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Is There a 'Spirituality Across Faiths'?
insights from evolutionary and developmental science

Peter Kevern

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About 12 years ago, in a landmark study, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead introduced the term 'spiritual not religious' (Heelas, Woodhead, Seel, Tusting, & Szerszynski, 2005) to refer to people who had stopped identifying with a religious tradition but still claimed a connection to something 'spiritual'. According to this distinction, religion is about the institutional, the organisation, the doctrinal and intellectual, publicly-policed codes of ethics and hierarchies; spirituality about the interior, intuitive, mystical element of human beings. They were not the first people to use the distinction, but they were among the first to produce evidence that this was a change affecting not just individuals, but whole groups of people, such as those they studied in Kendal in Cumbria.

On reflection, the phrase 'spiritual but not religious' seems to raise more questions than it answers: it can be a bit puzzling. For example, most people don't just pray, you pray *to* someone; they don't just have faith, they have faith *in* something. 'Spirituality' seems inseparable from the practices, traditions and holy things associated

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Dr Peter Kevern is Associate Professor in Values in Care at Staffordshire University. As well as interest in the relationship between religion and dementia, his research embraces a range of projects which concern human spirituality, the interface between religion and health, ageing and/or death. He is particularly interested in the potential role of religious communities for helping to deliver public health gains. This article is based on a presentation given at the WCF day conference 'Familiarity and Alienation' in September 2017 at Goldsmith, University of London. He welcomes comments and responses to his article, and can be emailed at p.kevern@staffs.ac.uk

Without a clear definition or a body of theory, the term 'spirituality' could mean anything from saying prayers to looking at a flower or going for a walk

with a particular religion. But like it or not, 'spiritual but not religious' people are on the rise (Bullivant, 2017): although some people are giving up formal religion, many of them continue to see themselves as somehow 'spiritual'. So is there such a thing as a spirituality that belongs to no religion, or to all of them?

My own interest in this question began when I moved from working in a theological college to a university department of health sciences. Nurses and other health professionals in the NHS are now expected to pay attention to the 'spirituality' of their patients of all faiths and none, but nobody seems to know what that means, and nurses are not normally allowed to do anything specifically religious such as pray with a patient, or talk to them about religious matters. So the term 'spirituality' has often been used to mean anything and nothing: successive studies have shown that they have been very confused and uncertain about how to offer spiritual care (McSherry & Jamieson, 2011).

Without a clear definition or a body of theory, the term 'spirituality' could mean anything from saying prayers to looking at a flower or going for a walk, and this breadth limits the opportunities to arrive at a shared understanding

of how to nurture it (Gall, Malette, & Guirguis-Younger, 2011). For a few, its main value is as an 'empty signifier', representing all the things that couldn't be reduced to clinical protocols and outcomes (Swinton & Pattison, 2010); others dismiss the term as no more than a code-word for religion that's been smuggled in through the back door to undermine the secularity of the NHS (Paley, 2008).

My frustration with this state of affairs drove my own quest for an understanding of 'spirituality' that might be useful in a secular healthcare context. It seemed we had to find ways to talk about it in non-religious ways: to identify something driving 'spirituality' which wasn't simply a religious construct. Similarly, if we are to find a spirituality that is shared across faiths, we will have to start by asking, "What is shared between religions when you take out all the things that make them the distinct religions they are?"

CSR And The Evolutionary Psychology Of Religions

A glimmer of light emerged in a field of thought usually termed the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR), which represents a meeting-point between cognitive scientists (who study why we believe the things we do), developmental psychologists (who study how our understanding grows as we get older) and evolutionary psychologists (who develop theories about how evolutionary pressures favoured some ways of thinking and perceiving over oth-

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Spirituality as going for a walk

ers). The problem they were grappling with is this: why, in a secular world, do most people find it easier to be religious than to be secular (Schloss, 2008)? Collectively, they generated a body of theory that is represented in what Boyer (Boyer, 2005) and others have come to term the 'Standard Model'.

The basic idea behind the model is that the human mind evolves to perform certain functions, such as detecting patterns and working out what others are thinking. These predispose us to 'spirituality' as a sort of cognitive by-product which Slone (Slone, 2007) has termed 'theological incorrectness': when we are not making an effort to think rationally, our brains fall back on a prereflective view of the world which is rich with gods, or purpose, or meaning.

For example, Justin Barrett claims we have a mechanism called the 'Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device' (HADD) (Barrett, 2004) which you can identify in yourself by a moment's reflection. When we are faced with, for example, an unexpected noise, it predisposes us to ask "Who's there?" rather than "What's that?". It is hypersensitive in the sense that it assumes the presence of an active agent more readily than is warranted by the frequency of such agents, but over evolutionary history this has probably been to our advantage: repeatedly imagining beings that aren't there carries with it little evolutionary cost; however, failing to respond to a rustle which turns out to be a predator would have a great evolutionary cost! A practical implication of this finding is that human beings may generally find it easier to believe in divine agents than not.

A second suggested mechanism is the 'Social Exchange Regulator', which studies have shown is present in chil-

dren at a very early age (Cosmides, Barrett, & Tooby, 2010). The term denotes our instinct to keep things 'fair' and to track who owes what to whom. It is presumably very important in the development of mutually-supportive human societies, but as a by-product we expect the world to be *just*. When the world is clearly unfair (for example, when a good person becomes very ill), it drives us to look for explanations.

Thirdly, we have an instinct for Non-Random Design: we find patterns in nature, and they seem to speak to us (Bloom, 2009). This instinct for regularities may confer a clear evolutionary advantage, by allowing us to predict what is likely to happen next and ultimately to understand and change our world. But it also means that we are more likely to see 'meaning' in completely accidental things, such as the shape of clouds or which cards are drawn from pack. In fact, a lot of what we may call 'superstition' probably begins like this: "Last time a black cat crossed my path I fell ill: so black cats bring bad luck".

Finally, there is a property which psychologists call Theory of Mind. This is what predisposes us to think that, if something happens, a thinking person is behind it: human characteristics such as compassion, constancy, anger and abandonment will be overlaid on a series of events. It should be easy to see by now how when combined with our tendency to detect agents, to find meaning and patterns in random events, and our expectation that the universe should

be fair and balanced, the theory of Mind might make it natural to believe that there is a 'mind' behind everything who is manifest to us in the rustling of the leaves and the patterns in the clouds: who rewards or punishes us and intervenes in our lives (Slone, 2007).

In this way the 'Standard Model' attempts to provide an account of the psychological mechanisms underlying religious intuitions. But is it enough to provide the basis for a shared spirituality? For a while I thought that it might be, at least in the very restricted world of an acute hospital where patients are cut off from their sources of religious support and struggling to find meaning and comfort in the face of life-changing medical conditions. Furthermore, this account of spirituality as a sort of unreflective religious sentiment, even helped explain a couple of puzzling clinical results: for example, why people found even believing in a punishing God to be more comforting than believing in no God at all; and why some people with religious beliefs coped better than their fellow patients, while others coped worse (Kevern, 2012). It also appears that religious beliefs are quite effective in dampening down our sense of 'threat' and so preventing us from being overwhelmed by panic (Flannelly, Koenig, Galek, & Ellison, 2007) .

But on reflection, it's become clear that this account of spirituality leaves out far too much. It might give a bare account of why we might be drawn to spirituality in the first place, but it completely ignores the fact that we develop

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spiritualities in communities of people, among our families and friends; and that we develop them over time, often by repeating the same devotions hundreds or thousands of times. If we are to find a shared spirituality across faiths, we have to take those faiths seriously as real historical and social structures (Kevern, 2017). So what can be learnt by looking at the evolutionary theory behind religious communities about the things they have in common, the shared spirituality across *communities*?

Religion, Human Community And The Evolution Of Societies

The first observation is that religions, and particularly what we now call 'world religions', originate in a particular sort of culture. A very interesting study has shown that in harsh and changing environments, human beings pursue a 'fast' strategy looking for short-term gains as individuals. Religions belong to a 'slow' strategy of building up relationships, valuing trust, faithfulness and self-sacrifice: they arise in relatively stable environments, and in turn help to stabilise and perpetuate what's best in their environment (Baumard & Chevallier, 2015). So religions evolve alongside stable communities, and religions that last

and grow in the long term are ones which create or maintain communities that can manage their resources and compete over time. They have this much in common: you can see it in the fact that they all have some version of the Golden Rule.

Some Examples of the Golden Rule

From Islam:
'Not one of you is a believer until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.'
(Fourth Hadith of an-Nawawi 13)

From Judaism:
'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour.'
(Talmud, Shabbat 31a; Tobit 4.15)

From Christianity:
'Do to others as you would have them do to you'
(Matthew's Gospel 7.12)

From Hinduism:
'Do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.'
(Mahabharata 5.1517)

From Buddhism:
'Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.'
(Udana-Varga 5.18)

From Taoism:
'Regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain and regard your neighbour's loss as your own loss.'
(Tai Shang kan Ying P'ien, 213-218

From Sikhism:
'Don't create enmity with anyone as God is within everyone.'
(Guru Granth Sahib, pg.1299; Guru Arjan Devji 259)

Whatever we understand the Divine to be, we encounter it in our communities, reinforced in their shared teachings and practices

In ancient times, the power of a community's god was assessed by looking at how well that community was doing: its wealth, its size and its success in battles. The 'best' gods and the 'best' religions have usually been judged to be those of the most successful communities. Turning to the anthropological research, there is reasonably good evidence that having a shared religion confers advantages on a community. It reinforces community cooperation and builds trust between members; it discourages idle scroungers ('free riding') and makes it easier to spot the people who will support you, who you might want to marry or trade with (Powell & Clarke, 2012). Social Psychologists, in turn, point out that religions develop some powerful mechanisms to reinforce these values and norms, such as 'saturated' ritual behaviour and clear bound-

aries on membership (Norenzayan et al., 2014). Finally, they develop a shared core of 'pro-social' beliefs which Noranzayan (Norenzayan, 2013) sees as expressing 8 fundamental principles of religious communities. It would be beyond the scope of this article to apply them to some examples in the world religions, but the reader should be able to perceive their applicability to context:

> *Watched people are nice people. Individuals become more socially compliant if they believe a god is watching them.*
>
> *Religion is more in the situation than in the person. Not everybody needs to be devout, so long as the religious institutions are accepted as authoritative.*
>
> *Hell is stronger than Heaven. The fear of punishment is a more*

important tool in structuring society around religion than the promise of rewards.

Trust people who trust in God. Religious people are taken to be more reliable, and so religion helps a society towards stability and efficiency.

Religious actions speak louder than words. 'Costly signalling' is employed to discern the most religious (and therefore trustworthy) individuals.

Unworshipped Gods are impotent Gods. The power of a God to influence society is determined by the amount of worship they receive, and vice versa.

Big Gods for Big Groups. As smaller societies give way to larger ones, tribal deities become replaced by 'High Gods'.

Religious groups cooperate in order to compete. One social function of religion is to coordinate individual efforts to secure resources in a competitive environment.

Putting these two 'big ideas' together, we can start to see a possible model emerging. Human beings have evolved ways of interpreting the world which make it relatively easy for them to coalesce around some religious ideas and practices. These in turn are shaped by the adaptive needs of the community: they take on the forms that give the community the best chance to survive, grow and pass on its religion. When we meet members of other faith communities, we find there *is* a shared spirituality, because we share a mental architecture based on detecting the presence of thinking agents in our environment; and a social structure based upon trust and cooperation in 'slow' societies. Whatever we understand the Divine to be, we encounter it in our communities, reinforced in their shared teachings and practices. We carry these as 'habits of the heart' and practice them in lives lived in virtue.

Spirituality Beyond Religion And Spirituality Across Faiths

This application of findings from evolutionary theory has brought a richer understanding of the potential for a 'spirituality across faiths'. It reminds us that whatever spirituality is for the individual, it has grown up in a specific religious context over a specific period of time. Nevertheless, it can still be shared with people whose spirituality has grown up in a different religious and historical context, because the religious dynamics of successful human societies have a great deal in common, even if the particular teachings and practices vary widely. All humans whose lives are rooted in a religious community share some elements of their spirituality in common, as humans in community.

However, this comfortable conclusion has a sting in the tail. If all our shared spirituality arises in the context of religious institutions, what happens when those very institutions start to fail, or disappear entirely? According to the widely-held secularization thesis, in
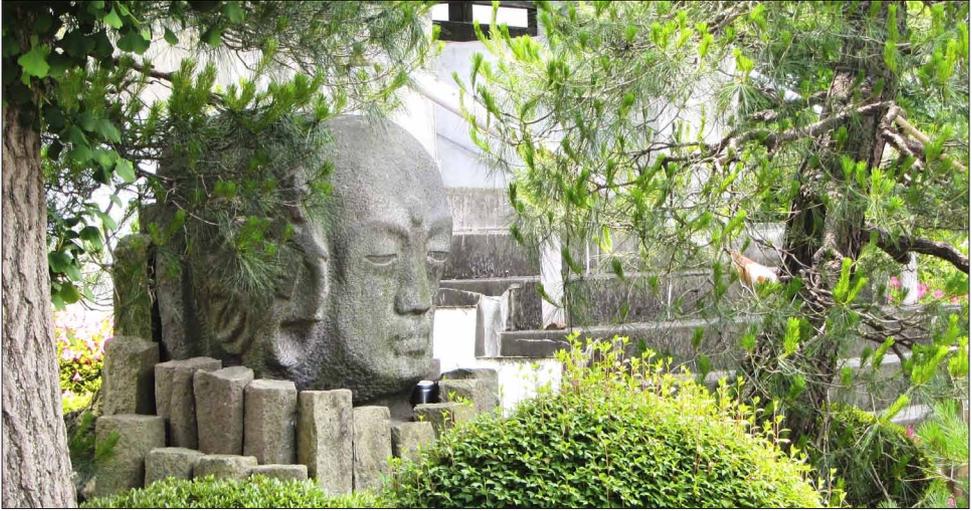
Human spirituality is more fundamental than we think

modern developed societies religion is destined to wither away; and although the evidence for this process is at best patchy and contestable, it is clearly the case that religious institutions have a declining hold over day to day life for many people in Europe, including the UK (Bruce, 2014). Similarly, from an evolutionary perspective, Norenzayan et al (Norenzayan et al., 2014) argue that religious institutions have fulfilled their social-evolutionary function of maintaining stability and encouraging 'slow' strategies: now that social stability has been achieved and these functions are fulfilled by the secular instruments of the state, the impetus for religious activity has been lost: "secular societies climbed the ladder of prosocial religion and then kicked it away". These gloomy prognoses of the future of religion raise the question: if the religions that nurtured and structured spirituality disappear, does human spirituality disappear with them?

Two observations embedded in the discussion above suggest that, although spirituality may change in many ways, it will continue to be an essential part of human interaction. The first is that, as a human characteristic 'hard-wired' into our brain architecture, the cognitive perspectives and interpretations that lead to spiritual beliefs will continue to predispose us to them: although we may consciously favour rational, materialist explanations, at the times when we are most needy or stressed we will discard them in favour of spiritual intuitions. As we have observed, 'religion' seems stubbornly persistent. Secondly, if our religious practices have developed, reinforced and 'sedimented' a spirituality over time and in the company of others, this will not disappear all at once, but will continue to provide a language of symbols, practices and ethics which

will persist even if their religious origins are forgotten (Bibby, 2016). Newly-rediscovered religions such as Wicca or Kabbalah spring up in the vacuum left by the departure of old ones, and bear remarkable similarities to them. Secular techniques such as 'mindfulness' or community singing shed their religious cladding, but remain valued. Perhaps we will conclude, from the long perspective of evolutionary theory, that human spirituality is much more fundamental, more universal and more resilient than we think in our most anxious moments; but also that it has less to do with the details of religious belief and practice than our religious authorities would like us to believe.

To summarise, I see increasing evidence that there *is* a shared spirituality across all faiths and none. The evidence accumulates from the cognitive-psychological study of the architecture of the human mind, and is supported by sociological studies of the role of religion in human evolution and personal development: societies have gods, and all stable societies tend towards very similar gods. Finally, these two dimensions seem sufficiently stable to outlive any particular religion, to persist as an implicit faith, a way of viewing and responding to the world, even in a secular society. Thus, although there is a lot of talk of secularisation, and some good reasons to suspect that some religious institutions are going to disappear, the 'hard wiring' of our faith means that it will not go very far. Religious communities have long-lasting and profound effects on individuals, whether recognised or not. The 'religious mind' will persist and re-emerge at the point where secular institutions fail or fall short.

But these conclusions come with a final 'health warning'. None of what we have discussed amounts to an argument for the meaningfulness of spirituality, or the 'truth' of faith. If evolutionary theory provides an explanation for why we have the spirituality we have, it also risks making it meaningless: it is there because it helps us to survive, not because it is true or good. For those of us who have a faith in a God or gods, this presents us with a theological challenge: to find the hand of the divine within the evolutionary process, rather than as an alternative to it.

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