaning-making social brain."[75]

In the context of such evidence for the inherently social nature of cognition, alongside relatively ill-tempered debates between new atheists and religious 'believers', it is clearly timely to challenge the folk psychology which leads to such debates apparently offering more heat than light. Belief about the ultimate nature, meaning and purpose of the world is clearly not about an autonomous individual striving to consciously construct their own guide to how they should act in the world. However, such a simplistic view is to spiritual matters what homo-economicus is to public policy; although we know it can't quite be right, we struggle to shake it off.

We continue to talk of belief as if it were a mental representation of the outcome of a deliberation about the nature of reality. But that's not what beliefs feel like, nor is it how they emerge. Belief formation is only partly as an individual making inferences and judgments on the basis of reason. The larger, but currently neglected part of belief formation relates to identity, belonging and shared rituals and practices that we are barely conscious of. As Madeleine Bunting put it in the first public event, we cannot get 'beyond belief' in that richer sense. Belief is not so much the distilled outcome of deliberations to which we consciously assent from an unproblematic vantage point; it is more like the living questioning of the vantage point itself.[76]

A rationalist humanist response to this contention might be to acknowledge that reason emerges through such social influences, but

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75. Cacioppo, J. & Patrick, W. (2008) *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection.* London: W.W. Norton and Company. See also Cacioppo, J. (2009) *Connected Minds: Loneliness, Social Brains and the need for community.* RSA Events, 8 September. [Video file] Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=iu6RM_Ib3oA

76. In our third workshop, there was a wider discussion about the role of beliefs in connection to spirituality, with Gay Watson remarking that Buddhists believe that 'beliefs', as such, tend to screw you up, while Jules countered that Plato had a view of beliefs that was very different – 'theoria'– which is more about a personal journey.

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to defend the primacy of reason as something that can be refined and developed, allowing it to cut through or transcend them. The idea of individual belief formation is not necessarily naïve, but rather, aspirational. Perhaps sustained inquiry can create levels of individual autonomy that go beyond the social rather than merely ignoring it.

In this respect, anthropologist and humanist Matthew Engelke remarked in our first workshop that humanists are often self-consciously contrarian. They are animated by ethical concerns but part of their love of reason is that many don't want to be 'like-minded' and often want to disagree. He referred to "the militant subject", a concept premised on the idea that commitment to a cause can sometimes eclipse commitments to one's community. In this sense, a humanist may still want to challenge beliefs as things that, in principle, are amenable to rational inquiry, or as Engelke put it: "The humanist focus tends to be on realisation rather than conversion ie 'You are always a humanist. You just don't know it.'"

Philosopher John Gray might counter that the faith in reason underpinning this idea of realisation is not so different from religious faith, indeed, it might be more far-fetched: "Religious faith is based on accepting that we know very little of God. But we know a great deal about human beings, and one of the things we know for sure is that we're not rational animals. Believing in the power of human reason requires a greater leap of faith than believing in God."[77]

Nonetheless, a deep recognition of the myriad of social influences on both belief and reason should at least encourage a deeper public discussion on whether our existing terms 'believer', 'non-believer', or atheist, agnostic, theist are serving us well. In a recent email exchange with Theos advisor Ian Christie, he illustrates the importance of this point. Many who might like to go to church feel that they can't because they have a skewed perception of belief:

> "One problem the churches have is the perception among many people that you can join only once you believe; in reality, it is joining and being in congregation that leads to belief. And many people also feel that 'belief' requires a) certainty and b) accepting six impossible things before breakfast. But belief is about trust and hope, not certainty; and the impossible things are not equivalent to scientific hypotheses or even statements about the facts of the world – they are metaphors intended to give us a faint hope of grasping some aspect of what we cannot (in our present form) ever fully understand or articulate."[78]

Viewing 'belief' as an emergent property of social interaction and institutions doesn't mean we should all become religious, but it does open the possibility of religious institutions reforming in ways where 'belief' is less of a barrier to entry, and more like an optional emergent property of participation. Dave Tomlinson's approach, outlined in *How to be a Bad Christian* is an example of this inclusive approach.[79] It will also be

"Viewing 'belief' as an emergent property of social interaction and institutions doesn't mean we should all become religious, but it does open the possibility of religious institutions reforming in ways where 'belief' is less of a barrier to entry, and more like an optional emergent property of participation"

77. Gray, J. (2014) [Online] op. cit.
78. Personal communication between Ian Christie and Johnathan Rowson.
79. Tomlinson, D. (2012) *How to be a Bad Christian and a Better Human Being.* Hodder and Stoughton.

interesting to observe the evolution of the Sunday Assembly movement, which purports to be free of 'beliefs', because if the foregoing argument is right, 'beliefs' will soon start to emerge in the process of building and managing a global movement.

Cultural psychology: why the sacred won't go away

> "The persistence of the sacred is not a symptom of a persistent cultural backwardness that rational Enlightenment can cure, but an inherent structure of morally boundaried societies."
> **Gordon Lynch**[80]

> "The human mind is a story processor, not a logic processor."
> **Jonathan Haidt**[81]

'Social' and 'cultural' are so closely related that that they are often conflated. This conflation is understandable and not always problematic, but it can be useful to distinguish them in the context of the spiritual, because they engender different aspects of the human 'ground'.

The 'social' refers principally to relationships; we evolve through physiological inter-dependence and the psychological need to attach and reciprocate support. Culture is about the ideas that emerge to make sense of that fundamentally social existence. The 'society' that emerges from the social is not a given, but constantly created and recreated through expressive tools that humans have become well adapted to, including language, music and art, and all the stories they seek to tell.

Such narratives are rarely transparent or propositional, and need to be interpreted and debated hermeneutically, as they have been for centuries. If our social need is principally to relate, our principal cultural need is to make meaning, and those two needs are often mutually reinforcing. You could say the cultural is what turns the social into 'society'.

This socio-cultural perspective highlights why a society dominated by the logical and propositional does not fit human culture particularly well. As Labouvie-Vief has argued, we are in danger of overvaluing 'logos' "in which meaning is disembedded from reality of flux and change and related to stable systems of categorisation…".[82] And we risk undervaluing 'mythos' in which "The object of thought is not articulated separately from the motivational and organismic states of the thinker; rather the thinker's whole organism partakes in the articulation of the object and animates it with its own motives and intentions."[83]

80. Lynch, G. (2012) *On the Sacred*. From the 'Heretics' Series. Durham: Acumen Publishing. Available from: University Publishing [Online] www.universitypublishingonline.org/acumen/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9781844655359 (p.9).
81. Haidt, J. (2012) *The Righteous Mind*. London: Penguin Books. p.281.
82. Labouvie-Vief, G. Wisdom as Integrated Thought: Historical and Developmental Perspectives. In R. Sternber (ed.) (1990) *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins and Development*. Cambridge University Press. p.56.
83. Ibid.

Four RSA Workshops: commitment, experiences, practices and power

From October 2013 to September 2014, the RSA hosted four workshops to examine various dimensions of spirituality in public life. A total of 49 people participated and represented a wide range of professional backgrounds ranging from psychotherapy and anthropology to finance and clergy. Following are brief summaries of the discussions and talks from each of these workshops.

Workshop 1: Understanding the Spirit of Commitment

Participant	Locus of expertise	Summary
Rabbi Dr Naftali Brawer	Judaism	The first workshop, entitled 'Understanding the Spirit of Commitment', explored the meaning and value of spiritual commitment in the shared contexts of institutions, communities, and groups. Despite some popular associations with groovy emotions and scented candles, participants quickly pointed out that spirituality is also known to catalyse greater social engagement. The workshop's first speaker, Chris Cook, attributed the effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous to its spiritual element, or more precisely, "the human experience of struggling together and a shared commitment to the process". Margaret Holloway mentioned that "weakness and vulnerability", when recognised and shared openly with others, leads to profoundly meaningful connections between people. Such *darker* elements are usually experienced as socially and personally awkward, but handling them with care and concern is a requisite for spiritual commitment even in non-religious societies, explained Pippa Evans, co-founder of the Sunday Assembly. Spirituality can unify us in this way, by challenging us to acknowledge our pain rather than avoid it (as common practice may suggest). Spirituality can also help us establish a greater connection with ourselves too. Sam Sullivan, the former mayor of Vancouver, shared a moving personal account of a skiing accident that left him paralysed and wheelchair-bound. His suffering then triggered a spiritual experience and realisation that drove him to public service, disability activism, and meaningfulness. In light of Sam's experience, Mark Vernon remarked that: "Spiritual commitment offers a way of finding consolation and meaning in a world of impermanence and suffering." Overall, this first workshop framed spirituality as a process that can shape one's relationship with oneself and others in highly meaningful ways.
Dr Piers Benn	Philosophy	
Prof. Chris Cook	Psychiatry	
Dr Matthew Engelke	Anthropology	
Jules Evans	Philosophy	
Pippa Evans	Movement building	
Toby Flint	Christianity	
Dr Christopher Harding	Asian History	
Prof. Margaret Holloway	Social Work	
Elizabeth Oldfield	Public policy	
Dr Andrew Powell	Psychiatry	
Dr Jonathan Reams	Leadership	
Juliane Reams	Counseling	
Dr Oliver Robinson	Psychology	
Dr David Rousseau	Philosophy	
Dr Jonathan Rowson	Philosophy	
Nathalie Spencer	Behavioural Science	
Sam Sullivan	Public Policy	
Dr Mark Vernon	Psychotherapy	

Workshop 2: The Nature and Value of Spiritual Experience

Participant	Locus of expertise	Summary
Dr Robin Carhart-Harris	Neuroscience	The second workshop narrowed its focus on the nature and value of spiritual experience itself. The overarching question asked, "What do spiritual experiences tell us, if anything, about who we are and how we might best live our lives." Bettina Schmidt opened by clarifying that, contrary to popular belief, any individual regardless of their particular religion or lack thereof is capable of having a spiritual experience. Robin Carhart-Harris, the first scientist in over 40 years permitted to test LSD on humans, followed up by sharing his research on spiritual experiences triggered by psychedelics. Study participants who underwent spiritual experiences in the laboratory characterised them as a deep sense of *unity, oneness*, and of a *door being wide open.* There are also elements, Iain McGilchrist stated, of profound uncertainty, non-utility, and not-knowing that are native to spiritual experiences. In fact, Robert Rowland Smith linked the spiritual to a movement beyond our personality – that which we use ceaselessly and unconsciously to make sense of the world. "To be spiritual in a radical sense" Robert continued, "means not to be oneself." This notion of non-self is what Buddhists refer to as *emptiness*, Gay Watson remarked. This realisation of emptiness via spiritual practices and experiences leads paradoxically to a sense of connection and interdependence with our bodies, with others, and with the contexts in which we live. The workshop closed with a talk by Raphael Underwood, a PhD candidate in psychiatry at King's College studying spiritual experience and mental health. Said experiences are often erroneously interpreted as signs of mental illness rather than spiritual insight, but the distinction lies in how they are subjectively interpreted: mentally ill individuals can see them as intrusive and threatening, while healthy individuals may seem them as fulfilling and life-enriching.
Prof. Chris Cook	Psychiatry	
Prof. Oliver Davies	Theology	
Jules Evans	Philosophy	
Dr Chris Harding	Asian History	
Prof. Margaret Holloway	Social Work	
Dr David Luke	Psychology	
Prof. Gordon Lynch	Sociology	
Dr Iain McGilchrist	Psychiatry	
Amelia Peterson	Education	
Dr Oliver Robinson	Psychology	
Dr Robert Rowland Smith	Philosophy	
Dr Jonathan Rowson	Philosophy	
Prof. Bettina Schmidt	Anthropology	
Nathalie Spencer	Behavioural Science	
Nick Spencer	Theology	
Dr Steven Taylor	Psychology	
Louisa Tomlinson	Therapy	
Raphael Underwood	Psychology	
Dr Mark Vernon	Psychotherapy	
Dr Gay Watson	Buddhism	

Workshop 3: The Nature and Purpose of Spiritual Practice

Participant	Locus of expertise	Summary
Rabbi Dr Naftali Brawer	Judaism	The third spirituality workshop explored spiritual practice and the importance of habit. Throughout the workshop, participants emphasised the great value of adding spiritual practice to one's daily life. Danny Penman, for instance, commented that the practice of mindfulness was really about living and being alive, and he compared not doing your daily mindfulness meditation to not taking your "meds". David Lorimer framed a spiritual dance known as Paneurhythmy slightly differently. In this practice, people use different body movements to express human virtues such as love, wisdom, and truth. The movements become highly meaningful and can lead to "tremendous theological discussion". Elizabeth Oldfield, director of the religious and social think tank *Theos*, then gave a moving first-person account of her experience of prayer. She began by describing it as "a telephone conversation with a much longer wire and much more static", and as being with "a trusted friend who knows the very worst of you". In this way, spiritual practices lead to authenticity and a closer appreciation of one's unfavourable qualities. For example, Jules Evans discovered an "inner critic" within himself when deciding to deal with his acute social anxiety. He then set off to interview several proponents of those leading psychological therapies that aim to change the nature of our inner voice and improve our lives. These sorts of personal insights seem to either lead one to adopt a spiritual practice, or be a result of the practice. Whatever practice one adopts however, Clare Carlisle stressed the importance of consistency and habit. It is only through habit, she described, that real change and benefits emerge. The workshop concluded that when we yearn for spiritual practice we yearn for a richer conception of human freedom that helps cultivate our better natures, promote concern beyond the self, and cultivate "an orientation towards truth and goodness".
Dr Clare Carlisle	Philosophy	
Prof. Guy Claxton	Psychology	
Prof. Chris Cook	Psychiatry	
Jules Evans	Philosophy	
Dr Mark Harris	Theology	
David Lorimer	Philosophy	
Claudia Nielsen	Psychotherapy	
Elizabeth Oldfield	Public policy	
Dr Danny Penman	Mindfulness	
Dr David Rousseau	Philosophy	
Dr Jonathan Rowson	Philosophy	
Dr Mark Vernon	Psychotherapy	
Dr Gay Watson	Buddhism	
Dr Jacqueline Watson	Education	

Workshop 4: Personal Transformation and Social Transformation

Participant	Locus of expertise	Summary
Indra Adnan	Psychotherapy	The final workshop shifted its gaze outward to investigate the relationship between personal transformation and social transformation. The guiding question was, "In what ways does changing your conception of who you are shape how you think the world should be?" Jules Evans began by calling for a greater social provision of opportunities for self-transcendence. Transcendent and spiritual experiences, he argues, open us up to new possibilities for life, policy, etc. And while such experiences may benefit us all, means for cultivating them are sparse in the public realm. Oliver Davies reoriented attention to science and what he named the "second major reconceptualisation of human nature" we are currently in the midst of. Emerging psychological and neuroscientific evidence should be combined to draw a new understanding of what it means to be deeply social human beings. Mindfulness meditation, a popular contemplative practice at the moment, may give us first-hand insight into our social nature and Madeleine Bunting then spoke about the challenges in integrating it into western culture. While some fear that mindfulness may lead to passivity, Madeleine asserted that it can actually lead to fuller engagement with the world. Indra Adnan supported this paradoxical notion of change-through-acceptance by contrasting the "hard" power of force and the "soft" power of ethics and values. Particularly, soft power is really about conveying and embodying those values that are meaningful to people, rather than influencing others by force, status, or wealth. Charlotte Millar shared her success in integrating mindfulness concepts into her finance profession, and Guy Claxton similarly advocated introducing virtues and values closely associated with spiritual practices (eg, compassion, humility, honesty, generosity, etc) into schools. In brief, the final workshop made bare the important point: social transformation naturally follows from personal transformation.
Madeleine Bunting	Journalism	
Ian Christie	Environment	
Prof. Guy Claxton	Psychology	
Prof. Oliver Davies	Theology	
Jules Evans	Philosophy	
Pippa Evans	Movement building	
Andres Fossas	Psychology	
Claire Foster-Gilbert	Christianity	
Dr Chris Harding	Asian History	
Sanderson Jones	Movement building	
Jennifer Kavanagh	Quakerism	
David Lorimer	Philosophy	
Matthew Mezey	Civic innovation	
Charlotte Millar	Mindfulness	
Dr Danny Penman	Mindfulness	
Dr Oliver Robinson	Psychology	
Dr Robert Rowland Smith	Philosophy	
Dr Mark Vernon	Psychotherapy	
Dr Gay Watson	Buddhism	
Dr Jacqueline Watson	Education	
Sarah Wiggins	Christianity	

Summary by Andres Fossas

Our need for mythos is closely related to the social function of the sacred, because it highlights the need for shared cultural touchstones that are not reducible to logos. As a leading scholar in this domain, Gordon Lynch puts it, the sacred "is a way of communicating about what people take to be absolute realities that exert a profound moral claim over their lives". He adds that notions like protection of children, truth telling and the integrity of nations are key modern manifestations of the sacred.[84]

If the message from research relating to the Social Brain is that beliefs are not principally propositional, and that public debates about belief therefore often miss the point, the message from cultural psychology and cultural sociology is this: The sacred is not an old fashioned sociological construct or a thinning religious ambience in a vanishing corner of the public realm, but rather a fundamental part of how humans make meaning and form bonds, and the unacknowledged undercurrent in most political debates.

Cultural psychologist Jonathan Haidt puts it like this:

"The key to understanding tribal behaviour is not money, it's sacredness. The great trick that humans developed at some point in the last few hundred thousand years is the ability to circle around a tree, rock, ancestor, flag, book or god, and then treat that thing as sacred. People who worship the same idol can trust one another, work as a team and prevail over less cohesive groups. So if you want to understand politics, and especially our divisive culture wars, you must follow the sacredness…A good way to follow the sacredness is to listen to the stories that each tribe tells about itself and the larger nation."[85]

Where Haidt says 'tree, rock, ancestor, flag, book or god' we might add that conceptual ideas also have sacred content, for instance ideas like 'the heroic individual', 'the independent nation', 'the free market', 'Europe' and 'immigration' all contain sacred content. Alas, most political debates fail to acknowledge these moral foundations, which is why they are often unsatisfying for the public to endure. Still, it is worth highlighting that while our allegedly secular culture prizes logos it remains awash in mythos in service of the sacred. We struggle to acknowledge this point, because it highlights the limited role of reason in, for instance, rational voter deliberation over policy in elections. It is too strong to say that democracy is premised on a lie, but it is no secret that political campaigners understand that elections are not won on issues, but rather on the capacity to tap into moral foundations relating to the sacred, by framing narratives with a judicious use of root metaphors.[86]

84. Lynch, G. (2002) *After Religion: 'Generation X' and the Search for Meaning*. Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd. p.11.

85. Haidt, J. (2012) Forget the Money, Follow the Sacredness. *The New York Times*, The Opinion Pages, 17 March [Online] Available at: www.campaignstops.blogs.nytimes. com/2012/03/17/forget-the-money-follow-the-sacredness/?_r=0

86. Rowson, J. (2014) If the case for independence is so strong, why isn't Yes winning? *Bella Caledonia*, 14 August [blog] Available at: www.bellacaledonia.org.uk/2014/08/14/if-the-case-for-independence-is-so-strong-why-isnt-yes-winning/ and Rowson, J. (2014) The UK Paradox: Why the party that needs to get serious will suffer when it does. *RSA blogs*, 4 March [blog]. Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/ukip-paradox-party-suffer/

In a deeper analysis of this point in *The Sacred in the Modern World,* sociologist Gordon Lynch argues that the sacred does not apply to a discrete universal entity (eg a deity), but rather to social and cultural constructions that have come to be made sacred.[87] In this sense, the sacred is closely associated to our sense of moral reality, and is thus present in religious and secular contexts alike.

A striking contemporary example is technology which exemplifies a complex symbol of the sacred in modern life because it inspires dichotomous fantasies of both the salvation and the extinction of humanity.[88] Lynch argues that identifying with sacred forms can have both positive and negative consequences, the latter of which could be mitigated by engaging in "moral reflexivity", or rather, critical reflection on a sacred form. Uncovering the modern landscape of the sacred is therefore important because sacred forms and symbols give rise to "powerful tides of moral emotion around our individual and collective lives" and we need the language of the sacred to "make sense of it".[89]

The social constitution of belief and the cultural function of the sacred both highlight the degree to which human cognition is unconscious, but neither speaks directly to the fact that it is also automatic and habitual to an unnerving extent.

Automatic processing: why the spiritual injunction to 'wake up' matters

"Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had to do it over again, I'd have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after the other, instead of living so many years ahead of each day."
Nadine Stair, 85 years old[90]

After a range of recent popular books on the phenomenon, it is no longer controversial to state that most of a person's daily life is governed by automatic processes triggered by features of the environment.[91] While cognition and consciousness are too complex to give precise measures of exactly *how* automatic we are, social psychologist John Bargh suggests approximately 99 percent of psychological and bodily processes are automatic[92] while Baumeister and colleagues suggest conscious thought may be causal (and important) for overall behaviour only 5 percent of the time.[93]

87. Lynch, G. (2012) *The sacred in the modern world: A cultural sociological approach.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

88. Lynch, G. & Alexander, J. (2011) The Power of the Sacred [Video file]. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=V64d4h_U-jI

89. Lynch, G. (2012) op. cit.

90. Nadine Stair, 85-years-old, quoted in: Kabat-Zinn, J. (1996) *Full Catastrophe Living.* London: Piatkus.

91. See, for example: Bargh, J. A. & Chartrand, T. L. (1999) The Unbearable Automaticity of Being. *American Psychologist, 54(7), 462;* Kahneman, D. (2011) *Thinking Fast and Slow.* London: Penguin Books; Thaler, R. & Sunstein, C. (2008) *Nudge.* New Haven: Yale University Press; Ariely, D. (2008) *Predictably Irrational.* Harper Collins.

92. Evans, J. (2009) Interview with John Bargh. *And Other Dangerous Situations. The Website of Jules Evans,* 1 July. [Web Log Post]. Accessed 17 April 2014 from: www.philosophyforlife.org/interview-with-john-bargh/.

93. Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Muraven, M. & Tice, D. M. (1998) op. cit.

Conscious thought only really comes into its own in novel situations, since once a situation is repeated and previous expectations and patterns are activated, conscious thought becomes unnecessary.[94] A blow to self-esteem through a failure or an insult for example, mobilises previously rehearsed patterns of thought and behaviour to automatically restore the sense of self-worth. Bargh and Chartrand comically refer to these automatic processes as 'mental butlers' who know our tendencies and preferences so well that they anticipate and take care of them for us, without having to be asked.[95]

The spiritual implications of automaticity are not self-evident because automaticity is not bad in itself, as the philosopher Whitehead articulated so vividly:

> "It is a profoundly erroneous truism, repeated by all copy-books and by eminent people when they are making speeches, that we should cultivate the habit of thinking of what we are doing. The precise opposite is the case. Civilisation advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them. Operations of thought are like cavalry charges in a battle – they are strictly limited in number, they require fresh horses, and must only be made at decisive moments."[96]

The point is that we are not merely 'creatures of habit' but also habit-forming creatures. You could even say that we are built to put ourselves to sleep. While this trait has adaptive value in that we use our cognitive resources efficiently, it can also render us vulnerable in certain ways.

One potential problem area arises when attempts are made to solve an adaptive challenge as a technical one, which some believe to be the most common source of leadership failure in all professional domains.[97] Adaptive challenges refer to those that require us to problematise our own role in the problem and require re-imagining and reshaping our worlds; in contrast, technical challenges can generally be solved quickly with few superficial changes, often on the basis of expert advice. Our vulnerability to automatic processing can lead individuals to apply rote technical solutions (eg taking medication to lower blood pressure) to fix a problem that would benefit from a more adaptive response (eg adopting a healthier diet and lifestyle to lower blood pressure). In other words, the human tendency for automatic action, while useful in stable or routine circumstances, can become maladaptive and even harmful when something complex or particular is happening.[98]

94. Bargh, J. A. & Chartrand, T. L. (1999) op. cit.
95. Ibid.
96. Whitehead, A. N. (1911) *An Introduction to Mathematics*. Project Gutenberg eBook. [Online] Available at: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/41568 Chapter 5.
97. Heifetz, R.A. & Linsky, M. (2002) *Leadership on the Line*. Boston: Harvard School Press.
98. Hunter, J., & Chaskalson, M. (2013) Making the Mindful Leader: Cultivating Skills for Facing Adaptive Challenges. In H.S. Leonard, R. Lewis, A.M. Freedman & J. Passmore (eds.) *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of the Psychology of Leadership, Change, and Organizational Development*. Wiley-Blackwell. p.195.

"The point is that we are not merely 'creatures of habit' but also habit-forming creatures"

A second problem is that we become defined by our 'situations'. Two infamous psychological experiments on obedience to authority, one by Milgram in 1974 and another by Haney et al in 1973, represent extreme cautionary tales of unquestioned automatic processing. In both controversial studies, participants willingly engaged in harmful behaviours towards others and/or themselves, likely as a result of their automatic responses to the external demands placed upon them by an authority figure (as in Milgram's study) or by a simulated role they were asked to fill (as in Haney et al's study, made famous by Zimbardo). Initial pre-study inquiries revealed that participants did not expect to behave in the manner they did[99] which is a useful reminder that we don't really know how our automatic systems will respond ahead of time.

The good news is that it is possible to become more conscious of automatic processes. One of the main ideas to emerge from the Social Brain Steering Group in year one of our project (2009) is that the dynamics of human behaviour are better captured in a three-part rather than two-part relationship.

> "At the neuroscientific level, it is accurate to divide our brains into a controlled system and an automatic system, in which our automatic and largely unconscious behaviours are supplemented and informed by occasional conscious deliberation. However, when you consider the relationship of these two systems operating within the environment, our behaviour is mostly habitual, which means that we act without thinking in situations that appear familiar."[100]

Habits are important because they define who we are, but also because they can be changed. We breathe automatically, we see automatically, but we think, decide and act habitually. Habits are driven by our automatic (principally limbic) system, and often feel automatic due to the way our brains predict events, and reward us when those predications are accurate, principally through the release of the 'feel good factor' in the form of dopamine. Karl Friston has built a general theory of cognition out of this idea, which contends that our brain is continually interpreting information contextually with a view to acting in the world. We do not perceive as a prelude to considering how to act, but rather perceive in the context of available actions, and our interpretation of the world is suffused with our prediction of what we are expected to do next.[101]

Deliberation and reflection occurs when the world does not immediately conform to our predictions. The intriguing aspect of Friston's theory is that we predict in different ways, and our predictions are coloured by our self-concept and social conditioning. The ways in which our automatic and habitual processes contextualise the world below consciousness directly circumscribes our ability to learn, because it affects our openness to experience – a key determinant of our interest in spiritual matters.

Francisco Varela makes a similar claim arguing that it is principally at 'breakdowns' – moments where we do not have a habitual reaction available

99. Moore, D. A. & Loewenstein, G. (2004) Self-interest, automaticity, and the psychology of conflict of interest. *Social Justice Research, 17(2), 189–202.*

100. Rowson, J. (2011) *Transforming Behaviour Change.* London: RSA.

101. Ibid.

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to respond to an unexpected stimulus, that consciousness is brought forth to reconstitute our 'micro-worlds' – to refashion our interpretation of the lived environment so that we can intelligibly act within it.[102] Spiritual training can therefore be thought of as what we need to be ready for such moments – we need not only the capacity to make ourselves present to what is happening, but also to mobilise the better aspects of our selves.

The difficulty in becoming aware of automatic processing is attributed to the high speed at which it occurs, concealing it from conscious monitoring and reflection. Research psychologist Maja Djikic posits that slowing the mind down, or "cultivating stillness", creates a gap between one's awareness and the contents of that awareness.[103] Mindfulness practices have been posited as means for cultivating such qualities. Hunter and Chaskalson explain:

> "The power of mindfulness arises from systematically developing a person's attention so that she can recognise in the moment how she identifies with her implicit, habitual and automated patterns of thinking, feeling and acting and the results they bring about. By recognising these patterns, she can elect to change course. As a result mindfulness endows – 'an adaptability and pliancy of mind with quickness of apt response in changing situations'."[104]

Some quibble with language, and suggest "heartfulness" or "recollection" might be a better word than mindfulness, but the core point is pretty fundamental and is not about a mindfulness 'fad'.[105] American author Thoreau described this kind of cultivated awareness as the "only way of living" and Jonathan Swift famously said: "May you live every day of your life." In more explicitly spiritual literature, Gurdjieff is quoted as saying:

> "Man is asleep…he has no real consciousness or will. He is not free; to him, everything 'happens'. He can become conscious and find his true place as a human being in the creation, but this requires a profound transformation."[106]

In our third workshop Dr Danny Pennman said mindfulness can be thought of as a daily mental health 'vaccination': "It is a dose-response relationship." Not doing your daily practice is like "not taking your meds". To work with this level of interest in your own automaticity, you need repeated practise, and to find a way to keep motivation high.

There is an irony here of course. The challenge is to make spiritual practise a habit so that we become less habitual in our encounters with daily life. This approach recognises that there is no ultimate escape

"There is an irony here of course. The challenge is to make spiritual practice a habit so that we become less habitual in our encounters with daily life"

102. Ibid.
103. Djikic, M. (2014) Art of Mindfulness: Integrating Eastern and Western Approaches. In *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Mindfulness*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons. pp.139–148 [Online] Available at: www-2.rotman.utoronto.ca/facbios/file/(2014)%20Djikic.pdf
104. Hunter, J. & Chaskalson, M. (2013) op. cit.
105. Rowson, J. (2014) Mindfulness: more than a fad, less than a revolution. *RSA blogs*, 30 April [blog]. Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/mindfulness/
106. Located at The Gurdjieff Society: www.gurdjieff.com/about.php. George Ivanovich Gurdjieff was an influential Greek-Armenian spiritual teacher, who began to share his 'The Fourth Way' in Moscow in 1912. He argued that it was neither a religion, nor a philosophy, but a practical teaching to be lived and verified by direct experience.

from habituation, just greater control over the habits we choose to have, and a greater awareness of how they arise and how they can change.

We rarely succeed in changing our habits and thereby shaping our lives in the way we want to if we 'go it alone'. Instead we tend to need what Avne Offer called 'commitment devices'. Offer argues that humans have unhitched themselves from the institutions that are protective against the inherent short-sightedness of the human condition, including religious institutions.[107]

Dr Clare Carlisle suggested that "An orientation to truth and goodness" is what gives a practise meaning and makes one want to continue, but this is a challenge for those who believe you can, for instance, completely secularise mindfulness meditation, turn it into 'attention training' and strip it of all ethical content. A related challenge is that, as social beings, we tend to need support or inspiration from others. Canadian magician Doug Henning once elegantly put the overall challenge like this:

> "The hard must become habit. The habit must become easy. The easy must become beautiful."

For the hard to become habit, we need social reinforcement, for the habit to become easy we need to shape our habitats accordingly – places to practise and people to teach us or work with, and for the 'easy to become beautiful' we need social rewards, such that the new-found habit is socially endorsed. The issue is therefore not so much to change people's habits, but to make the social process of habituation more consciously shared. One way to do that is to pay closer attention to something we all share: our bodies.

Embodied cognition: why the experience of meaning is visceral and important

> "Coming to grips with your embodiment is one of the most profound philosophical tasks you will ever face."
> **Mark Johnson**[108]

> "I don't think any one of us can begin to discover again what religion might mean unless we are prepared to expose ourselves to new ways of being in our bodies."
> **Rowan Williams**[109]

While western approaches to spirituality have often seen the body's desires and appetites as a distraction or barrier to spiritual life (think of film images of self-flagellation), it is also possible to see the body as the best place to start the inquiry.

107. Offer, A. (2006) *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain since 1950*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
108. Johnson, M. (2007) *The meaning of the body – the aesthetics of human understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p.1.
109. Williams, R. (2014) The Physicality of Prayer. *New Statesman*, 8 July, [Online] Available at: www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/07/after-god-how-fill-faith-shaped-hole-modern-life

In the context of this ambivalence towards the body, it's not an accident that many in the west begin spiritual journeys with Yoga, nor that Yoga begins with *asanas* (bodily postures) moves on to *pranayama* (breathing exercises) and only then deals with meditation or any discussion of divinity.

While the body may not be a spiritual end in itself, it is helpful to recognise that all experience comes through it.[110] The simple fact is that *the body is always present*, while the mind is invariably elsewhere, and much of spiritual inquiry begins with the simple reconnection of body and mind through the breath that we tend to take for granted.[111]

According to neuroscientist Mario Beauregard, spiritual experiences relate to a fundamental dimension of human existence and are frequently reported across all cultures.[112] There is a strong consistency in the reported characteristics of such experiences, which seem to occur in spiritual and religious contexts,[113] after ingestion of psychedelics,[114] upon viewing Earth from space,[115] or even spontaneously by the religious and non-religious alike.[116] A myriad of common underlying themes suggest that spiritual experiences, regardless of their particular cognitive or emotional content, are all woven of the same psychological fabric.

Despite some notable claims of out-of-body experiences – and perhaps even then – spiritual experiences are bodily experiences. Guy Claxton argues that religions are extensions of our bodies, in the sense that they originated not from elaborate frameworks of beliefs intended to provide

110. The idea of 'experience' as such is not straightforward, and the subject of a huge literature that is beyond our scope here. Robert Rowland Smith's main inquiry in our second workshop was into the nature of experience as such, and the role of the 'I' in interpreting that experience. He referred to Freud's 'Das Eich' – 'the I' as that which is "unable to destroy itself." A useful clarification is that while ego is often confused with "self-identity", for Freud Ego means "I want". In this respect, spirituality can be thought of as the interruption of desire, the interruption of the gratifying urge and "the selflessness that sits alongside the need for a self". As scholarship on Husserl and other phenomenologists has highlighted, self-reflection is captured in reflexive words somewhat lost in English eg "Je me, nous nous". Without those reflexive terms it is easy to lose sight of the key feature of something to have 'otherness' ie the felt sense that communication can be purloined. Robert argued that "There is an other within ourselves which opens out to experience" and this idea was contextualised through a reference to the work of Levinas who said the relationship with God is a relationship with otherness ie it has to be an asymmetrical relationship. In this sense Robert argued: "To be spiritual in a radical sense means not to be oneself."

111. Gay Watson presented ideas from her book on Emptiness: what is 'empty of' essence, permanence, singularity, and closely related to interdependence. The sense of 'emptying out' has western connections in Heraclitus, Stoicism, Postmodernism, Science, indeterminacy and metanarratives. What makes this philosophically rich account of emptiness visible is silence: the art of the unseen. This purpose serves to draw our attention to 'The complacency of the seen.' Emptiness is about the lenses through which we look, rather than what we look at. What does an appreciation of emptiness point towards? The human challenge to know oneself as "Embodied, embedded, connected."

112. Beauregard, M. (2011) Neuroscience and Spirituality–Findings and Consequences. In *Neuroscience, Consciousness and Spirituality*. Springer Netherlands. pp. 57–73.

113. Beauregard, M. & Paquette, V. (2006) Neural correlates of a mystical experience in Carmelite nuns. *Neuroscience letters, 405(3), 186–190.*

114. MacLean, K. A., Johnson, M. W. & Griffiths, R. R. (2011) Mystical experiences occasioned by the hallucinogen psilocybin lead to increases in the personality domain of openness. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 25(11), 1453–1461.

115. White, F. (1998) *The Overview Effect: Space exploration and human evolution.* American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA).

116. Taylor, S. Spontaneous Awakening Experiences: Beyond Religion and Spiritual Practice. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 44(1), 73–91.

"The simple fact is that the body is always present, while the mind is invariably elsewhere"

comfort and meaning, but rather from experiences that were actually seen, felt, and thereby, embodied. These experiences, warmly referred to as "glimpses" by Claxton when he spoke here at the RSA, are described by him as follows:[117]

Spirituality concerns a particular transformation in the quality of human experience. Spiritual experience (SE), as recorded across history and culture, has a number of core features:

- A degree of aliveness and intensity that makes 'normal experience' (NE) seem vapid and attenuated.
- A sense of belonging and connectedness, of being part of a larger whole, of being naturally 'at home', that highlights a common background feeling of loneliness or alienation in NE.
- A sense of caring and compassion towards other people in general, and even aspects of nature and the environment, that makes their well-being matter in a non-possessive way, and compared to which NE seems apathetic or of less meaning.
- A feeling of depth; of calm connectedness and open involvement with mystery and uncertainty without any insecurity, compared with a rather anxious dogmatism – a need to feel right or certain – that attends NE.
- A feeling of ease and lightness, of peace, acceptance and harmony, that contrasts with a background sense of agitation, restlessness or unsatisfactoriness that seems often to accompany NE.

Although precise measurements on such matters are difficult, such experiences are actually quite common. According to survey data, about half of adults have had at least one spiritual experience in their lifetimes. In the United Kingdom, the prevalence of such experiences among adults ranges from 31 percent to 48 percent across surveys (see Castro, 2010), while in the United States the number is closer to 50 percent (Smith, 2006). Even in China, where more than half (52.2 percent) of the population is unaffiliated with any religion (Pew Research Centre, 2012), 56.7 percent of adults report having had a spiritual experience (Yao and Badham, 2007).[118]

The renowned polymath and writer Ken Wilber has consistently argued for the broader importance of spiritual experience in the modern scientific paradigm. In the book, *Sense and Soul*, Wilber argues that if spirituality is to merge with 21st century science, the study of spirituality must be based on falsifiable evidence.[119] While something important will always be lost in the measurement process, spiritual experience can in principle lend itself to scientific scrutiny and falsifiability and it is no

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117. Claxton, G. (2013) Science and Spirituality: 'Effing the Ineffable.' *RSA blogs*, 10 February [blog]. Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/touched-moved-spirituality-essentially-embodied/.

118. In our workshop on spiritual experiences, Bettina Schmidt gave an overview of the work of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre in Lampeter, which includes descriptions of over 60,000 spiritual experiences, and is soon to be available online.

119. Wilber, K. (2011) *The marriage of sense and soul: Integrating science and religion.* Random House LLC.

coincidence that empirical research into spiritual experiences is currently underway on multiple fronts in psychology and neuroscience.[120]

Wilber further explains, "It is only when (spirituality) emphasises its heart and soul and essence – namely direct mystical experience… – that (it) can both stand up to modernity and offer something for which modernity has desperate need: a genuine, verifiable, repeatable injunction to bring forth the spiritual domain" (2011).

While there are perennial problems with definitions and taxonomies, a critical point is that such experiences do not feel deviant, on the contrary they feel more real, just as waking consciousness feels *more real* than dreaming. And part of the reason they feel real, is that they are experienced viscerally, through our bodies.

This point is supported by the fact that the importance attributed to the human body in psychological processes has been steadily on the rise.[121] Embodied cognition research has significantly increased in the past decade as the body's manifold roles in cognition and affect are systematically unpacked.[122] Cognitive linguists Mark Johnson and George Lakoff take the strongest position, arguing *all* concepts originate in bodily metaphors.[123] Moreover, research on bodily feelings corresponding to emotions suggests that when they are experienced in concentrated form, positive emotions such as happiness, wonder, awe, and joy, result in increased openness to transcendence and a more spiritual conception of the self, world, and others.[124]

Despite the potential joys of bodily experience, there is a good reason for spiritual ambivalence towards the body, which is that it represents an existential threat. The body aches, bleeds, grows old and weak, and eventually dies. In this way, the body acts as a constant reminder of one's mortality, and, consequently, as a supremely reliable trigger of existential anxiety.[125] Attempts are made across cultures to regulate bodily phenomena that may serve to remind people of their physical nature, evidenced

120. See, for example: Beauregard & Paquette, 2006; 2008; Davis & Vago, 2013; Greyson et al., 2014; Hood, 2005; Josipovic, 2013; MacLean et al., 2011; Newberg, 2014; Tang & Tang, 2013; Urgesi et al., 2010.

121. To contain the scope, I say little about 'the extended mind' here, in which the mind and cognitive processes of an individual extend beyond the boundaries of both skull (as is traditionally believed) and body (as proposed by the embodied cognition thesis). As Clark & Chalmers succinctly put it in their seminal paper: "…once the hegemony of skin and skull is usurped, we may be able to see ourselves more truly as creatures of the world" Chalmers, D. & Clark, A. (1998) The Extended Mind. *Analysis* 58(1), 7–19. [Online] Available at: www.consc.net/papers/extended.html

122. Examples include *power posing* (adopting an open and expansive body posture) increasing testosterone, decreasing cortisol, and increasing feelings of power and risk tolerance; touching a hard surface triggers abstract notions of difficulty; holding a warm cup of coffee satisfies the need for social warmth; (see Bargh et al., 2012, for a review).Other perspectives suggest that the process of meaning-making itself is contingent on the memory of the body's physical responses to past sensory input (Taylor & Lamoreaux, 2008).

123. Johnson, M. & Lakoff, G. (2002) Why cognitive linguistics requires embodied realism. *Cognitive linguistics*, 13(3), 245–264.

124. Saroglou, V., Buxant, C. & Tilquin, J. (2008) Positive emotions as leading to religion and spirituality. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3, 165–173; and Van Cappellen, P., Saroglou, V., Iweins, C., Piovesana, M. & Fredrickson, B. L. (2013) Self-transcendent positive emotions increase spirituality. *Cognition and Emotion* 27(8) [Online] Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02699931.2013.787395?url_ver=Z39.88-2003&rfr_id=ori:rid:crossref.org&rfr_dat=cr_pub%3dpubmed#.VOXmM3kYS70

125. Hart, J. & Goldenberg, J. L. (2007) A terror management perspective on spirituality and the problem of the body. In A. Tomer, G. T. Eliason & P. T .P. Wong (eds.), *Existential and Spiritual Issues in Death Attitudes*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. pp.91–113.

"Such experiences do not feel deviant, on the contrary they feel more real, just as waking consciousness feels more real than dreaming"

by the disgust and embarrassment commonly directed at common bodily functions, the extensive efforts and elaborately imposed rules for both concealing and enhancing the body's appearance.[126]

The body is the central aspect of our 'ground', but we need not think of it as all we have or all are we are. Perhaps the most celebrated Yogi in the west, Iyengar, puts it like this:

> "If we abandon or indulge our bodies, sickness comes, and attachment to it increases. Your body can no longer serve as a vehicle for the inward journey…If you say you are your body, you are wrong. If you say you are not your body, you are also wrong. The truth is that although body is born, lives and dies, you cannot catch a glimpse of the divine except through your body."[127]

Divided brain: why our need for perspective and balance is greater than ever

With the possible exception of the heart, the brain is arguably the most important part of the body, and the structural and functional division of hemispheres is one of the most significant features of the brain.

Scientist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist's acclaimed work *The Master and his Emissary* significantly builds on and enhances prior research by neuropsychologists Sperry and Gazzaniga into functional differences between the brain hemispheres in split-brain patients,[128] by Hirstein into confabulation,[129] and by Gallagher into the philosophical conception of the narrative sense of self.[130, 131]

The essence of McGilchrist's argument might be summarised like this: We all live in two worlds and one of our worlds is under threat. A proper understanding of the relationship between the right and left hemispheres of the brain draws attention to two very different and often competing

126. Goldenberg, J. L., Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J. & Solomon, S. (2000) Fleeing the body: A terror management perspective on the problem of human corporeality. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 4(3),* 200–218.

127. Iyengar, B.K.S (2005) *Light on Life.* Rodale Press.

128. Gazzaniga, M. S. & Sperry, R. W. (1967) Language after section of the cerebral commissures. *Brain,* 90(1), 131–148; and Sperry, R. W., Gazzaniga, M. S. & Bogen, J. E. (1969) *Interhemispheric relationships: the neocortical commissures; syndromes of hemisphere disconnection.* Handbook of Clinical Neurology, 4, 273–290; and Wolman, D. (2012) A tale of two halves. *Nature,* 483(7389), 260–263.

129. Hirstein, W. (2005) *Brain fiction: Self-deception and the riddle of confabulation.* Boston: MIT Press.

130. Gallagher, S. (2000) Philosophical conceptions of the self: implications for cognitive science. *Trends in cognitive sciences,* 4(1), 14–21.

131. The brain is divided into two asymmetrical halves – the left and right hemispheres – in humans and many other species including fish, amphibians, birds, and other mammals. This lateralisation of the brain has been traced back to early vertebrates (Rogers et al., 2013). Contrary to conventional belief, both hemispheres are involved in reason, emotion, language, and a number of other psychological functions. The hemispheres differ, however, in how they participate in such functions. The left hemisphere, for instance, is specialised in categorising stimuli, managing routine patterns of thought and action, and deploying a narrow, sharp, and focused form of attention. In contrast, the right hemisphere exhibits a specialisation for the processing of novel stimuli, metaphor, body language, embodiment, context, intense emotions and emotional expression, and for broad and sustained open awareness or attention (McGilchrist, 2009). The two hemispheres communicate through and are physically connected by a bundle of neural fibers called the corpus callosum. While the reason for the hemispheric division of the brain is unclear, some neuroscientists suggest that the purpose is inhibitory, such that the corpus callosum allows one hemisphere to inhibit the other to, in turn, facilitate normal human functioning (McGilchrist, 2009).

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forms of perception and cognition, and makes the challenge of achieving 'balance' and perspective in life more palpable.[132]

McGilchrist puts it at follows: "Because we thought of the brain as a machine, we were asking 'what does it do?' and getting the answer 'they both do everything'. If instead we had thought of the brain as part of a person, rather than a machine, we might have asked a different question: 'what's he or she like?' How, in other words – with what values, goals, interests, in what manner and in what way – did this part of a person do what he or she did? And we would have got quite another answer. For each hemisphere has a quite consistent, but radically different, 'take' on the world. This means that, at the core of our thinking about ourselves, the world and our relationship with it, there are two incompatible but necessary views that we need to try to combine. And things go badly wrong when we do not."[133]

There are some signs that things are going badly wrong along these lines: "The left hemisphere's obsession with reducing everything it sees to the level of minute, mechanistic detail, is robbing modern society of the ability to understand and appreciate deeper human values," McGilchrist claims. "Appeals to the natural world, to the history of a culture, to art, to the body, and to spirituality, routes that used to lead out of the hall of mirrors have been cut off, undercut and ironised out of existence." [134]

This lack of perspective is no mere cognitive blip, but feeds in to broader patterns of social breakdown. While we cannot infer direct cause and effect, the growth in 'left-hemisphere overreach', what McGilchrist believes to be the trend for cultural expression of the qualities of abstraction, measurement and algorithm, can be inferred from urbanisation and its broader effects, for instance, levels of loneliness in the UK are increasing, and it has been argued that the rising rates of illness are a result of an evolutionary mismatch between past human environments and modern-day living.[135]

On 25 October 1925, Mahatma Gandhi published a list of seven social sins that, if not corrected, could potentially destroy societies and individuals and this list seems to be more relevant than ever with respect to our need for perspective and balance. The seven social sins are: "Wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, and politics without principle."[136]

McGilchrist's research is invaluable because it shows that the part of us that is concerned with restoring that balance through context, meaning

"Spirituality is about not 'knowing'. it is often in places where we are not looking directly; in the background, the in-between"

Iain McGilchrist

132. The full expression of the argument can be found at McGilchrist, I. (2009) *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. Yale University Press, and a summary of the argument in dialogue form is included in Rowson, J. & McGilchrist, I. (2013) *Divided Brain, Divided World: Why the Best part of us Struggles to be heard*. RSA. [Online] Available at: www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/divided-brain-divided-world/

133. In our second workshop, McGilchrist was keen to emphasise that one implication of thinking of the brain in this way is that 'attention' should not so much be seen as something one does, but rather as an aspect of consciousness itself.

134. McGilchrist, I. (2012) *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning: Why Are We So Unhappy?* Yale University Press.

135. See, for instance, Lederbogen, F. et al. (2011) City living and urban upbringing affect neural social stress processing in humans. *Nature*, 474(7352), 498–501; Griffin, J. (2010) *The lonely society?* London: Mental Health Foundation.

136. Rajput, J. S. (ed.) (2012) *Seven Social Sins: The Contemporary Relevance* (Vol. 1). Allied Publishers.

and wholeness is more tentative and less articulate than the part of us that is concerned with decontextualising, measurement and precision, which means we have to fight that bit harder and better for the things that are difficult to articulate and measure. The point applies to the public use of 'spirituality' and 'soul', and is more broadly relevant for those who believe society's ills stem from our public language being excessively explicit and over-concerned with measurement. The case for the implicit and what physicist David Bohm called 'the implicate order' arises from a deeper understanding of the primary division in our brain.[137]

While speaking at the second RSA workshop, McGilchrist's core contention was that, at heart, spirituality is about *not* "knowing". He added that the spiritual is often in places where we are not looking directly; in the background, the in-between. We tend to neglect that which is not in the foreground of experience, and we know this empirically from research on perception, *not* from research on cognition, reinforcing the point about attention being better understood as an aspect rather than function of consciousness.

The point is that making things more explicit does not make them better. In ritual, we see an embodied metaphor in which meaning is beyond the explicit, and this is precious. If we lose sight of the value of such rituals we are in danger of losing the distinction between mythos and logos. Iain emphasised that narrative, metaphor and implicit meaning are key to spirituality and that spirituality at its heart is about modesty, about not knowing, ending his talk with the evocative line: "Life is a superfluous gift calling for gratitude and tenderness."

Neural plasticity: why we need to take spiritual practice seriously

"The brain is a far more open system than we ever imagined, and nature has gone very far to help us perceive and take in the world around us. It has given us a brain that survives in a changing world by changing itself."
Norman Doidge[138]

"In truth, the crossing from nature to culture and vice versa has always stood wide open. It leads across an easily accessible bridge: the practising life."
Peter Sloterdijk[139]

The idea of 'neuroplasticity' is relatively mainstream, and simply stated it refers to the brain's capacity to change itself. We can do this much more than we previously thought, but it is not often understood that plasticity significantly declines with age, nor do we typically appreciate the extent of effort required to make significant changes in general or the effort to maintain the requisite effort, or what Claxton calls 'the habit habit'.[140]

137. Bohm, D. (1980) *Wholeness and The Implicate Order.* Routledge and Kegan Paul.
138. Doidge, N. (2014) *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science.* New York: Penguin.
139. Sloterdijk, P. (2013) *You Must Change your Life.* Cambridge: Polity Press. p.11
140. Doidge, N. (2014) *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science.* New York: Penguin.

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It is now a truism in sports psychology that practice doesn't make perfect, rather, practice makes permanent.[141] You become what you repeat, and what you repeat may not always be optimal or consciously chosen. The idea of practice, or practise, or praxis differ in emphasis, but they all point to the idea of self-reinforcing patterns of behaviour, and the value of a practice often grows in a kind of compound interest.

The core idea is captured by the distinguished social theorist Sloterdijk: "Practice is defined here as any operation that provides or improves the actor's qualification for the next performance of the same operation, whether it is declared practice or not."[142]

There is a huge literature now on 'social practice theory' and how it informs our use of natural resources, particularly energy,[143] but public awareness of the range of contemplative practices seems to be somewhat underdeveloped. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society presents a wide range of available contemplative practices that can be grouped into seven families, each facilitating the expression of a broad fundamental human need or capacity eg creativity, physicality, relationships, cyclical rituals and ethical generativity.[144]

In this respect, emerging evidence from psychological and neuroscientific research helps to contextualise the value of such practices. Studies have found significant evidence that repeating a certain experience over an extended period of time (a *habit*, in other words) actually changes the size of the brain region(s) associated with that experience, but the point is not so much about neuroanatomical size, rather it is about connections between existing neurons, and to some extent the creation of new ones.[145]

It follows that accessing the "fruits" of spiritual practice may only be accessible through habit and consistency. If part of spiritual practice is about seeking "a transformation that can ultimately alter and orient one's life"[146] and such transformation entails the development of several elusive qualities and human virtues like empathy, compassion, humility, patience, sacrifice, and others, then the case for fostering a culture of practice is very strong.

141. Waitzkin, J. (2008) *The Art of Learning*. New York: Free Press; and Sayed, M. (2010) *Bounce*. New York: Harper Perennial.

142. Sloterdijk, P. (2013) op. cit. p.4

143. See, for instance, Shove, E. (2011) *How the social sciences can help climate change policy*. Lecture at the British Library, 17 January. [Online] Available at: www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/shove/lecture/filmedlecture.htm

144. Our capacity for creativity, for instance, is addressed by a family of contemplative arts including improvisation, journaling, music, and singing. Physical movement via walking meditation, yoga, dance, Qigong, and others. Our capacity to form relationships with others via deep listening, storytelling, and dialog, while our capacity for stillness is cultivated via meditation, silence, and centering; retreats, ceremonies, and rituals can address our deeper cyclical needs for consistency and repetition; pilgrimages, volunteering, work, and vigils address our needs for activism and effecting change; loving-kindness, lectio divina, beholding, and visualisation can refine our long-term generative capacities. Despite their various forms, however, all contemplative practices share two vital elements: awareness and connection/communion. See Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (2014) The Tree of Contemplative Practices. [Online] Available at: www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree.

145. London taxi cab drivers, for instance, have a larger hippocampus (the brain region associated with navigation, amongst other things) than non-taxi drivers (Maguire et al., 2000). In fact, this brain region was larger in the most experienced drivers. The brain seems to function very much like a muscle in this regard, growing slowly through repetition.

146. Dibert, F. (2009) Mindfulness, Compassion, and the Nature of Self: A study of Vipassana meditation in context. *ProQuest Dissertations*. [Online] Order from: www.proquest.com/products-services/dissertations/

Public Event 2. On Being Touched and Moved: why spirituality is really about the body

RSA Public Event Series on Spirituality (2 of 6)
26 November 2013

> Spirituality and religion start not from belief… Not [from] a wish, or thought, or an interpretation, but [from] direct experience. It can be seen and felt, not construed or imagined. It is embodied.
> Professor Guy Claxton, keynote speaker

In the second of six public RSA events on reappraisving the spiritual, Professor Guy Claxton poetically described the role and importance of the body in spirituality. Specifically, Claxton attributed the origin of religious traditions to a unique type of physical phenomenon he calls a Glimpse.

Glimpses are variably known by the names: mystical experience, peak experience, satori, grace of God, Nirvana, etc, and are commonly characterised as "surprising, short-lived, uncontrollable, highly significant, highly attractive," and embodied. In this context, he views spiritual practices as attempts to recapture and stabilise such experiences, with religions coalescing around those individuals who manage to "crack the quest for stabilisation" and lead others to the same end (eg, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, the Buddha). Though Glimpses are generally underreported on basis of their ineffability, highly personal or subjective nature, and utter strangeness, 50–60 percent of people mention having experienced such an event.

Professor Claxton states that a Glimpse is not an illusion or hallucination, but rather a concrete felt sense of reality "unmasked, unusually accurate, and intensely perceived". He goes on to provide an example of an actual Glimpse that took place in London on a commuter train, originally reported to the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre:

Vauxhall station on a murky November Tuesday evening is not the setting one would choose for a revelation of God. The carriage was full. I cannot remember any particular thought process which may have led up to that great moment. For a few seconds only, I suppose, the whole carriage was filled with light. I felt caught up in a tremendous sense of being within a loving shining purpose. In a few moments, the glory had faded, all but one curious lingering feeling: I loved everyone in the seats around me. It sounds silly now, and indeed I blush to write it, but in that moment I think I would have died for any one of those people. I seemed to sense the golden worth in all of them.

Guy then asks a burning question: are Glimpses distortions of reality or are they more accurate depictions of reality than we can otherwise perceive? Research emerging from the areas of embodied and extended cognition suggests the latter is true. Claxton highlights that our minds and bodies, like clouds, are semi-stable and constantly interacting with wider internal and external forces, allowing us to concoct an image of our world that is far from an accurate representation of it. "Hills look steeper to tired people," he says, "coins look bigger to hungry children." Like Glimpses, our understanding and intentions well up

from deep inside of us, "catching us by surprise" because the process unfolds too fast to consciously notice. As a result of this sheer speed and subtleness, we can and do misconstrue ourselves along with our connections to other phenomena. Being profoundly moved and touched through an embodied Glimpse might offer, even if just for a few moments, a glance "behind the mirror" into the way things truly are.

www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2013/On-Being-Touched-and-Moved
Summary by Andres Fossas

In this regard, research is already indicating that mindfulness meditation serves as a means for developing compassion and empathy. Other studies support the requirement of long-term habitual practice to develop these deeper emotional qualities.[147] Over time, spiritual practices appear to effect the structural changes in our brains that likely reflect the forms of spiritual transformation recounted by various spiritual leaders and sacred texts.

This evidence tallies with the general verdict of workshop participants; the value of spiritual practice largely depends both on the perspective of the practitioner and on the persistence with which it is practised. In addition to Danny Penman's reference to 'dose-response relationship', Clare Carlisle argued that continual spiritual practice gives natural and spontaneous rise to other beneficial habits.

There is a key paradox at work in spiritual practice, however, such that practice must become consistent and habitual in order to fulfil the spiritual aim of moving beyond the practice itself. In our second workshop, Rabbi Naftali Brewer says habits can be seen as "duties of the heart" rather than activities of the body, and the creation and maintenance of habits are at least partly about socialising a faith community ie "there is something more sacred than the habit".

Naftali quoted H.J. Eschel's quote in this regard, "Prayer is a window, not a screen," as the key to prayer is the development of a capacity to feel beyond the words.

The point is that habits often remain even after the rationale for the habit is forgotten or superseded. In this respect, over-fastidious attention to rituals can undermine the very values they are espousing eg mind and heart in state of submission to higher power.

On the other hand, Naftali added that habits can also be the trigger ie the relatively mindless repetition of the practice is the thing that brings one's mind to a more open, receptive, 'non habitual' space. In other words, spiritual practice is partly about cultivating that discrimination between doing things by rote out of the habit of doing them by rote, and doing so with a deeper appreciation for the liberating qualities of repetition Naftali made reference to "pre- and post-meaning naivetés" and wished people 'a second naiveté'.

147. Allen, M., Dietz, M., Blair, K. S., van Beek, M., Rees, G., Vestergaard-Poulsen, P., Lutz, A. & Roepstorff, A. (2012) Cognitive-affective neural plasticity following active-controlled mindfulness intervention. *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 32(44), 15601–15610; and Brefczynski-Lewis, J. A., Lutz, A., Schaefer, H. S., Levinson, D. B. & Davidson, R. J. (2007) Neural correlates of attentional expertise in long-term meditation practitioners. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 104(27), 11483–11488.

The more one engages with spiritual practice, the more it seems to develop, deepen and complexify as a result. For instance, Elizabeth Oldfield compared the development of Christian prayer to the deepening of a friendship, although she emphasised that there is a sense of asymmetrical wisdom in the actual experience of prayer.

Clare Carlisle[148] argued that one's attitude to habits is very closely connected to one's idea of freedom. However, for something to be habitual does not mean it is unfree: "Freedom is the uninhibited expression of our own nature. Not rational choice." The point was developed through the thought of Ravisson: "Practice wills the repetition." The interplay of receptivity and resistance shapes our ethical and religious life, so meditation, for instance, is both about becoming receptive to some things and resistant to others.

Sloterdijk puts the point forcibly: "It is time to reveal humans as the beings who result from repetition. Just as the 19th century stood cognitively under the sign of production and the 20th under that of reflexivity, the future should present itself under the sign of the exercise."[149]

Conclusions to section 2

The six relationships outlined in this section, connecting scientific findings with aspects of spiritual life or experience, form an important part of any argument for spirituality playing a larger role in the public realm. Taken together, these features of human nature show that the human need for the spiritual arises out of basic aspects of our physiology, psychology and sociology.

Spirituality does not thereby become a monolith. Believing is fundamentally social, but beliefs will differ, the sacred is universal, but lines of the sacred will be drawn differently, we are all an auto-pilot by default, but people will be relatively 'awake' or 'asleep' to differing extents, we can all taste the numinous, but spiritual experiences will range in frequency, meaning, duration and intensity; we all live in two different perceptual worlds, but some balance these worlds better than others; and we would all benefit from some form of spiritual practice, but nobody can say exactly where we should begin.

Spirituality therefore has some universal forms and structures but varying content. The challenge for us now is how to deepen the discussion in that context. How can we best speak of the spiritual in a way that helps us understand how best to live?

148. Clare outlined three principles of habits: 1.Repetition; 2.Receptivity to change and resistance to change (stable constant pattern); 3. Pathways, the path quality of habit formation and change.
149. Sloterdijk, P. (2013) op. cit. p.11.

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3. Living from our ground, not our place

> "We should find the centre of our spiritual lives beyond the code (of morals and laws) deeper than the code, in networks of living concern which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it."
> **Charles Taylor**[150]

Arising out of the foregoing understanding of the human 'ground', there is a cultural challenge to restructure our understanding of how the spiritual manifests, and why it matters. The task is to prevent our shared understanding of the spiritual collapsing into those more familiar and comfortable ideas that hover around it: the theological, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, emotional, scientific, mystical, psychological, and sociological; even though it contains elements of all of them, it is important to give spirituality conceptual integrity of its own that can be spoken of in accessible ways.

My suggestion is to think of spirituality in terms of four main aspects of human existence that are consistently distorted or misrepresented, but can and should be a larger part of the public conversation. From our workshops, literature review and public events it became clear we need to try work within certain core cultural discourses about themes that connect us at the deepest, most universal level. Love, death, self and soul were selected, not as an exhaustive or exclusive map, but to illustrate why the spiritual is not fringe or niche but right at the heart of our lives.

Love (the promise of belonging)

> "'God is Love' became 'love is God'."[151]
> **Simon May**

The centrality of love emerges from the emphasis on relationships arising from the social brain, the moral function of the sacred, and the role of practice in strengthening patterns of affect and behaviour.

Love has become almost synonymous with attraction and desire and romance, but these points of emphasis obscure a much deeper phenomenon. Jules Evans was one among a number of workshop participants

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150. Taylor, C. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. p.743.
151. May, S. (2011) *Love: A History*. London: Yale University Press.

who felt that love was an under-discussed element of spirituality. Speaking of his own transformative experiences, recounted in his book *Philosophy for Life*, Evans spoke of how the experience of love sometimes allows for a 'reset' of everything in one's life. Andrew Powell and Robert Rowland Smith alluded to the timeless quality of the experience of love, and indicated that we can't give depth to the spiritual without a direct appreciation of its role in our lives.

But how does that come about? The anthropologist Helen Fisher has come to think of love as "one of the most powerful brain systems on earth for both great joy and great sorrow". The human longing for love has also been described as a quest to fill a deeply profound void. In the book *Love: A History*, philosopher Simon May describes love as, "the rapture we feel for people and things… [that] sets us off on – and sustains – the long search for a secure relationship between our being and others".[152]

Love is associated with the desire to belong, which various psychologists view as an integral part of what makes us human.[153] May further explains: "If we all have a need for love, it is because we all need to feel at home in the world." The erosion of religious affiliation and the sense of displacement in a globalising world place increased pressures on our capacity to "feel at home in the world" and, by definition, to love.

Among the many forms of love that a person can experience, the 'highest' form of love is often associated with spirituality. Religions, for instance, are known to attribute unconditional love exclusively to divine beings. For instance, the Bible states: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."[154] According to Simon May, our modern idealised notion of romantic love is actually based on the unconditional form of divine love that is evident throughout the Bible – though perhaps most recognisably in Corinthians:

> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

These biblical conceptions of a "love that never fails" can be found in the present day notions of "eternal love" and "living happily ever after". May explains that modern ideas of romantic love have been hijacked from religious contexts, suffering a fundamental distortion in the process. Personal relationships are thus burdened by tacit expectations of unconditional love, ultimately resulting in dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the relationship. "To its immense cost" May argues, "human love has usurped a role that only God's love used to play." In further support of this view, various scholars on the subject view the notion of unconditional love as "mythical" and practically unattainable by humans. This then begs the question of why we find the notion of unconditional love so compelling that we judge our relationships by it.

152. Ibid.
153. Baumeister, R. & Leary, M. (1995) The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3) 497–529.
154. 1 John 4:8

The search for unconditional love may in fact be a manifestation of a deeper human longing for what Simon May calls "ontological rootedness". Life is naturally bereft of certainty and our bodies and personalities undergo several evolutions, to the point that recognising the person we were several years ago becomes a challenge. With the passage of time, our friends and loved ones undergo the same processes of change. Change is perpetual and pervasive and a love that is unfailing, everlasting, and unconditional represents an antidote to the transient nature of life, holding the promise of providing what May calls "an indestructible grounding for one's life".

Historically, such grounding was originally found in religion, spirituality, and the sacred. In his book, *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love,* Robert Johnson writes,

> "So much of our lives is spent in a longing and a search – for what, we do not know. So many of our ostensible "goals", so many of the things we think we want, turn out to be the masks behind which our real desires hide; they are symbols for the actual values and qualities for which we hunger. They are not reducible to physical or material things, not even to a physical person; they are psychological qualities: love, truth, honesty, loyalty, purpose – something we can feel is noble, precious, and worthy of our devotion. We try to reduce all this to something physical – a house, a car, a better job, or a human being – but it doesn't work. Without realising it, we are searching for the sacred. And the sacred is not reducible to anything else."[155]

In our public event on love, Mark Vernon, echoing CS Lewis, offered four conceptions of love, but offered a developmental perspective.[156] The earlier transitions bring the realisation that another person exists, who not just gives, but receives love as well (from the first to second forms of love), and that people can nourish and be supported by various forms of love (from the second to third forms of love). The final and most complex form of love is spiritual in nature. Saint Augustine described this capacity for love as one that "reaches not just for others or for life, but for nothing less than the infinite". In other words, the fourth form of love relates to those elements that transcend people, things, and the self; the individual may realise that love is not dependent on any one person or thing, but rather that love is "already flowing through us", and has "in a sense, already *made* us." As in Corinthians above, this is a love that does not seek to possess or create, but just is.

We can catch a glimpse of this experience of love when we find ourselves welling up with emotion about things we deeply identify with. The centrality of love is closely connected to our extended period of infancy when we need to rely on others for so long, and perhaps we feel that deep interdependence more than we are allowed to express in an individualistic culture.

155. Johnson, R. (1983) *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love*. New York: Harper Collins.
156. C.S. Lewis also described four types of love: (1) Affection (Storge); (2) Friendship (Philia); (3) Romance (Eros); and (4) Unconditional love (Charity or Agape). Lewis, C.S. (1960) *The Four Loves*. Geoffrey Bles.

"Change is perpetual and pervasive and a love that is unfailing, everlasting, and unconditional represents an antidote to the transient nature of life"

Simon May

What appears to be missing are discussions of how love and will come together, a key theme in the growing Psychosynthesis movement. As Devorah Baum indicated, maternal love has a ferocity; it's not passive or even particularly peaceful. Simon May argues that it is thanks to our desire for ontological rootedness that we can "unleash the will to value, defend, affirm, empathise with, and give to the supremely loved one in the most intense way possible".[157]

If we allow our experience of love to make our existential 'ground' clear to us, and even move us to tears, how do we harness that deep wellspring of meaning and power to act in the world? Martin Luther King seemed to recognise that this was our fundamental challenge:

> "Power properly understood is …the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change… One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites – polar opposites – so that love is identified with the resigna-tion of power and power with the denial of love. Now we've got to get this thing right…Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic… It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time."[158]

The spiritual injunction here is to tap into the deep sources of our own power and love, and embark on the lifelong challenge of bringing them together in practice. In many ways that challenge is the overarching spiritual challenge that this report seeks to draw attention to.

157. May, S. (2011) op. cit. p.31.
158. Sourced from Kahane, A. (2010) *Power and love: A theory and practice of social change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

What Kind of Love Do We Need?

RSA Public Event Series on Spirituality (5 of 6)
17 July 2014

> Dust – what seems to be the least important matter in the world, the absence of meaning – continually appears in religious and in literary texts as love itself. In other words, there is nothing but love.
> Dr Devorah Baum, English lecturer and panellist at the RSA event What Kind of Love Do We Need?

Love was the focal point of the RSA's fifth of six public events on spirituality. Dr Jonathan Rowson opened the event by describing a recent instrumental and concerning shift in global consciousness: from intrinsic values to extrinsic values, from evidence to data, from mythos to logos, from wisdom to an overabundance of information, and, perhaps more simply, to an increasing sense of losing touch with the roots of meaning. This latter shift, concerning the loss and erosion of meaning, seems to plague spirituality and love alike. Jonathan quoted Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran to illustrate a deeper meaning of love that lies in stark contrast to modern notions of love-as-comfort, pleasure, and/or happiness:

> "When love beckons to you, follow him,
> Though his ways are hard and steep."

> "And think not you can direct the course of love,
> for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course."

Psychotherapist Mark Vernon followed up with a rich intellectual exploration of how our understanding and expression of love can evolve over the lifespan. Four different and increasingly complex developmental positions, or stages, of love are identified. Most adults experience and have developed positions one through three, but interestingly, it is the final position (fourth) that involves spirituality implicitly. Narcissistic love, the first position, is most evident in the newborn whose needs are quickly fulfilled shortly after his or her desire is expressed (ie, via crying, screaming, etc). As the child develops, he or she begins to realise that they are not the only creature in the universe. "Life expands as a result" and shifts to the second position: dyadic love. This can be seen in the exclusive or insular type of love between mother and child, young infatuated lovers, pious believer and God, etc, where little or nothing beyond the dyad seems to matter. The third position – romantic love – involves a "triangulation", in which the dyadic relationship expands to include other people, interests, and values. "Friendship is the love of this phase," Mark explains. The fourth and final position, transpersonal love, is described as spiritual and "beyond language." A person at this position may have a capacity for love, or for relating, to another shortly after meeting. "Love as the ground of being itself", Mark concludes.

Dr Devorah Baum wove a rich and elaborate picture of love as a profound force that propels us toward union, growth, separation, and suffering. "Freedom is the word that love conjures up… a mirage of blissful unity, of satiated desires, of Eden" but paradoxically, "to 'fall' in love is the sinful, the criminal, the anarchic, the loss of innocence, the agony of separation, and the exile from Eden". She describes love as an unruleable emotion, sometimes characterised by "ferocity, desire, and madness". "Loving someone" she states, "or even caring for someone doesn't mean that you're not going to screw them or yourself up in unforeseeable ways." Delving further into complexity and ambiguity, Devorah describes love as a force that "hurtles us into the other, the stranger, the unknown". In this sense, passionate love attempts to merge with the other, breaking down the barriers that separate our minds, bodies, and souls. Love profoundly challenges us with the "inevitability of loss" and the inability to fully or forever possess the object of one's love. For love to mature, she explains, "the love we need must be transformed into the love we want", or rather into the "kind of love that we can live without". Evolution entails not the renunciation of desire, but simply the recognition that "living without, is at the heart of it".

From left to right: Mark Vernon, Dr Jonathan Rowson, Dr Devorah Baum at the RSA event: What Kind of Love Do We Need?

www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2014/what-kind-of-love-do-we-need

Summary by Andres Fossas

Death (the awareness of being)

"I face up to death but then I flip back into denial. Surely that's what it's like? I lie in bed in the small hours of the morning, absolutely terrified by the apprehension of my own dissolution…And then I go to sleep and wake up in the morning and make toast."
Will Self[159]

Given that the etymological root of spirituality means vitality or aliveness, it may seem paradoxical to argue that death is at the heart of it. Still, death becomes an unavoidable subject of inquiry when you reflect on the fact we live and age mostly on auto-pilot (as described in section 2, Automatic processing), and that our bodies are mortal (explored further in section 2, Embodied cognition). Death is the quintessential feature of our existential 'ground', and the discomfort we have in facing up to it is a large part of the reason we prefer to focus our lives on our social or economic 'place'. Moreover, as the greatest human

159. Self, W. (2014) Let's Talk About Death. RSA public event, 23 June. [Video file] Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lE0uT5Kyt4 (circa 51:28)

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uncertainty, death is often regarded as a major stimulus for the origin of religion.[160]

In our first workshop we experienced perhaps the most intense moment of the entire project when our guest speaker Sam Sullivan, President of Global Civic Policy Society and former Mayor of Vancouver offered a captivating account of the spiritual dimensions of his sustained political commitment. He suffered a skiing accident when he was nineteen, which left him quadriplegic, in a wheelchair for life. Soon after the accident, while contemplating suicide, he imagined his own death in vivid, visceral and bloody terms. After meticulously simulating the gunshot in his imagination, he described how he felt, now as the witness to his own continued breathing, noticing with singular intensity the sensation that remained in his disabled body, but highly functional mind; only now from a renewed, life-affirming perspective: "There seems to be some helpful movement, I thought…Somebody could do something with that. Hey, *I* could do something with that."

This simulated death experience brought him out of despair, and sustained spiritual practice related to stoicism helped him forge a celebrated career in disability activism and public service, which continues.[161]

Sam Sullivan's case is striking, but there is a large literature on near-death experiences (NDEs) and post-traumatic growth (PTG) that suggests it is part of a familiar pattern. Close encounters with death are often referred to as "spiritual catalysts" that can result in surprisingly positive outcomes for the individual.[162] Those who report NDEs, for instance, by either coming close to dying or actually reaching 'clinical death', describe profound shifts in deeply-held views. The most common shifts are characterised as: greater appreciation for life, concern for others, acceptance of death/mortality, concern for meaning, heightened sense of spirituality, and lack of concern for materialism and impressing others.[163]

In his celebrated Stanford commencement speech, Steve Jobs contextualised why death is a spiritual catalyst as follows:

> "Remembering you are going to die is the best way of avoiding the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart."
> **Steve Jobs**[164]

Beyond all the great contributions, my main reflection concerns the connection between the public salience of death and research in the social psychology of values championed by the 'Common Cause' approach to

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160. Hood, R. W., Jr., Hill, P. C. & Spilka, B. (2009) *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach* (4th edition). New York, NY: Guilford.

161. I am very grateful to Jules Evans for arranging this, and for Sam Sullivan for sharing so openly.

162. See, for example: Cozzolino, P. J., Staples, A. D., Meyers, L. S. & Samboceti, J. (2004) Greed, death, and values: From terror management to transcendence management theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30(3), 278–292.

163. Ring, K. (1980) *Life at death: A scientific investigation of the near-death experience.* New York: Coward, McCann, & Geoghegan. As cited in Cozzolino et al., (2004).

164. Jobs, S. (2005) Stanford Commencement address. [Video File] Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF8uR6Z6KLc

> *"If reflecting on our own deaths tends to promote intrinsic values and weaken extrinsic values, and concealing death has the opposite effect, our cultural representations of death clearly have political and economic implications"*

social change.[165] One of their leading tenets is that appealing to extrinsic motivations (fame, money, status) can be a technical solution to short term behaviour change, but it will undermine long term behaviour change which requires an alignment of intrinsic values (love, nature, craft) with the desired change. If reflecting on our own deaths tends to promote intrinsic values and weaken extrinsic values, and concealing death has the opposite effect, our cultural representations of death clearly have much greater political and economic implications than we tend to realise.

So why don't we do just that? Because death is terrifying, and facing up to it requires extraordinary courage. In the Pulitzer-Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker writes:

> "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man."[166]

In social psychology, terror management theory (tmt) originated as an empirical framework for Ernest Becker's ideas and has since spawned hundreds of published studies.[167] The theory holds that reminders of one's own death (ie, *mortality salience*) trigger existential anxiety and give rise to a host of unsavory unconscious behaviours and defenses to alleviate it.[168]

In general, thoughts of death prompt individuals to hold on more rigidly to their current worldviews and beliefs. In over 300 peer-reviewed scientific studies, participants responded to reminders of death by more strongly holding onto and defending their cultural worldviews, whatever they happen to be. For instance, when examined through a political lens, death anxiety promoted aggression towards people with rival political beliefs and support for charismatic leaders with shared beliefs.[169] More generally, increased mortality salience leads to more favourable judgments of similar others, less favourable views of dissimilar others, greater discomfort when one personally violates a cultural norm, harsher penalties prescribed for the cultural transgressions of others, and an increased sense of greed.[170] The increased in-group bias and out-group prejudice observed in Americans during the aftermath of 9/11 provides a real-world

165. Crompton, T. (2010) *Common Cause: the case for working with our cultural values*. COIN; Campaign to Protect Rural England; Friends of the Earth; Oxfam; WWF. See also broader work of Public Interest Research Centre, which builds on this report.

166. Becker, E. (1973) *The Denial of Death*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

167. Burke, B. L., Martens, A. & Faucher, E. H. (2010) Two decades of terror management theory: A meta-analysis of mortality salience research. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 14(2), 155–195*.

168. Greenberg, J. Solomon, S. & Pyszczynski, T. (1997) *Terror management theory of self-esteem and cultural worldviews: Empirical assessments and conceptual refinements*. Academic Press.

169. Cohen, F. & Solomon, S. (2011) The politics of mortal terror. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 20(5), 316–320*.

170. For reviews, see Burke, B. L., Martens, A. & Faucher, E. H. (2010) Two decades of terror management theory: A meta-analysis of mortality salience research. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(2), 155–195; and Tritt, S. M., Inzlicht, M. & Harmon-Jones, E. (2012) Toward a biological understanding of mortality salience (and other threat compensation processes). *Social Cognition*, 30(6), 715–733.

illustration of these effects.[171] Surprisingly, even very subtle or indirect reminders of mortality, such as mere attention to one's own body[172] or a comparison of humans to animals,[173] can activate our defences against the threat that death represents.

As our first speaker in the public event on death, philosopher Stephen Cave spoke to the audience as follows:

> "Death is a Taboo, maybe our last taboo[174]…Death shifts you into a different gear…If you are religious you'll now be feeling more religious. If you are patriotic you'll now be feeling more patriotic. Whatever the core of your worldview is, because we've mentioned the death word, you'll now be holding on to it more tightly and will more aggressively defend it."

At face value, there is therefore conflicting evidence; awareness of death appears to focus our lives for the better, but it also leads to a kind of toxic tribal entrenchment. This is where the emphasis on experience and practice that spirituality offers has explanatory power and social significance. The psychological defences just described apply to cognitive reminders of death but not to actual lived encounters with death. In an excellent e-book *Meeting Environmental Challenges*, Tom Crompton and Tim Kasser review the evidence from social psychology to make the point very clearly: brief reminders of mortality tend to activate values of self-interest and destructive impulses (pp.19–22) but the most striking example came from participants in writing in a simulated forestry-management scenario, in which briefly writing about their own deaths lead them to want to chop down more trees. However, a sustained, reflective meditation on death can increase concern for others (human and non-human) (pp. 48–49).[175]

This modern evidence chimes well with spiritual traditions. In our public event on death, Dr. Joanna Cook gave a vivid account of an experience that formed part of being a Buddhist nun in Thailand: "I was given a photographic atlas of the body and I was asked to meditate on it. So the idea here is that one sits with the images of dissected corpses and then imaginatively extends one's understanding of the photos into one's understanding of one's own person. Now at first it was really frightening, and then exhilarating and then quite transformative. But initially I had to leave the book outside at night."

171. Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S. & Greenberg, J. (2003) *In the wake of 9/11: The psychology of terror*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

172. Goldenberg, J. L. (2005) The Body Stripped Down An Existential Account of the Threat Posed by the Physical Body. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(4), 224–228.

173. Beatson, R. M., & Halloran, M. J. (2007) Humans rule! The effects of creatureliness reminders, mortality salience and self-esteem on attitudes towards animals. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(3), 619–632.

174. In his comments on this report, Ian Christie made an interesting challenge to this point: "Whose last taboo, though? 'Our' here seems to mean: 'liberal atheist-humanists' last taboo. It is not a taboo in the religious traditions. As with the other categories, we are confronting a situation in which liberal humanism, agnostic at least and atheist at most, is struggling to find answers to ultimate questions that the faith traditions have tackled for millennia, but cannot bring itself to look at the process and findings they have come up with. Perhaps the last taboo for liberal humanism is the acknowledgement that it has a lot to learn from traditions whose premises and goals it wishes to deny?"

175. Crompton, T, and Kasser (2009) Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity. Surrey: WWF-UK. Available at: www.assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/meeting_environmental_challenges___the_role_of_human_identity.pdf

"Awareness of death appears to focus our lives for the better, but it also leads to a kind of toxic tribal entrenchment"

Such practices may seem bizarre or morbid by western social standards, but they allow human minds to reach a sort of psychological truce with our mortal enemy in the most literal sense. Dr. Cook elegantly articulates this notion: "…there's no cheating death here; the meditator learns to stare down the vertiginous fact of her own mortality, unflinchingly and intentionally. And it's in so doing that religious principles move from propositional beliefs into experiential reality…".

Echoing this point about religions grasping the need to know death experientially, Will Self remarked that Christianity "does death well", even to the extent of engendering belief in God:[176]

> "When I say, as an agnostic, that religion does death well, what I mean is, that the part of me that is a genuine agnostic is swayed, under the influence of a Christian funeral. I couldn't believe I think they do it well if I was sitting there thinking this is obviously…Sky-God nonsense, clearly part of me is responding."[177]

The point is that if you are going to 'do' death, it is important to do it well, and not least because doing so offers clarity into what is most meaningful in life. Consider that Bronnie Ware, a palliative nurse, distilled the five most common regrets of dying individuals from numerous first-hand accounts (Ware, 2012a):

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I didn't work so hard.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

Insofar as the five listed regrets are considered to be "emotionally meaningful", they may all be mediated by the construct of authenticity (even the second goal, "I wish I didn't work so hard" was reported to work in service of nourishing interpersonal relationships). Authenticity has been defined as the unhindered expression of one's true or core self in daily life.[178] The essence of this construct is plainly described in Kübler-Ross and Kessler's book, *Life lessons: Two experts on death and dying teach us about the mysteries of life and living*. The authors write: "Deep inside all of us, we know there is someone we were meant to be. And we can feel when we're becoming that person. The reverse is also true. We know when something's off and we're not the person we were meant to be" (2001).

Realising that one is approaching death seems to have a significant impact on the types of goals people pursue. According to socio-emotional

176. In his feedback on the paper, Ian Christie wrote: "But doing it well in the Christian sense is not just about having a good style of send-off and a gift for striking the right note of depth and solemnity.…'Doing Death' is not just about process but also about trust, hope and conviction about things which are actually the ultimate facts of the matter in existence.

177. Self, W. (2014) Let's Talk About Death. RSA public event, 23 June. [Video file] Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lEouT5Kyt4 (circa 37:10)

178. Kernis, M. H., & Goldman, B. M. (2006) A multicomponent conceptualisation of authenticity: Theory and research. *Advances in experimental social psychology, 38, 283–357.*

selectivity theory (SST), as a person begins to view their time as limited (rather than abundant or open-ended), the types of goals they pursue change from acquisition of knowledge/resources to the regulation of emotion.[179] In other words, when we realise that our time in life is finite, we prioritise emotionally meaningful goals and experiences. In these circumstances, people tend to forego maintaining many superficial relationships in favour of deepening the few deemed most significant. This general family of shifts has been correlated with increased emotional experiences and wellbeing in late life.[180]

Let's Talk About Death

RSA Public Event Series on Spirituality (4 of 6)
23 June 2014

> What's the strangest thing about the world? Anybody may die at any moment, but everyone behaves as if they'll live forever.
> Will Self, novelist, journalist, and panelist at the Let's Talk About Death RSA event

The fourth of six public RSA events on spirituality focused on the disturbing yet fascinating topic of death. A panel of four speakers, including the director of the Social Brain Centre at the RSA, Dr Jonathan Rowson, offered various rich perspectives on approaching, contemplating, and, perhaps paradoxically, growing from the inevitable truth of our own mortality.

Jonathan Rowson began by drawing light on the relationship between death and the spiritual: "…in nine months of doing this [spirituality] project, it's become clear to me that [death] is really at the heart of it". Furthermore, experiencing a felt sense for death and its subsequent impact on our lives might even be considered a prerequisite for understanding any notion of spirituality. Empirical research has shown that many or most individuals who come close to death are psychologically and positively transformed as a result, often reporting profound shifts in their personal values, worldviews, and life priorities. "It's like we don't already know we're going to die" and "curiously, [we] don't seem to feel it unless [we're] given a warning" he concluded.

179. Carstensen, L. L., Isaacowitz, D. M., & Charles, S. T. (1999) Taking time seriously: A theory of socioemotional selectivity. *American Psychologist*, 54(3), 165.

180. Carstensen, L. L., Turan, B., Scheibe, S., Ram, N., Ersner-Hershfield, H., Samanez-Larkin, G. R., Brooks, K.P. & Nesselroade, J. R. (2011) Emotional experience improves with age: evidence based on over 10 years of experience sampling. *Psychology and aging*, 26(1), 21.

Philosopher, critic, and author Steven Cave described death as a powerful social and personal "taboo" that, even upon verbal mention, can effect rapid changes in one's state of mind. He referenced research findings from over 400 experiments in Terror Management Theory showing that people more strongly attach to and aggressively defend their particular worldviews when they think about death. In alignment with Jonathan's previous statements, Steve highlighted the sharp distinction between thinking about death and actually engaging with death. While thinking can trigger a sort of psychological narrowing or constriction, engaging with death can trigger a psychological opening or expansion, such that socially-imposed goals fall away and a new "vivid appreciation for life" emerges. In several ancient civilisations this keen awareness of death was equated with wisdom. Steve aptly closed his talk by underlining the value of intimately knowing our mortality and quoting Psalm 90:12: "Lord, teach us to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

Joanna Cook, researcher and lecturer in medical anthropology, echoed the previous speakers in that explicit experience with death – ie, an experience that is directly seen and felt – "becomes constitutive of who one is" and results in a fuller engagement with life. To illustrate this, Joanna described her profound experiences as an ordained Buddhist nun in Thailand, where she meditated extensively on various manifestations of death and human mortality. Part of her training involved contemplating images of dissected human corpses, meditating alongside terminally ill patients in hospitals, and chanting at wakes. She left the audience with the following hard-earned insight: "…there's no cheating death here, the meditator learns to stare down the vertiginous fact of her own mortality, unflinchingly, and intentionally. And it's in so doing that religious principles move from propositional beliefs into experiential reality".

According to journalist and novelist Will Self, modern society undermines the reality of death by portraying it as spectacle or entertainment. In doing so, our collective ability to confront the reality of death is significantly diminished. Evidence for the pervasiveness of this social monopoly on death is present in numerous disparate examples: characterising the death of a military service member as a "sacrifice", creating anniversary dates for historically significant deaths, the negative stigma surrounding unassisted suicide in case of terminal illness or severe incapacity, and the advancement of "scientifically-brokered immortality" in various guises (eg, cryogenics). Religions seem predicated on similar notions of immortality that, ultimately, shield us psychologically from confronting death directly. Unlike modern day institutions, Will refuses to draw sharp distinctions between death and life, opting instead to view them as a single entity he calls "death-life" – a notion comparable to Einstein's concept of space-time.

From left to right: Will Self, Dr Jonathan Rowson, Dr Joanna Cook, Steven Cave at the RSA event: Let's Talk About Death

www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2014/lets-talk-about-death

Summary by Andres Fossas

Spiritualise: revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges

Self (the path of becoming)

> "What the advertiser needs to know is not what is right with the product but what is wrong about the buyer."
> **Neil Postman**[181]

> "Why are you unhappy? Because 99.9 percent of everything you think, and of everything you do, is for yourself – and there isn't one."
> **Wei Wu Wei**[182]

There appear to be four main perspectives on the spiritual significance of the self, all of which contain implicit injunctions that appear to pull us in different directions.

Let go!
First, and most fundamental, there is the metaphysical idea that the self is not real, which entails an injunction to reduce our attachment to particular ideas of who and what we are. This could be thought of as the injunction to: let go! As Robert Rowland Smith put it in our second workshop: "To be spiritual, in a radical sense, means not to be oneself."

Grow!
Second, there are models in humanistic-, developmental- and transpersonal psychology, and in psychotherapy, that point to pathways for the maturation and integration of the self, namely: grow! As Labour MP Chris Ruane put it: "People speak about one world. My party speaks about one nation. I think we need to be *one person*."[183]

Be yourselves!
Third, in theoretical sociology and psychology the self is presented as being subject to a proliferation of contexts and expectations through urbanisation, globalisation and social media, and some have argued that these external changes are so fundamental that we are advised *not* to seek to integrate, but, like Walt Whitman's saying "I contains multitudes", to accept this 'multiphrenia' as an essential feature of modern life, namely: Be yourselves![184] Buddhist psychotherapist Mark Epstein may not share this theoretical tradition, but his captures are attuned to it: *"We are all engaged in a futile struggle to maintain ourselves in our own image."*[185]

181. Postman, N. (2006) *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. Penguin.

182. Wei Wu Wei. (1963) *Ask The Awakened*. Routledge-Kegan Paul Ltd.

183. Ruane, C. (2013) Mindfulness in the Political Life. [Video file]. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AcAaUIRpzE /

184. For more on the modular self, and how our ultimate judgments and behaviour depend on which one of our "selves' is in the driving seat (working towards a given evolutionary goal), see Kurzban, R. (2010) *Why everyone (else) is a hypocrite: Evolution and the modular mind*. Princeton University Press, and Kenrick, D. T. & Griskevicius, V. (2013) *The rational animal: How evolution made us smarter than we think*. Basic Books.

185. Epstein, M. (2004) *Thoughts without a thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist perspective*. Basic Books. p.44.

Be still!

Fourth, there is the phenomenological or narrative perspective of self-consciousness, referred to by social psychologist Mark Leary as the most distinctive feature of being human, and what he calls "the curse of the self".[186] This chatter of self-creation and self-concern is something that spiritual practice is often directly targeted at reducing, with the injunction amounting to: be still! As writer Tim Parks puts it: "As words and thought are eased out of the mind, so the self weakens. There is no narrative to feed it… 'Self' it turns out, is an idea we invented, a story we tell ourselves. It needs language to survive."[187]

While we cannot analyse or integrate all of these perspectives in detail, they all inform what follows. What is clear is that we live in a culture built around the needs of the self, but we are not particularly clear on what the self is, or what it really needs. We speak of self-confidence, self-esteem, self-centred behaviour, self-righteousness, self-help, selfishness, selflessness and so forth. There are theories of the ecological self, the saturated self, the divided self, the protean self, the quantified self and in 2013, 'selfie' was even voted word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries. And if this world of literal and figurative selfies sometimes seems a bit unreal, it might be because the self is a bit unreal too.

Dr. Sam Harris, neuroscientist, atheist and experienced Buddhist meditator writes: "There is no discrete self or ego living like a minotaur in the labyrinth of the brain. And the feeling that there is – the sense of being perched somewhere behind your eyes, looking out at a world that is separate from yourself – can be altered or entirely extinguished."[188]

That's an important statement, echoing the theory of 'annata' in Buddhist psychology and western philosophy going back at least to Hume, but it's not the full picture.[189] Even if the self is not objectively 'real' in the sense of being substantial, stable and unchanging, the idea of the self has personal and cultural meanings that are subjectively and inter-subjectively important. 'Self', 'personality' and 'identity' have slightly different points of emphasis, but you can sense the central importance of the self to spirituality by considering psychoanalyst Erik Ericson's credible statement: "In the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity."[190] Then juxtapose that idea with Mark Epstein's remark that the spiritual is "whatever takes us beyond the personality".

Across different philosophical and religious traditions it seems that spiritual growth is partly about the development and integration of what we think of as the self, but also a progressive awareness that the self we are working with, and through, and for, is in an important sense unreal; in light of this fundamental equivocation, there is value in thinking of the self as 'virtual'.[191]

186. Leary, M. R. (2004) *The curse of the self: Self-awareness, egotism, and the quality of human life*. Oxford University Press.

187. Parks, T. (2012) *Teach Us to Sit Still: A Skeptic's Search for Health and Healing*. Rodale.

188. Harris, S. (2014) *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

189. Baggini, J. (2011) *The ego trick*. Granta Books.

190. Erikson, E. H. (1988) Youth: Fidelity and diversity. *Daedalus*, 1–24.

191. Varela, F. (1997) Ethical Know How, Action. In Varela F. (ed.) *Sleeping, Dreaming and Dying – An exploration of consciousness with the Dalai Lama*. Wisdom Publications.

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We are most familiar with the term virtual from the idea of 'virtual reality' and 'virtually' typically means 'almost real'. Francisco Varela, a neuroscientist, meditator and continental philosopher argues that the self can be thought of as 'virtual' in the sense that it seems real, and functions as if it were real, but on closer inspection it turns out to be insubstantial, without any ontological substratum. The self is experienced as a totality, and this illusion matters because many of our maladaptive behaviours arise from our attempts to grasp and construct this totality, thereby making it difficult for our truer, better but more contingent natures to emerge. One analogue that gives this claim some initial plausibility is the selfless nature of the experience of expertise, particularly the experience of 'flow',[192] which is often associated with the absence of self-consciousness:

> "When one is the action, no residue of self-consciousness remains to observe the action externally. When non-dual action is ongoing and well-established, it is experienced as grounded in a substrate both at rest and at peace.
>
> To forget one's self is to realise one's emptiness, to realise that's one's every characteristic is conditioned and conditional. Every expert knows this sensation of emptiness well."[193,194]

If we think of the self as virtual, then "whenever we find regularities such as laws or social roles and conceive of them as externally given, we have succumbed to the fallacy of attributing substantial identity to what is really an emergent property of a complex, distributed process mediated by social interactions".[195] Buddhist theorist David Loy explains why this matters:

> "Our deepest problem is a spiritual one. Since that word is not respectable in some circles and too respectable in some others, let me emphasise the special sense of the word as it is employed in the interpretation of Buddhism that follows. Our problem is spiritual insofar as what is necessary is a metanoia, a turning around or rather a letting-go, at our empty core…That sense of separation from the world is what motivates me to try to secure myself within it, but according to Buddhism the only satisfactory resolution is to realise I am not other than it."[196]

"Even if the self is not objectively 'real' in the sense of being substantial, stable and unchanging, the idea of the self has personal and cultural meanings that are subjectively and inter-subjectively important"

192. Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991) *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Perennial.

193. Varela, F. & Shear, J. (eds.) (1999) *The View from Within: First person approaches to the study of consciousness*. Imprint Academic. pp.34–35.

194. In Varela's terms, to say that the self is virtual is to say that *biologically* the self is: "a coherent global pattern that emerges from the activity of simple local components, which seems to be centrally located, but is nowhere to be found, and yet is essential as a level of interaction for the behaviour of the whole" (Varela 1999: 53). *Linguistically*: "What we call 'I' can be analysed as arising out of our recursive linguistic abilities and their unique capacity for self-description and narration" (Varela 1999: 61). *Socially*: "'I' can be said to be for the interactions with others, for creating social life. Out of these articulations come the emergent properties of social life for which the selfless 'I' is the basic component…"

195. Varela, F. & Shear, J. (eds.) (1999). op. cit. p.62.

196. Loy, D. (2000) *Lack and Transcendence: The Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism and Buddhism*. Humanity Books. p.xvii.

Buddhism is not for everybody, but a very similar idea is evident in western thought and 'succumbing to the fallacy' is precisely what cultural and market influences often lead us to do by treating us not only as 'consumers', but as consumers with particular consumption preferences that serve to prop up more or less coveted identities. Indeed much of social and economic life is about scrambling to make real and whole something that can perhaps only ever be virtual and patched together. Theoretical psychologist Kenneth Gergen puts it like this:

> "As the traditional individual is thrust into an ever-widening array of relationships, he or she begins increasingly to sense the self as a strategic manipulator. Caught in often contradictory or incoherent activities, one grows anguished over the violation of one's sense of identity."[197]

That type of fragmented experience of self may be familiar to many, but Gergen's point is that it may be we have to go through this experience of feeling 'saturated' by the strain of curating all these identities to reach a richer equilibrium:

> "As Saturation continues, this initial stage is superseded by one in which one senses the raptures of multitudinous being. In casting 'the true' and 'the identifiable' to the wind, one opens an enormous world of potential… The final stage in this transition to the postmodern is reached when the self vanishes fully into a stage of relatedness. One ceases to believe in a self independent of the relations in which he or she is embedded."[198]

Ray Lifton goes further, developing this point directly in opposition to the idea that the self is unreal:

> "Whatever the claim of Eastern disciplines or Western mysticism, there is no real 'escape from self'. Our very experience of high states in which we seem to move beyond the self are testimony to its range and possibility. And the quest (in Zen Buddhism, for instance) for formlessness is, in actuality, an effort to have achieved, upon one's 'return', changes or alterations in the self's forms. Those forms always include what (Charles) Taylor calls 'common space' with other human beings – shared structures having to do with family, ethnic groups, society, and culture, as well as with innate psychobiological tendencies that are the 'common space' of humankind."[199]

Gergen and Lifton's remarks are consonant with the argument above about the social brain and relational consciousness being a key aspect of the spiritual. Perhaps the best answer to the abstract metaphysical question of whether we have a self, is the conviction, through our experience, that our self becomes real through our relationships with others.

197. Gergen, K. (1991) *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*. Basic books. p.17.

198. Gergen, K. (1991) Ibid.

199. Lifton, R. J. (1999) *The protean self: Human resilience in an age of fragmentation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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Coming to know your self as virtual in experience, for instance through certain forms of meditation, therefore has a transformative effect because we (rightly) cease to think of 'I' as our true centre, and the resulting shift in our view of who we are changes how we function in relation to others. In this context, Buddhist psychotherapist John Welwood's warnings about 'spiritual bypassing' are important, namely the danger of trying to shore up a shaky sense of self with personal spiritual practices alone, rather than through the complex emotional and psychological work involved in improving human relationships.[200]

While we may glimpse the self's virtuality in fleeting moments, to live it experientially may require a prior integration of the psyche that is built not upon meditation but rather upon life experience, relational work, even therapy. On this account, self is the territory where spiritual progress depends on strengthening and integrating on the one hand (even if what is integrated is a more resilient multiphrenia) but seeking to transcend on the other. As psychiatrist and meditator Jack Engler says: "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody."

The spiritual problem is that both – being somebody and being nobody – are easier said than done. The process of trying to be somebody is partly about your actions in the world, but these are always accompanied by an inner monologue. We have built a culture and an economy that requires us to curate and choreograph an identity for the world, but this process of construction has a live commentary – an ongoing cacophony of self-concern and self-justification that undermines the quality of our lives and our capacity to be present for others. In our third workshop Jules Evans calls this judgmental inner monologue his 'inner Fox News'.

Our culture praises and encourages people to create their own personal 'brand image', and once this story is cast, it becomes locked-in. With this problematic inner life in mind, Matthew Taylor's suggestion that we need "an idea of individual aspiration linked to self-discipline and self-knowledge as well as self-expression" seems timely.[201] There are such ideas, of course, as we argued in *Beyond the Big Society: Psychological Foundations of Active Citizenship*. The idea that we grow in 'mental complexity' – our capacity to disembed our perspective from our immediate experience – is familiar from Piagetian theories of childhood development, and informs education policy, but is strangely absent from the behavioural turn in policy and public discourse more generally, perhaps because the notional hierarchy within adulthood, rather than between adults and children, is politically sensitive.[202]

But on that point, we really need to grow up. The literature on post-formal thinking (ie beyond the mental development of an eighteen-year-old) indicates that a meaningful change in the quality and efficacy of at least some forms of social productivity will require people to be able to disembed themselves from certain social and psychological influences that

200. Welwood, J. (2014) *Toward a psychology of awakening: Buddhism, psychotherapy, and the path of personal and spiritual transformation*. Shambhala Publications.

201. Taylor, M. (2014) 'Creative communities with a cause'. *Matthew Taylor's blog*, RSA, 29 April [blog]. Available at: www.matthewtaylorsblog.com/thersa/creative-communities-with-a-cause/?_ga=1.260026573.679069808.1418204749

202. For fuller details of these perspectives, see Rowson, J., Mezey, M., Dellot, B. (2012) *Beyond the Big Society*. London: RSA. [Online] Available at: www.thersa.org/action-research-centre/learning,-cognition-and-creativity/social-brain/reports/beyond-the-big-society

undermine autonomy, responsibility and solidarity, so that they can relate to those influences more flexibly and constructively. This kind of growth is 'vertical' in the sense that it changes *how* we know the world rather than 'horizontal' in the sense of changing *what* we know about the world. Such models of mental complexity are theoretically highly developed, and amenable to empirical measurement.

In light of the explanatory power of this perspective, when policy makers try to change behaviour through conventional policy instruments like incentive structures, environmental influences and choice architectures, Harvard Professor Robert Kegan argues they show "an astonishingly naïve sense of how important a factor is the level of mental complexity".

Notions of human growth and transformation are deeply rooted in both spirituality and psychology. Some psychologists have devoted their careers to researching how people can, and sometimes do, transform psychologically throughout their lives, while religious scholars have suggested that the ultimate purpose of spirituality is to transform the individual – from one kind of person into another kind of person. Strikingly, the Buddha referred to meditation practice as *bhavana,* which literally means "development."

In our third workshop, Oliver Robinson noted that the literal opposite of develop (fold out) is to envelop (fold in). When asked to elaborate by email he wrote: "The word development means to reveal, the opposite of envelop, which means to conceal or wrap up. Development in the modern world has been generally conceived as increase; enhancing complexity, accretion of new ideas, growth, scaling up, but the origins of the word mean a taking off. In contrast to the general modern trend towards development as more-ness, spirituality has (to a degree) remained allied to that original meaning of the word development, emphasising things like: reduce thought chatter, find your inner light, stop talking so much, unlearn things, become still and simple, take off your social mask, be spontaneous, and allow your creative impulses and emotions spontaneous release."

Nobel-prize winning physiologist Albert Szent-Gyorgi recently said he found it impossible to explain the mysteries of biological development "without supposing an innate 'drive' in living matter to perfect itself".[203] This drive, he believed, led organisms to grow and achieve greater levels of complexity, organisation, order, and harmony. Carl Rogers, a founding figure of psychotherapy, observed this "innate drive" in his clinical work. "We can say that there is in every organism, at whatever level, an underlying flow of movement toward constructive fulfilment of its inherent possibilities".[204] Rogers refers to this underlying flow toward growth as an organism's "actualising tendency".

The picture of the self as spiritual terrain is therefore rich and complicated and hard to distil, but at its heart there is a process of becoming, and it is up to us to speak more clearly of that process, and consider the educational and cultural antecedents of what we become.

203. Szent-Györgi, A. (1977) Drive in living matter to perfect itself. *Synthesis* 1 1(1):14–26.
204. Rogers, C. (1995) *A way of being.* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Spiritualise: revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges

Soul (the sense of beyondness)

"Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same."
Kathy in Wuthering Heights[205]

"That's the point: we need a word that's hard to define, because, if we define it, we'll probably miss the point altogether."
Iain McGilchrist on 'the soul'[206]

If the self is a complicated subject – difficult to understand, the soul is a complex one – difficult to articulate. It is about human experience in its broadest possible context, and that breadth militates against precision. As RD Laing put it:

"I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience. We are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another. Experience used to be called The Soul."[207]

The soul gets at the idea of being human in the context of the depth and breadth of humanity, rather than being a particular person in the context of a single life. The soul is about our experience as such, while the self is about the commentary we give to experience.

While this distinction between self and soul is helpful, McGilchrist's point about the limitations of defining the soul is fundamental to understanding what the soul is. It's not just that we can't define it, but that the value of the concept is precisely to show up the limitations of the mentality that seeks definitions. As James Hilman put it: "The soul is less an object of knowledge than it is a way of knowing the object, a way of knowing knowledge itself." In McGilchrist's terms, the soul is dispositional, more of a process than an entity, and more of a 'how' than a 'what'.

This point bears repeating, because it is easy to nod in assent without really feeling it. Again Hillman puts it succinctly: "The soul is a deliberately ambiguous concept, resisting all definition, in the same manner as do all ultimate symbols which provide the root metaphors for the systems of human thought." McGilchrist lists a few: "Mind, matter, nature, gravity, time, energy and God, all fall into this category. We can't really say what they are at all."

This embrace of ambiguity is transgressive in important ways. In a late capitalist culture that has become ever more fixated on definition, measurement and financialisation, the soul serves as a crucial bulwark to preserve intrinsic meaning and value. McGilchrist puts it like this: "There's a danger, in my terms, of the left hemisphere having to collapse things too quickly into something familiar, 'what is it precisely?', leaving, therefore, no place for the intuited and the implicit, through which

"The soul is about our experience as such, while the self is about the commentary we give to experience"

205. Brontë, E. (1847: 2007) *Wuthering Heights*. Broadview Press.
206. McGilchrist, I. (2014) [online] op. cit. What happened to the soul? (2014) RSA public event, 31 March. Transcribed in 'What is the soul and why does it matter?'. *RSA blogs*, 14 December [blog] Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/the-soul-matter/
207. Laing, R. D. (1990) *The politics of experience and the bird of paradise*. Penguin UK. p.16.

alone all great ideas in art, in religion, and in our lives are communicated. Making things more explicit doesn't actually make them easier to understand: it means we understand something *other than what it is we are seeking to know.*"

With this implicate understanding in mind, it seems safe to say that we already know what the soul is, it's only when asked to make that knowledge explicit that we run into trouble. The challenge is that the conventional wisdom among most scientists and analytic philosophers is that the soul is mostly a religious and pre-modern folksy notion that makes no sense with respect to modern understandings of our evolved bodies and brains.

However, if you don't move in those kinds of sanitised intellectual orbits – and most people don't – the apparent death of the soul might cause bemusement. Even if we don't adhere to a religious or even philosophical (technically 'ontological') account of individual souls, it's not so easy just to discard the notion. Sometimes words capture elements of experience that we lose forever when those words disappear. As Iain McGilchrist put it in his talk at the RSA:

> "Nowadays it's become a kind of embarrassment to talk about the soul; *and yet until now it has been central to most cultures.* The word has disappeared. And language is an aspect of reality. *If it's true, as Wittgenstein said, that philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by language,* making something disappear by language could bewitch us into thinking it didn't exist."

Our awkwardness towards speaking of the spiritual may be quite closely related to the loss of authority we feel in the meaning of the soul. The idea of immaterial substances inhering in individuals is still held by some, but the notion that if you don't subscribe to that particular idea of the soul, you can't speak of the soul at all is deeply problematic. Losing 'the soul' means losing an essential reference point for qualities of human experience that are deeply valuable not just despite but *because* they are inherently difficult to articulate.

The point of distinguishing between self and soul is to put clear water between something we take for granted that is actually problematic or even unreal; something we need to work on – the self, and something we tend to neglect and undervalue, but which should become a much more salient part of our lives; something we need to be receptive to and deeply grateful for – the soul.

Theologian Keith Ward puts it like this:

> "The whole point of talking of the soul is to remind ourselves constantly that we transcend all the conditions of our material existence; that we are always more than the sum of our chemicals, our electrons, our social roles or our genes…We transcend them precisely in being indefinable, always more than can be seen or described, subjects of experience and action, unique and irreplaceable."

In this respect, 'Soul' is not anti-scientific, it's anti-scientistic; it is consistent with a respect for the scientific method but challenges scientific

overreach into philosophy and ideology. From a materialist perspective Nicholas Humphrey argues that humans actually live in 'the soul niche' and he means niche in the conventional ecological sense of the term – the environment to which we are adapted. "Trout live in rivers, gorillas in forests, bedbugs in beds. Humans live in soul land."[208]

Humphrey adds that 'soul land' is a territory of the spirit and also that this spiritual territory is not only where humans live, but also where they give of their best. Reclaiming the soul is also therefore partly about placing creative expression at the centre of people's lives. Consider the expression of artist Edward Hopper: "If you could say it, there would be no need to paint it"[209] or as the poet and dramatist Victor Hugo put it: "Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent."[210]

The language of soul and soulfulness has enormous value for the arts broadly conceived and part of the reason we need to find the courage to speak of the soul, is because it is the authentic language of the arts in a way that cost-benefit social return on investment calculations never can be.

The final point about the soul is what follows from this analysis for individual souls, and here we can be unequivocal: we have souls! They are not separate from our material conditions, but they are no less real for that:

> "The whole of creation is about the making of things particular out of things that are whole…the soul is that which seems to me not to be in any way opposed to material existence, but transcends it. It's not separate from the material, in the way that a wave is not separate from the water; and yet the form, the force field, the thing that shapes it, the thing in which it's instantiated, is something concrete and not concrete at the same time."[211]

Reclaiming the language of the soul in general, and of our own souls, therefore gives us greater capacity to fight for aspects of life that have intrinsic value. When Sting sings "Let your soul be your pilot", we know what he means, and that may be partly because, as Tracy Chapman sings:

> "All that you have is your soul."

The main point of this section was to draw out the features of human need, evasion, identification and context in languages that are universal: love, death, self and soul. In each case, an examination seems to yield an implicit injunctive message. With love, it is: know me, and belong. With death: know me, and live a deeper life. With self: know me, and transform. With soul: know me and create.

It is time to consider what might follow from the spread of such spiritual knowledge.

"Reclaiming the soul is also therefore partly about placing creative expression at the centre of people's lives"

208. Humphrey, N. (2011) *Soul dust: the magic of consciousness*. Princeton University Press.
209. Edward Hopper.
210. Victor Hugo.
211. McGilchrist, I. (2014) [Online] op. cit.

What happened to the soul?

RSA Public Event Series on Spirituality (3 of 6)
31 March 2014

> The soul seems to me to be process… perhaps we have to grow our souls…
> a latent function that needs to be nourished to grow and expand.
> Dr Iain McGilchrist, keynote speaker

Attendees of the third of six public RSA events on spirituality witnessed the psychiatrist and author Dr Iain McGilchrist weave the invisible and delicate lines between which the soul may reside. He begins his exploration with two guiding questions: what use is the soul as an idea, and what might the soul be like?

The soul, according to McGilchrist, is a deliberately ambiguous concept that resists precise definitions like other "metaphors of human thought", such as mind, matter, nature, gravity, God. Unlike other concepts however, the soul places the person in the widest possible context, beyond the confines of immediate time, space, and the person him or herself. It seems to involve the idea of a destiny as well. Furthermore, Carl Jung believed that the soul may be what makes meaning possible, deepening events into experiences and granting authenticity to the world. McGilchrist quotes Iris Murdoch's play, *Above the Gods*, in this regard:

In a way, goodness and truth seem to come out of the depths of the soul. And when we really know something we feel we've always known it. And also, it's terribly distant, farther than any star. We're sort of stretched out. It's like beyond the world, not in the clouds or in Heaven, but a light that shows the world – this world – as it really is.

So what might the soul be like? McGilchrist suggests that it is less like matter and more like an elusive energy process or potentiality that is constantly unfolding in living beings. He then wonders: "Perhaps not all souls are equal, perhaps we have to grow our souls, perhaps souls can be so thwarted that they're almost extinguished" such that depression, for instance, may be seen as a form of "soul sickness". Tying the previous concepts together, McGilchrist believes that suffering in general may help the soul to grow. In this sense, a soul might be a disposition towards life, "a disposition that is both rapt and reflective and makes a living process possible… that opens a space".

Thinking and moral reasoning are parts of the soul too, though deeper and more transcendent aspects, over which we have less power, are present as well. In regard to emotion, McGilchrist played an excerpt of a moving musical piece, *Le Roi*, by Sir John Tavener, to illustrate that we can respond to music and art in a way "to which the word 'emotion' is wrong", and to which the words 'spiritual' or 'soulful' are closer to the mark.

While the soul is sometimes considered to be separate from the body, in that it moves on and endures after our death, in life, the two seem inextricably linked. In what seems like paradoxical wisdom, McGilchrist suggests that though the soul is not the same as the body, it is not opposed to it either. In other words, the soul is simultaneously intangible as well as embodied, or rather, in the world but also beyond it. The idea of the soul encapsulated by the body is also evident in the popular adage "the eyes are the windows to the soul" and similarly in the words of 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: "The human body is the best picture of the human soul."

McGilchrist concluded his spiritual exploration in poetic fashion with an insightful quote from Eugene Gendlin: "We think more than we can say, we feel more than we can think, we live more than we can feel, and there is much else besides." And perhaps, McGilchrist suggests, the "much else besides" is what we mean by the soul.

Dr. Iain McGilchrist at the RSA event: What Happened to the Soul?

www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2014/what-happened-to-the-soul

Summary by Andres Fossas

4. Spiritual pathways to personal, social and political transformation

"If spirit is a name for the resistant and transcending faculties of the agent, we can spiritualise society. We can diminish the distance between who we are and what we find outside of ourselves."
Roberto Unger[212]

In section one it was argued that while the spiritual cannot be strictly defined, it has a complex relationship with both religion and wellbeing; it is a signpost for a range of touchstones, particularly meaning, the sacred and transcendence; and its purpose is to reorient our attention away from our social and economic 'place', and towards our existential 'ground'. In section two some scientific and social-scientific evidence helped illuminate why 'beliefs' are not what we typically assume, why the sacred won't go away, why the spiritual injunction to 'wake up' matters, why the experience of meaning is visceral, why our need for perspective and balance is greater than ever, and why we need to take spiritual practice seriously. And in section three it was argued that the concerns of our human ground should be explored through revitalised public discussions with respect to love, death, self and soul.

With all that in mind, what then is the place of the spiritual in the public realm?

In the course of this project, we have tried to answer this question several times in a range of blog posts. We initially made a case for spirituality as the key bridge between personal and social transformation, arguing that we need spiritual practices, perspectives and experiences to help us in our "lifelong challenge to embody our vision of human existence and purpose" because human immunity to change is otherwise too strong.[213]

We also argued that we need spirituality to deepen our understanding of the public wellbeing debate by placing greater emphasis on meaning and growth, rather than pleasure; and the political adoption of behaviour change, by challenging conventional wisdom about unchangeable human traits, particularly relating to our automatic natures. We also drew

"Reclaiming the language of the soul in general, and of our own souls, therefore gives us greater capacity to fight for aspects of life that have intrinsic value"

212. Unger, R. M. (2007) *The self awakened: Pragmatism unbound*. Harvard University Press. p38.
213. Rowson, J. The Brains Behind Spirituality. (2013) *RSA Journal*, Summer. [Online] Available at: www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2013/07/the-brains-behind-spirituality/

attention to the role of the spiritual in existing practice within education, social work, nursing and psychiatry.[214]

More recently, in the context of global inequality and acute ecological problems, combined with a rise in mental health problems and loneliness, we argued the public role of the spiritual was to help us to imagine a society with a better balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.[215]

And in our work on climate change last year, the spiritual was implicit in the call to get over what we call 'stealth denial' – knowing while acting as if one didn't know – and 'wake up', even if that means some kind of ritual process in which we grieve for our lost habitat, an idea suggested by various others who sense that the climate crisis has spiritual roots, including philosopher Clive Hamilton and *The Guardian's* Jo Confino.[216]

While all of that, and more, helps make the utilitarian case for spirituality, the real value of the spiritual may be even deeper.

Some have argued that spirituality and utility are like oil and water – they are not supposed to mix. For instance, in his commencement address at Stanford, Zen Priest Norman Fischer was adamant that spiritual practice must be "Useless, absolutely useless":

> "You've been doing lots of good things for lots of good reasons for a long time now" he said, "for your physical health, your psychological health, your emotional health, for your family life, for your future success, for your economic life, for your community, for your world. But a spiritual practice is useless. It doesn't address any of those concerns. It's a practice that we do to touch our lives beyond all concerns – to reach beyond our lives to their source."[217]

This sentiment is echoed by Iain McGilchrist, partly in his talk on the soul at the RSA, but also in an earlier workshop. Just as we don't ask of people "What's he/she *for*?" Nor should we approach spirituality in the spirit of its use value.

On this account, the very nature of spirituality is antithetical to policy because it is not utilitarian, and calls the whole utilitarian philosophy that underpins most policy into question.

In our final workshop, Oliver Robinson drew attention to a helpful distinction of Evelyn Underhill to resolve this tension. Spirituality has both mystical aims (ie, spirituality as end in itself) and instrumental aims (ie, spirituality as means of attaining other goals). As an analogy, Oliver mentioned Art and Design as complementary features of a similar perspective, with one emphasising intrinsic value, and the other more extrinsic application; but no sense of them being in fundamental conflict.

214. Rowson, J. (2013) Taking Spirituality Seriously. *RSA blogs*, 2 October [blog] Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2013/socialbrain/spirituality/

215. Rowson, J. (2014) Towards a Post-Extrinsic Society. *RSA blogs*, 26 November [blog] Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/postextrinsic-society/

216. See for instance, Confino, J. (2014) Grieving could offer a pathway out of a destructive economic system. *The Guardian*, sustainable business section, 2 October [Online] Available at: www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2014/oct/02/grieving-pathway-destructive-economic-system; and Rowson, J. (2013) *A New Agenda on Climate Change*, [Online] Available at: www.thersa.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1536844/RSA_climate_change_report_03_14.pdf

217. Sullivan, K. (2014) Zen Buddhist priest urges Stanford graduates to cultivate spiritual practices. *Stanford News*, 14 June. [Online] Available at: www.news.stanford.edu/news/2014/june/baccalaureate-event-fischer-061414.html

With this in mind, it would be completely counter-productive to help ourselves to a particular notion of the spiritual to serve as an axiom to further political ends. Instead it seems most fitting then to end with some suggestions that are about restoring a sense of balance between 'ground' and 'place', between spiritual and material, between extrinsic and intrinsic, to show them as fundamentally integrated aspects of our lives and purposes.

The twelve points that follow should therefore be read as calls to action, but not of the conventional injunctive 'do this!' variety. In each case the suggestion is that most issues in the public realm have spiritual roots that we need to acknowledge, engage with, and 'bring to the table' when our personal and professional roles oblige us to think more instrumentally. In this respect, they are our first attempt at a template for Martin Luther King's claim that we need to bring love and power together in practice. The potential prize is what Roberto Unger calls "a larger life" for every man and woman.[218]

From political power to personal power and back again

> "There was an uneasy calm about the post-millennial world - shattered by 9/11. Then we were talking about the 'Clash of Civilisations' rather than 'The End of History'. Strangely, despite apocalyptic predictions, two failed wars and a loss of life on a terrifying scale, 9/11 seems to mark a diversion rather than a fundamental change. There is actually something bigger that is going on. Then came the crash. At the time, we were worried about man-made climate change. Suddenly, we were worried about our entire economic structure. We no longer feel able to control our destiny. Complex systems – economic, cultural and environmental – surround us. Yet we have lost a sense of agency. There is a reason for that. We have."
> **Anthony Painter**[219]

Our idea of power is in flux. Moses Naim speaks of "the end of power", arguing that because of technological developments, globalisation and shifts in mentalities, power is now "easier to get, harder to use and easier to lose". [220] Benjamin Barber argues that national governments are now "too big for the small problems and too small for the big problems".[221] After a range of failures and partial successes, NGOs are losing faith in the power of multi-national institutions like the UN to solve international problems, not least on the slow-burning planetary emergency that is climate change. While we may never have loved politicians, the 2012 annual Edelman Trust Barometer survey found that the proportion of people inclined to trust government in 18 countries had fallen to a new low of just 38 percent.[222]

218. Unger, R. M. (2007) op. cit.
219. Painter, A, (2014) Why have we lost control and how can we regain it? *RSA blogs*, 2 May [blog] available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/enterprise/lost-control-regain/
220. Naim, M. (2014) *The End of Power*. Basic Books.
221. Barber, B. (2012) Can Cities Save us? *RSA Journal*, Winter. [Online] Available at: www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/journals/winter-2012/
222. 2012 annual Edelman Trust Barometer survey available at: www.edelman.com/insights/intellectual-property/2012-edelman-trust-barometer/

So traditional hierarchical power is less potent and less credible, but it doesn't follow that power is becoming more evenly distributed. The rallying cry "We are the 99 percent" may have been rhetorical rather than empirically motivated, but it was based on a well-justified perception that financial power is far too concentrated, and in a way that threatens democracy. And the technological roots of this inequality are in danger of becoming entrenched. Jaron Lanier argues that the financial value of data for advertisers and the lack of effective micropayment mechanisms online means that money, information and power are increasingly the same thing; and they are mostly flowing from unremunerated individuals to major companies like Facebook, Amazon, Twitter and Google.[223]

Since traditional forms of power are failing to deliver, we appear to need a richer experiential grasp of personal and collective power to address major social and ecological problems, especially those that are broadly 'wicked' in nature – including how to keep global average temperatures within a 'safe' range, how to safeguard public health against a range of related threats to it, how to navigate rapid technological change, and how to reduce global wealth inequality.[224]

Such problems, and many more, often call for levels of global awareness, analytical insight, perspective taking and value fluency that few possess, and we need to grow into such qualities, individually and collectively. Speaking at the Davos Forum in 2006, for instance, Bill Clinton referenced Ken Wilber and remarked that we need a "higher level of consciousness" to solve interrelated planetary problems.[225]

The role and relevance of political power has therefore never been more confusing, while the need to get in touch with an inner sense of personal power and development has arguably never been greater. Spirituality points to the possibility of acquiring such 'levels of consciousness' through various forms of spiritual practice and commitment. Indeed, far from being a niche escape from the world, spiritual commitment of this kind – to grow in mental complexity – seems to be a cultural imperative for surviving in the 21st century.[226]

But we cannot do it alone. Indeed personal power is inextricably linked to our capacity to develop ourselves through common endeavour with others. Andrew Samuels puts it like this:

"Being actively engaged in a social, political, cultural or ethical issue, together with others, initiates the spiritual. This is a very different perspective from one that would see social spirituality as being something done in the social domain by spiritual people. To the contrary, there is a kind

223. Lanier, J. (2014) *Who owns the future?* Penguin Books.

224. Wicked problems have a range of features that call for levels of depth and insight that may go beyond existing understandings eg they contain multiple actors with multiple interests and values; it's often not clear exactly what the problem is, and problems are framed in ways that favour some parties over others; they don't lend themselves to expert solutions, and you don't really know what the problem is until a solution arises (because that gives rise to new problems). See, for instance, Rosen, J. (2012) Covering wicked problems. *Press Think*, 25 June. [Online] Available at: www.pressthink.org/2012/06/covering-wicked-problems/

225. See 'Clinton at Davos' on YouTube. [Online] www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEjKr2gA8Wk

226. We outlined the details of this perspective in Rowson, J. et al. (2012) op. cit.

"Since traditional forms of power are failing to deliver, we appear to need a richer experiential grasp of personal and collective power to address major social and ecological problems"

> *"The fact that we are losing touch with sources of intrinsic value (meaning, community, transcendence, the sacred) is a large part of why, as Michael Sandel says, we are no longer a society with a market ('social democracy') but more like a market society ('neoliberalism')"*

of spiritual rain that can descend on people who get involved in politics and social issues with others."

Relatedly, Matthew Taylor speaks of a shift in perspective from citizens as being the passive recipients of social change through policy, to become the active shapers of it through mobilisation.

> "The point is not that we don't need policy, nor that it isn't better to have good policies than bad ones, but that we need to think of policy as fuel for a strategy of social renewal, not the engine of that renewal."[227]

So let's think about the engine. 'Policy' might sound a million miles from the spiritual, but if policy is less about governments doing things, and more about them enabling us to do things; if it's about the social productivity and civic engagement that most complex policy problems now call for, and if that comes back to our sense of personal power which is driven by ideals and feelings and vision, and the sense of being part of something bigger than ourselves; then people will 'get involved' for reasons that are correctly thought of as spiritual. For instance, when we find that mindfulness practice changes our attitudes and behaviours that are beneficial to the environment, that is now a 'policy' development.[228,229]

From utility to virtue and back again

Most of the western world has gradually reduced the role of religion in our political economy for good reasons that were partly about loss of presumed religious 'faith' in the population but mostly about the abuse of power outside of democratic control. However, the collateral damage was to remove the spiritual aspects of religion that are an important counter-vailing force for humanity in the context of capitalism. The fact that we are losing touch with sources of intrinsic value (meaning, community, transcendence, the sacred) is a large part of why, as Michael Sandel says, we are no longer a society with a market ('social democracy') but more like a market society ('neoliberalism'). Reconceiving the spiritual is about trying to deal with that corrosive loss of perspective, and points towards some of the following attempts to rebalance society.[230]

In Rowan Williams's review of Sandel's book *What Money Can't Buy*, he pinpoints the premise of Sandel's critique into excessive marketisation and points towards forms of resistence as follows: "The fundamental model being assumed here is one in which a set of unconditioned wills negotiate control of a passive storehouse of commodities, each of them capable of being reduced to a dematerialised calculus of exchange value. If anything could be called a 'world-denying' philosophy, this is it…a possible world of absolute commodification. If we want to resist

227. Taylor, M. (2014) IPPR and Miliband – new direction, same engine? *Matthew Taylor's Blog*, RSA, 19 June. [blog] Available at: www.matthewtaylorsblog.com/politics/ippr-and-miliband-a-new-direction-but-the-same-engine/

228. Ericson, T., Gunaketu, B. and Barstad, A. (2014) Mindfulness and sustainability. *Ecological Economics*, 104 (issue C), pp.73–79.

229. Rowson, J. (2014) 29 September [blog] op. cit. Available at: www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2014/09/can-spirituality-inform-public-policy-yes-no-and-maybe/

230. Sandel, M. J. (2012). What money can't buy: the moral limits of markets. Macmillan.

this intelligently, we need doctrine, ritual and narrative: sketches of the normative, practices that are not just functions, and stories of lives that communicate a sense of what being at home in the environment looks like – and the costs of failure as well."[231]

Similarly, in the context of 'political emotions' Martha Nausbaum writes that: "Public culture needs something religion-like … something passionate and idealistic if human emotions are to sustain projects aimed at lofty goals… Mere respect is not enough to hold citizens together when they must make sacrifices of self-interest." [232]And in their book *How Much is Enough?*, Robert and Edward Skidelsky present a detailed description of the good life and a rationale for its various elements as an alternative vision to modern capitalism, but in the penultimate paragraph of their book, without forewarning they write: "Could a society entirely devoid of the religious impulse stir itself to pursuit of the common good? We doubt it."[233]

While it is not clear exactly what is meant by 'the religious impulse', emerging empirical evidence from the fields of psychology and neuroscience provide support for the role of spiritual practices, such as mindfulness meditation, as tools for 'inner shaping' and the cultivation of several prosocial qualities that may be required for actively caring about the good life eg, compassion,[234, 235] empathy,[236] altruism,[237] and inner peace.[238]

Common to all such perspectives is the idea that to challenge utilitarianism as the default mode of thinking requires a deeper connection with our own spiritual roots, whether within existing institutions or through the process of creating new ones. It doesn't follow of course, that we cease to value utility, but just that we retain a broader and richer perspective of the collateral damage caused by seeking it without it being contained within a larger perspective on ultimate ends.

From economic objectives to existential threats and back again

Just as 'terror management theory' helps to explain why we don't face up to death, there are existential threats to humanity as a whole that

231. Williams R. (2012) From Faust to Frankenstein: Markets alone should not determine our conception of what is desirable. *Prospect*, May [Online] Available at: www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/rowan-williams-archbishop-canterbury-markets-sandel-skidelsky-marx-morality-aristotle-good-life

232. Nussbaum, M. C. (2003) *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions.* Cambridge University Press.

233. Skidelsky, R. & Skidelsky, E. (2012) *How Much is Enough?: The Love of Money and the Case for the Good Life.* Penguin UK.

234. Condon, P., Desbordes, G., Miller, W. B. & DeSteno, D. (2013) Meditation increases compassionate responses to suffering. *Psychological Science*, 24(10), 2125–2127.

235. Lutz, A., Brefczynski-Lewis, J., Johnstone, T. & Davidson, R.J. (2008) Regulation of the neural circuitry of emotion by compassion meditation: Effects of meditative expertise. *Public Library of Science PLOS ONE*, 3 (26 March) [Online] Available at: www.journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0001897

236. Hunsinger, M., Livingston, R. & Isbell, L. (2014) Spirituality and Intergroup Harmony: Meditation and Racial Prejudice. *Mindfulness*, 5(2), 139–144.

237. Huber II., J. T. & MacDonald, D. A. (2012) An Investigation of the Relations between Altruism, Empathy, and Spirituality. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 52(2), 206–221.

238. Liu, X., Xu, W., Wang, Y., Williams, J. M. G., Geng, Y., Zhang, Q. & Liu, X. (2013) Can Inner Peace be Improved by Mindfulness Training: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Stress and Health*, 22 November [Online] Available at: www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/smi.2551/abstract.

"Public culture needs something religion-like … something passionate and idealistic if human emotions are to sustain projects aimed at lofty goals"

Martha Naussbaum

"Viewing climate change as an existential threat rather than a technocratic challenge requires the kind of spiritual disposition we considered earlier, namely an openness to experience and a willingness to turn our lives around if necessary"

might transform the way we live if only we looked at them more directly. Existential threats include sudden developments like asteroid strikes, biological warfare and abrupt and uncontrollable advances in artificial intelligence,[239] but the most tangible existential threat is a slow burning one – climate change.

Viewing climate change as an existential threat rather than a technocratic challenge requires the kind of spiritual disposition we considered earlier, namely an openness to experience and a willingness to turn our lives around if necessary. Meyers puts it as follows:

"Because the normative implications of climate change challenge our most basic background assumptions, we cannot simply treat this deeply systemic issue as a problem to be handled consciously and deliberately, if only people had sufficient knowledge and will-power. Unlike broken hammers and cars, we don't simply become conscious of existential problems affecting the lifeworld in order to fix them. Instead, as Heidegger explains, we become insecure and anxious – often without knowing why or even noticing."[240]

Part of the shift from 'place' to 'ground', and from life to death is to wake up to the broader features of our ecological ground that are under threat. Or as Elizabeth Oldfield put it in a recent 'Thought for the Day', we need to learn to *love* our shared habitat as if it were a cherished home, and until we realise that it really is something we love that is under threat, our response is unlikely to be fit for the task.[241]

This kind of fundamental shift doesn't mean you stop thinking about the economy, but just as a terminal illness can radically change your perspective on how you want to live, climate change should lead to a shift in perspective in the kind of economic system we need to have.[242] There is some evidence this is beginning to happen, with a variety of models of 'green growth' proposed. However, the core challenge to an economic paradigm based on what Naomi Klein calls 'extractivism' remains, and many have argued that the brutal logic of climate science – particularly relating to time sensitivity – requires a rethinking of basic features of capitalism, including the driving economic objective of most governments around the world – economic growth.[243]

239. Rees, M. (2014) The world in 2050 and beyond. *New Statesman*, 26 November. [Online] Available at: www.newstatesman.com/sci-tech/2014/11/martin-rees-world-2050-and-beyond

240. Meyers, T.C. (2014) Understanding Climate Change as an Existential Threat: Confronting Climate Denial as a Challenge to Climate Ethics. *De Ethica*, (1)1. [Online] Available at: www.de-ethica.com/archive/articles/v1/i1/a06/de_ethica_14v1i1a06.pdf

241. Oldfield, E. (2014) Thought for the Day BBC Radio 4, *Today Programme*, 17 May. [Audio file] Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01zcgln

242. For further details on the tensions in the economic aspects of the climate debate see Rowson, J. (2013) op. cit. [Online].

243. The most authoritative case on connecting growth to emissions is probably Oppenheim, J. (2014) *Better Growth, Better Climate: The New Climate Economy Report, The Synthesis Report*. The Global Commission on the Economy and Climate. [Online] Available at: www. newclimateeconomy.report/; For an exacting challenge to this kind of 'green growth' scenario, see Roberts D. (2014) Hey, Paul Krugman: Here's the real argument about climate change and economic growth. *Grist*, 8 October [Online] Available at: www.grist.org/climate-energy/hey-paul-krugman-heres-the-real-argument-about-climate-change-and-economic-growth/

It is precisely because this tension between economic objectives and existential threats is so profound and intractable that we may need deeper perspectives and practices arising from the spiritual to resolve or transcend it.[244]

From surface to depth, and back again

In a culture often thought to be shallow, awash with celebrity gossip, status updates and formulaic scandals; and in a policy landscape awash with 'wicked problems' like global wealth inequality and climate change, this need and appetite for depth of experience and insight is palpable. This need has historically been sidestepped by governments and deferred to religions, but at a time of disengagement with organised religion, political alienation and democratic stress, it is no surprise that politicians and public alike are seeking to reconnect with forgotten spiritual roots. During her RSA talk, Claire Foster-Gilbert, director of the Westminster Abbey Institute, described Parliament Square as being like "a brittle sponge that is so desperate for water… it's obvious in the people, the institutions, it's in the air, this huge longing for depth".[245]

But we struggle to 'do' depth in public. Isaiah Berlin helps indicate why:

"The notion of depth…is one of the most important categories we use. Although I attempt to describe what profundity consists in, as soon as I speak, it becomes quite clear that no matter how long I speak, new chasms open. No matter what I say, I always have to leave three dots at the end. I am forced to use language which is, in principle, not only today, but forever, inadequate for its purpose."[246]

Given this 'three dots problem', combined with media formats that tend to give little bandwidth and encourage snappy messaging, it's no surprise depth struggles to find a place in public language. Part of the solution is to acknowledge publicly that we need to 'go deep' more often in many spheres of life and policy, but also that we don't need to *stay* there.

In this respect, Gay Watson spoke in the fourth workshop of one of the main teaching stories designed to capture the spiritual journey of Zen Buddhism. The series of ox herding pictures represent our struggle to tame and guide the ego – a deep and protracted struggle – but, crucially, the final stage of the journey is about "Coming back to the market with open arms." ie it's about what we do for others with the depth we gain from spirituality, rather than viewing the journey towards depth as a way to escape the surface demands of our lives.[247]

"In a culture often thought to be shallow, awash with celebrity gossip, status updates and formulaic scandals, the need and appetite for depth is palpable"

244. See Rowson, J. (2012) The Understandable Madness of Economic Growth. *RSA blogs*, 26 March [blog]. Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2012/socialbrain/losing-religion-pursuit-economic-growth-delusional/

245. Foster-Gilbert, C. (2014) speaking at the RSA event, 19 November: *Love, Death, Self and Soul*. [Video file] Available at: www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2014/11/rsa-event-love-death-self-and-soul/

246. Isaiah Berlin, quoted by Iain McGilchrist, (2014) [Online] op. cit.

247. See for instance, Schloegl, I. (2011) *Gentling the Bull: a spiritual journey*. Tuttle books.

Love, Death, Self, and Soul

RSA Public Event Series on Spirituality (6 of 6)
19 November 2014

> It's obviously the people… but it's the institutions, it's in the air, this huge longing for depth.
> Claire Foster-Gilbert, Guest Speaker and director of Westminster Abbey Institute

The final RSA event emphasised the possible integration of a modern re-conception of spirituality into the public realm. Four speakers – Dr Jonathan Rowson, director of the RSA's Social Brain Centre; Claire Foster-Gilbert, founder and director of the Westminster Abbey Institute; Dr Andrew Samuels, psychotherapist and author of *Politics on the Couch*; and Marina Benjamin, author and senior editor of *Aeon* magazine – presented moving explorations of what it might mean to introduce a post-religious spirituality into public life.

Dr Jonathan Rowson described that spirituality deals with three key questions relevant to our daily lives: (1) What are we; (2) How should we live; and (3) Why are we here? While answers to the second and third questions lie in the realms of ethics and metaphysics respectively, the first question – What are we? – is increasingly being illuminated by scientific research. The spiritual notion of "waking up" for instance, is grounded now in an increasingly sophisticated understanding of automaticity, the fact that human beings live predominantly on psychological *autopilot*. A post-religious spirituality, Jonathan explained, can be thought of in terms of four main aspects of human existence that are consistently distorted or misrepresented but can and should be a larger part of public life. Those aspects comprise the title of the event: Love, death, self, and soul. Spirituality arises as a natural result of engaging at depth with any or all of these common elements.

Claire Foster-Gilbert is tasked on a daily basis with the question: what is the Abbey bringing to public life? To begin to provide an answer here, spirituality – of the sort presented by Jonathan – has to enter the discussion. Claire describes the response from the people and institutions at Parliament Square to the Westminster Abbey Institute like "a brittle sponge that is so desperate for water… it's obviously the people, [the] institutions, it's in the air… this huge longing for depth, for the chance to think about what it is that we're trying to do as public servants". In thinking of a post-religious spirituality, she made a moving personal plea for us to turn towards the old religions as a source of insight and learnings going forward. "Bring that inspiration, that greater and better understanding of who we are, to the religions we have."

Andrew Samuels, advocated for recognition of the spiritual for political and social transformation. "If you change only the material conditions, if you change only the constitutional and legal frameworks, then you can't refresh the parts that the spiritual bit can refresh." We have to focus on both the material and the spiritual, he pleaded, and continued on to describe his unique anatomy

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of spirituality comprising three dimensions: social spirituality, democratic spirituality, and craft spirituality. Social spirituality refers to that spiritual element that comes with belonging to a group that has a goal. Democratic spirituality regards the fundamental equality across human beings. The final dimension, craft spirituality, "has everything to do with work". In this vein, Professor Samuels cited Marx in that "we have become alienated from work" and called for an open discussion on how to "respiritualise" the workplace.

Marina Benjamin highlighted that faith, religion, and spirituality have to "flex" over time; in fact, they've always done so and that's how they've survived. She believes that the surviving religions are themselves "post-religious" in the sense of having transcended those doctrines that came into conflict with various zeitgeists through history (eg, slavery). She also opined that spirituality should not be pinned down or defined, but rather should "sit comfortably with history". Marina also discussed a relevant joint project between the Club of Rome and the Alliance for Religion and Conservation (ARC), in which researchers explore the current framework of implicit values in our current socioeconomic system. Only by revealing these values do we become capable of changing them.

From left to right: Claire Foster-Gilbert, Professor Andrew Samuels, Marina Benjamin, Dr Jonathan Rowson at the RSA event: Love, Death, Self, and Soul

www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2014/love,-death,-self-and-soul

Summary by Andres Fossas

From life to death, and back again

On balance, our lives would be richer if we would find ways to increase the cultural salience of death as an aspect of life, not merely as its ending. In this regard, Will Self suggests that just as physicists came to understand that the dimensions of space and time were effectively the same thing, so we might benefit from thinking in terms of 'lifedeath'. While the term may not catch, evidence detailed above suggests a sustained reflection on death can reorient our lives in helpful ways, as long as we 'do death' in a way that prompts reflection and reorientation, not defensive evasion and entrenchment.

In this respect, we should consider what it would mean to 'do death' outside of religious contexts, whether we should, and what that might look like at scale. A good question for any such institutional form – in schools, businesses and governments – might be: how does the fact that we will die at an unknown time influence our judgment about what is most worth learning? How does our failure to acknowledge our deaths inform our inability to fully face up to other threats that have existential aspects, including climate change? If the evidence from 'post-traumatic growth' and 'near death experiences' points towards a complete

reorientation in what we value and prioritise, is there not, staying mindful of ethical concerns, a strong case for simulating the experience of dying in certain contexts?

From self to soul, and back again

When we think of how we tweak our social media profiles and other online profiles, how we update our CVs and how we present ourselves at parties, meetings and so forth, it's clear that our culture actively encourages people to create their own personal 'brand image', and once this story is cast, it can become locked-in and self-perpetuating, requiring strenuous and ongoing identity maintenance.

The idea of the soul helps to put the existing cultural emphasis on the self into perspective and we should imagine what a society that placed relatively more emphasis on the soul, and relatively less on the self might look like. One implication might be a greater emphasis on the central human importance of creativity – not 'innovation' driven by profit motive, but creativity as a fundamentally humanising experience, as expressed by Carl Rogers:

> "The mainspring of creativity appears to be the same tendency which we discover so deeply as the curative force in psychotherapy-man's tendency to actualise himself, to become his potentialities. By this I mean the directional trend which is evident in all organic and human life – the urge to expand, extend, develop, mature – the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism, to the extent that such activation enhances the organism or the self."[248]

One corollary might be to challenge our emphasis on the work ethic, with what Pat Kane calls 'the play ethic', and to take ideas like significantly shorter working weeks very seriously as a shared human goal to reduce the pressure to remain in the performative stresses of the self, and increase the time we have to cultivate our souls.[249]

From political freedom to psychological freedom and back again

The language of freedom abounds in political arguments, but we would benefit from extending the idea of freedom beyond the legal and political realms, into the psychological and existential realms. Stephen Batchelor puts it like this: "In theory, freedom may be held in high regard; in practice it is experienced as a dizzying loss of meaning and direction."[250]

While we are fortunate to live with a high degree of political and economic freedom, most people are trapped in various ways. The point of spirituality is often to present pathways out of these more subtle traps of identity (such as financial pressure and family responsibility) that are not necessarily about changing our roles, but radically

248. Rogers, C. (1954) Towards a Theory of Creativity. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 11 (4), p.249–260.

249. Kane, P. (2005) *The play ethic: A manifesto for a different way of living*. Pan Macmillan; see also Coote, A. & Franklin, J. (eds.) (2013) *Time on our Side*. London: New Economics Foundation.

250. Batchelor, S. (1997) *Buddhism without Beliefs*. Riverhead Books. p.110.

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changing our *perspective* on them. For instance, Kegan's theory of adult development can be thought of as a theory of freedom. His model of development is presented as becoming increasingly able to take as 'object' aspects of our experience that we were previously subject to; we gradually stop being defined by things, and find our own power to define them in our own ways.

In this respect, personal development is about more than ego enhancement. There are ways to grow psychologically and spiritually, and organisational theory is beginning to take this seriously. For instance, Frederic Laloux's recent book, *Reinventing Organizations* was praised by Ken Wilber, and places human development and 'levels of consciousness' at the heart of organisational vision and mission.[251]

From happiness to meaning and back again

Many of us are on what Jonathan Haidt calls 'the hedonic treadmill' – stuck in a life that is about patterns of pleasure seeking, satisfaction and renewed desire, often linked to patterns of consumption.[252] Foregoing hedonic activities to pursue more meaningful ones may result in greater wellbeing.[253] The pursuit of meaning over happiness has also been associated with better health outcomes. The point is not that wellbeing doesn't matter, but that wellbeing should include hedonic and eudaemonic aspects, and that eudaemonic wellbeing is closer to the spiritual than is hedonic pleasure seeking.

It is notable that the New Economic Foundation's celebrated 'five a day for your mind' includes paying attention, connecting with people, giving, and learning, as well as being active – none of which are pleasure-seeking activities as such.[254] The role of spirituality in the wellbeing debate is therefore to help frame the societal objective of increased wellbeing as being more than a utilitarian calculus of pleasures entertained divided by pleasures satisfied, and more about our cultural capability to relate, pay attention, find meaning and experience depth, even when such things do not make us 'happy' as such.

From extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation and back again

The public realm faces significant challenges that cannot be adequately addressed by instrumental, utilitarian thinking. By public realm I mean the political economy and all the educational, commercial, civic and media institutions related to it; all of which, of course, have human beings inside them.

"Personal development is about more than ego enhancement. There are ways to grow psychologically and spiritually, and organisational theory is beginning to take this seriously"

251. Laloux, F. (2014) R*einventing organizations*. Brussels: Nelson Parker.

252. Haidt, J. (2006) *The happiness hypothesis: Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom.* Basic Books.

253. Quoidbach, J. & Dunn, E. W. (2013) Give It Up: A Strategy for Combating Hedonic Adaptation. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 4(5), 563–568.

254. For more on nef's Five Ways to Wellbeing programme of work see www.neweconomics.org/projects/entry/five-ways-to-well-being. Studies find that people who report greater eudaimonic wellbeing have stronger immune system function, less reactivity to stress, less insulin resistance, higher HDL (ie, good) cholesterol levels, better sleep, and brain activity patterns linked to decreased levels of depression, than those reporting greater hedonic wellbeing. Fredrickson, B. L., Grewen, K. M., Coffey, K. A., Algoe, S. B., Firestine, A. M., Arevalo, J. M., Ma, J. & Cole, S. W. (2013) A functional genomic perspective on human wellbeing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110(33), 13684–13689.

> *"We should not eliminate extrinsic motivation entirely, but the language of spirituality has an important role in showing its limitations, and giving an authentic vantage point for intrinsic values that otherwise risk being diluted by being translated into instrumental language"*

RSA Fellow Ian Christie puts the point as follows:

"We have had two centuries of a civilisation of unparalleled material progress, abundance and development based on extrinsic values (self-interest, materialism, economic growth, keeping up, social mobility); intrinsic 'beyond-self' and religious values have periodically been reasserted but they have lost their institutional hold and centrality to the stories that make sense of our lives. The extrinsic values celebrated by industrial society are now under real pressure in the West as scarcities begin to return and confidence in the future wanes, for good reasons of ecological disruption, social fragmentation and economic dysfunction and inequality."[255]

The most explicit expression of a need for new thinking that is less instrumental and extrinsic came from Common Cause[256] and subsequent related publications and institutions, including The Public Interest Research Centre[257] and The New Citizenship Project,[258] but such influences remain relatively fringe. We cannot and should not eliminate extrinsic motivation entirely, but the language of spirituality has an important role in showing its limitations and giving an authentic vantage point for intrinsic values that otherwise risk being diluted by being translated into instrumental language.

From beliefs to institutions and back again

What is driving the growth in the 'spiritual but not religious' identification is perhaps as much to do with a distaste for institutions as it is a loss of particular beliefs. The binding qualities of institutions may be viewed as problematic in an increasingly individualistic culture and the 'beliefs' fall out of that, rather than the other way round. However, at the same time we crave the kinds of community and solidarity that emerge from shared values and enduring commitments, and organised religion is still pre-eminent in meeting that need.

Claire Foster-Gilbert puts it simply: "What I really want to say is… don't give up on the old religions. We need them, we need their story, we need their history, we need all the mistakes that they've made over the millennia. All the recognitions of the dangers of spirituality, my god is it dangerous spirituality, once let loose… It's all there, it's all there! And we need to go back to it with this new understanding."

As the Sunday Assembly movement transitions from a vibrant city movement to a complex international organisation, these questions of coherence, commitment and clarifying exactly what bind us together in the long term will become important. Many members do not consider themselves atheists, and some do not even think of themselves as 'Godless', which raises questions about whether the attraction is entertainment or meaning. Initial signs show a huge hunger for the congregational

255. Personal communication between Ian Christie and Jonathan Rowson. Context available online at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2014/socialbrain/postextrinsic-society/

256. Crompton, T. and Kasser, T. (2009) *Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity*. Surrey: WWF-UK. [Online] Available at: www.wwf.org.uk/wwf_articles.cfm?unewsid=3105

257. For more info see PIRC (Public Interest Research Centre): www.publicinterest.org.uk/

258. For more info see: New Citizenship Project www.newcitizenship.org.uk/index.html

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experience, currently based on a shared aspiration to 'live better, help often, wonder more', but time will tell if they can maintain high levels of participation and commitment. In Chris Harding's terms:

> "Commitment perhaps turns on just the right balance of shared interests or growing inter-personal commitment, and sufficient space for exploration and growth within the group."

This point chimes with Iain McGilchrist's arguments about needing to rebalance what we believe and how we believe it – in favour of the latter. This broader emphasis on our engagement with institutions, including our ability to create and shape them, reflects an existing tradition in spirituality that emphasises the relative transformative power of 'how' over 'what'. We shouldn't feel our only options are to go back to religion as it is, or cut spirituality off from institutional support altogether. There are many creative possibilities inbetween, both in terms of renewal and reimagining and it feels like we have barely started.[259]

The question of how we cater for new conceptions of spiritual need and aspiration socially and politically is best answered through practice rather than theory, and it will become clearer over the ensuing years and decades. In this respect, Franciscan priest and spiritual writer Richard Rohr encapsulates one of the main underlying arguments of this report as a whole:

> "We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking."[260]

259. See, for instance, De Botton, A. (2012) *Religion for Atheists*. Penguin. But also, Rowson, J, (2012) What is the 'it' that De Botton doesn't seem to 'get'. *RSA blogs*, 2 February, [blog] Available at: www.rsablogs.org.uk/2012/socialbrain/religion-atheists-it-de-botton-get/
260. Rohr, R. (1999) *Everything belongs*. Crossroad Publishing Company.

Afterword

Professor Philip Sheldrake
Author of *Spirituality: A Guide for the Perplexed, Bloomsbury, 2014*

The title of the RSA spirituality report, *Spiritualise*, is interesting in itself. It does not use the more familiar noun, spirituality, with its sense of a clear and independent 'something'. At the same time, spiritualise also suggests an action – even an imperative – to give a spiritual character to our identity and to the world in which we are grounded.

The report is rich and provocative. At the same time it seeks to confront complex issues of definition and application without becoming dense or abstruse. By the use of the word provocative I am particularly referring to the fact that it is not purely descriptive but attempts to reimagine 'the spiritual' and its central importance to human identity and existence. The report also argues in favour of the inherently transformative and challenging dimensions of spirituality. Properly understood, spirituality can lead us into uncomfortable and demanding areas of life.

In this brief Afterword, I want to highlight one or two emphases that run through the report and are particularly interesting. My choice is subjective.

To begin, spirituality is not merely about depth experiences or spiritual practices. As the report clearly underlines, spirituality, or the call to 'spiritualise', are essentially involved with a process of transformation, both personal and social. In personal terms, Part 3, in treating "the path of becoming", highlights "letting go", growing and authenticity – "be yourselves!" The quest for the authentically "spiritual" and the search for our true "ground" inevitably demands that we confront aspects of ourselves that are incomplete or even dysfunctional. In that sense, spiritual practice refers to how we set out to practise life-as-a-whole, and the adjustments we need to make, rather than simply what meditative exercises we choose to adopt.

Different religions or philosophies, and particular traditions within them, have their own vocabulary to outline this vital process of transformation. For example, Ignatius Loyola, the 16th century author of the famous *Spiritual Exercises,* suggests that the search for spiritual freedom demands that we seek to rid ourselves of what he calls "disordered attachments". These are the destructive habits, unbalanced dependencies or self-serving attractions and desires that can often imprison us.

Importantly, Part 4 of the report underlines the relationship between spirituality and social or political transformation. Earlier on, the report speaks of "our deeply social nature" and, in Part 2, develops this briefly in terms of "relational consciousness". Our true "ground" or identity as human beings is not fundamentally individualistic. Rather, we are

inherently persons-in-relationship with others. More urgently, the need to re-spiritualise the public realm is a critical contemporary issue.

The notion of spirituality is now quite widespread in such areas as healthcare, social work, education, the arts and business leadership. However, in her contribution to the report, Claire Foster-Gilbert alludes to a yearning for the "water" of spirituality in the political and government worlds. This seemingly refers to a sense by people in these contexts that they are *personally* under-resourced spiritually. However, to re-spiritualise the public realm also demands that we confront the tendency to adopt purely utilitarian approaches to policy-making, urban development, effective public leadership or even citizenship itself. Public spirituality needs an authentic civic vision (for example, on page 83, pursuing the common good), the recovery of a disinterested sense of service, and the promotion of deep solidarity as the basis of effective community.

Whether we think in terms of personal or of social-public transformation, a critical issue is how we go about making choices. Interestingly, in the comments (page 31) about "relational consciousness" in David Hay's research on adult spirituality, it was noted how common it is for people to say that they want to "behave better". This includes a social element – if someone else is harmed by our choices we are also damaged in some way.

The reference in the report to pursuing the "common good" reinforces this point. The idea of the common good goes back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. He asks how we are to discern the goals of the good life, to learn how to shape our desires and then to choose wisely. Aristotle suggests that the truly good life is orientated towards what is shared with others. What is truly good for me is inseparable from what is good for you. And what is genuinely good for both of us is associated with what is good for us all. This common good is not merely a pragmatic arrangement but expresses something essential about human life. It is worth noting that this approach to interpreting our desires and then learning how to educate them as the basis for choosing well is further enriched in a spectrum of Christian spiritual traditions about the art of discernment.

This is one important reason, perhaps, for not polarising religion and spirituality and for noting the plea (page 90) not to "give up on the old religions". It is true that religions have too often become dogmatic, legalistic and bound up with institutional systems. Yet the original foundations of all the world religions were profound spiritual visions. Such visions have developed across time, gone through crises, adapted to new contexts, and produced a range of supporting disciplines and practices. However, as the example of the current fascination with Mindfulness Meditation reminds us, it is very easy to adopt a spiritual practice because it seems useful but to conveniently isolate it from its foundational philosophy and ethic (for example in Buddhism) and its vision of human purpose.

Inevitably, at certain points in the report there were additional themes that could have been included. For example, mysticism or the mystical is mentioned in passing (page 15) but not developed. More challengingly, what is the overall relationship between the internet and spirituality? The internet clearly has an impact on our identity and ways of knowing and therefore on our spirit. What difference does it make that we are increasingly present to each other virtually, via social media and on smartphones,

rather than in an embodied way? And what of the damaging side of the internet such as harassment by anonymous 'trolls'?

Whatever themes we focus upon, genuinely to 'spiritualise' our individual lives as well as society involves not simply practices but also the cultivation of wisdom and sensitivity as the basis for making risky choices, facing profound challenges and embracing life-giving change.

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