

# Spiritual Fluidity Allows for Spiritual Atheism

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In today's modern culture, the word spirituality is often seen as synonymous with or directly related to religion<sup>1</sup> or the supernatural, which can make spirituality feel unattainable to non-theists. As an atheist myself, I have struggled with the idea of spirituality. I have often found it difficult to express or understand spirit and spirituality, especially in the company of those who identify with spirituality through their belief in creator/creation.

I have noticed that spiritual fluidity and multi-religiosity can create space for an atheism that includes, or is open to, spirituality. To explore this idea, first I will define concepts, including atheism and spirituality, for the context of this paper. I will then attempt to answer questions, and ask a few questions of my own, on how, or if, atheists can hold a spiritual identity and explore the spiritual through their own contexts and understandings.

What is atheism? As with any worldview, there can be as many different definitions as there are people who hold that identity – the better question might be “What are all the different types of atheism?” However, answering that broad of a question would be equally as complex as asking “What are all the different Christian identities?” For the purpose of this paper, I will be using the most minimal philosophical definition of atheism – the absence of belief in god(s).<sup>2</sup> This refers to the content of belief (deity), not the psychological state of believing.<sup>3</sup>

With the understanding of how atheism will be defined for this purpose; what is spirituality? Another big question. Over 50 definitions of spirituality have been identified, and it is not reaching to say that there are as many definitions of spirituality as there are people studying

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<sup>1</sup> Comte-Sponville, A. 2007. “The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality, an Excerpt Translated by Nancy Huston.” *Literary Review -Madison-* 50 (3): 79–101.

<sup>2</sup> Atko Rimmel, and Mikko Sillfors. 2018. “Crossbreeding Atheism with Spirituality: Notes on Soviet and Western Attempts” 7 (1). doi:10.5334/snr.94.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Draper, “Atheism and Agnosticism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, March 22, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atheism-agnosticism/>.

it. I will define spirituality, for this purpose, as a sense of self. This sense is distinct from body, different from religion and distinctive from the secular.<sup>4</sup> In a broad sense, spiritual is synonymous with ‘psychological’ or ‘mental.’<sup>5</sup>

Defining “spirituality” begs the question “What is *a* or *the* spirit?” I would propose that the spirit is the brain, or as Descartes says, “A thing that thinks, that is to say, that doubts, affirms, denies... imagines and perceives.” The spirit is the *power* to think. Without the brain this “power” would be nothing – without this “power” the brain would just be an organ.<sup>6</sup>

As an atheist seeking spiritual identity, I have wondered *does spirituality require a divine being? Are atheism and spirituality mutually exclusive?* I don’t think so. It is true that religions involve spirituality, however not all spiritualities involve religion.<sup>7</sup> While detractors view spirituality in atheists as nostalgia for a rejected religious worldview,<sup>8</sup> spirituality that is completely separate from religion is becoming more and more common. In fact, both Sam Harris (American philosopher, neuroscientist, author, and atheist) and Richard Dawkins (renowned scientist, author of *The God Delusion*, and crusader for atheism) have publicly expressed their support for spirituality – as long as it does not involve a belief in the supernatural.<sup>9</sup>

So, what can an atheist spirituality look like? An atheist spirituality could be called post-secular as it doesn’t fit into the binary between the religious and the secular.<sup>10</sup> In *French Atheist*

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<sup>4</sup> brimadevi van Niekerk. “Religion and Spirituality: What Are the Fundamental Differences?” 74, no. 3 (2018): 11. doi:10.4102/hts.v74i3.4933.

<sup>5</sup> Joanna Skurzak. “French Atheist Spirituality.” *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 56, no. 3 (2020): 157–78. doi:10.21697/spch.2020.56.3.07.

<sup>6</sup> Comte-Sponville, 84

<sup>7</sup> Comte-Sponville, 85

<sup>8</sup> Bishop, John. 2010. “Secular Spirituality and the Logic of Giving Thanks.” *Sophia: International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Metaphysical Theology and Ethics* 49 (4): 523–34. doi:10.1007/s11841-010-0216-2.

<sup>9</sup> Atko Rimmel, and Mikko Sillfors, 5

<sup>10</sup> Teemu Taira. “Atheist Spirituality: A Follow on from New Atheism?” 24 (2012). doi:10.30674/scripta.67423.

*Spirituality*, Joanna Skurzak says, “Atheist spirituality arises from the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’”

What it boils down to is a reaching out for something larger than oneself, whether this be the universe or some other ineffable force of life. What makes this possible for an atheist is where one is doing their reaching out and spiritual seeking. Is it an internal or external source,<sup>11</sup> is it natural or is it supernatural? A *natural* spirituality is completely compatible with an atheist identity.

At this point, you may be wondering *what is natural spirituality*? Natural spirituality is a belief in unity with the natural world. It is a theory that humankind is one with nature, that humans have energy within – the same energy that is present in everything in this universe.<sup>12</sup> It has been described as “science with awe.”<sup>13</sup>

Freud identified a feeling tied to spirituality that he called the “Oceanic Feeling.”<sup>14</sup> This feeling is as if being a single drop in the ocean, and creates a sense of union with all. This is no more than a feeling, or emotion, though there are times that people have reported this feeling as experiential. There is no inherent religiosity to this feeling, it belongs to no religion or philosophy. It can be described in religious terms by a theist, but it is something that anyone can experience and is just as valid of a spiritual experience to an atheist.

There are various spiritual practices that are not tied to a deity or supernatural beliefs, Including:

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<sup>11</sup> Joanna Skurzak, 12

<sup>12</sup> OpenNaukri. “What Is Natural Spirituality and How to Develop It?” *Open Naukri*. Last modified November 6, 2017. <https://www.opennaukri.com/what-is-natural-spirituality-and-how-to-develop-it/>.

<sup>13</sup> SNS Writing Team. “What Is Spiritual Naturalism?” *The Spiritual Naturalist Society*. Last modified September 11, 2015. <https://www.snsociety.org/about-sns/what-is-spiritual-naturalism/>.

<sup>14</sup> Comte-Sponville, 95 - 97

1. **Meditation and Mindfulness:** Practicing meditation and mindfulness involves cultivating present-moment awareness, self-reflection, and mental clarity. These practices can lead to personal growth, stress reduction, and a deeper understanding of oneself.
2. **Nature Connection:** Engaging in activities that foster a connection with nature, such as hiking, gardening, or simply spending time outdoors, can bring a sense of awe and interconnectedness without involving a deity.
3. **Yoga:** Yoga, when practiced in a secular way, focuses on physical postures, breath control, and relaxation techniques. It can promote physical well-being, mental calmness, and self-awareness.
4. **Artistic Expression:** Engaging in creative pursuits like art, music, dance, or writing can be a form of spiritual expression that connects individuals to their inner thoughts, emotions, and the human experience.
5. **Ethical Living:** Following a set of ethical principles that emphasize compassion, kindness, and social responsibility can serve as a meaningful spiritual practice for some individuals.
6. **Philosophical Exploration:** Delving into philosophical ideas about the nature of existence, morality, and the human condition can lead to deep contemplation and a sense of intellectual and spiritual engagement.
7. **Rituals and Ceremonies:** Creating personal rituals or participating in secular ceremonies that mark important life events or transitions can provide a sense of meaning and symbolism.

8. **Community Engagement:** Participating in secular or non-religious communities that focus on shared values, social justice, and mutual support can provide a sense of belonging and purpose.

There are many more than can be listed. These practices can vary widely in their focus and impact, but they offer avenues for individuals to cultivate a sense of spirituality or deeper meaning without the involvement of a deity.

What you may be surprised to discover is that several forms of spiritual atheism are tied to existing forms of religion. One example is Buddhism. In *Spiritual Atheism*, Steve Antinoff writes, “Zen Buddhism is a historical manifestation of spiritual atheism.” The reason Buddhism often resonates with atheists is because it is a non-theistic philosophy that focuses on the nature of suffering, the human mind, and the path to alleviating suffering through self-awareness and ethical living. Its emphasis on meditation, mindfulness, and personal growth aligns with many atheists' values and perspectives, offering a way to find meaning and inner peace without the need for belief in a higher power.

Another existing form of spirituality for atheists is Humanism. While Humanism isn't usually thought of as inherently spiritual, it can be considered a spiritual path for some atheists. Humanism often emphasizes the value and potential of human beings, promoting ethical and compassionate living, critical thinking, and a focus on improving society and individual well-being. Some people find a sense of purpose, connection, and fulfillment through humanist principles, which could be analogous to spiritual experiences.

Yet another religious identity that many atheists have found a spiritual home in is Naturalistic Paganism. Naturalistic Paganism is a Paganism without the supernatural or

metaphysical that is typically seen in Paganism.<sup>15</sup> Naturalistic Paganism can appeal to atheists because it emphasizes a connection to nature, the cycles of the seasons, and the rhythms of life without involving supernatural beliefs. It provides a framework for experiencing a sense of wonder, awe, and interconnectedness with the natural world. This resonates with atheists who seek a spiritual or philosophical practice that aligns with their naturalistic worldview, allowing them to engage with rituals, symbolism, and community that revolve around nature and the Earth. Trish John-Leslie says Naturalistic Paganism is “a spiritual practice to help [atheists] celebrate the natural world or experience a deeper connection to the Universe without abandoning their rational faculties.”

Multi-religiosity and spiritual fluidity make space for an atheist identity because they allow people to hold many identities at once. It is up to the practitioner to find ways that they can comfortably and respectfully engage in differing beliefs without the differences in the belief systems creating dissonance.

It can be easy to mix atheism with non-theistic religious identities, but theistic religious identities can be harder to navigate. Does multi-religiosity and spiritual fluidity allow for an atheist identity in conjunction with a theistic identity? One can find many non-theist/theist identities when the non-theistic identity is Buddhism. One can find information about Jewish Buddhists<sup>16</sup>, Christian Buddhists<sup>17</sup>, Islamic Buddhists<sup>18</sup> and so on readily, but it is much more difficult to find atheists who resonate with a theistic identity, especially a *monotheistic* identity. This may be

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<sup>15</sup> John-Leslie, Trish. “What Is Naturalistic Paganism?” *Naturalistic Paganism*. Last modified September 1, 2020. <https://naturalisticpaganism.org/humanistic-paganism/>.

<sup>16</sup> Sigalow, Emily. *American Jewbu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Knitter, Paul F. *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. Richmond: Oneworld, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Pourfarzaneh, Som. “The Miracle of Compassion: An Essay on Multi-Religiosity by a Buddhist Muslim.” *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 33 (August 2021).

because many atheists are uncomfortable identifying themselves with *any* form of theism – however, these identities do exist. There are Jewish atheists, Muslim atheists, Christian atheists, and more. Let’s look at the ways these multi-religious, atheist/theist, identities can work:

Being a Jewish atheist refers to someone who identifies with the cultural, historical, and sometimes even the religious aspects of Judaism while not believing in a deity or adhering to the religious doctrines.<sup>19</sup> This is often seen as a cultural or ethnic identification rather than a religious one. There is a long tradition of secular Jewish thought and literature that emphasizes cultural and intellectual aspects of Judaism without the need for religious belief.

1. **Cultural Identity:** Judaism encompasses not only a religion but also a rich cultural and historical heritage. Many people identify as Jewish due to their family background, traditions, history, and shared experiences.
2. **Ethnic and Family Connection:** Judaism is also considered an ethnic identity for some, passed down through generations.
3. **Heritage and Traditions:** Many Jewish atheists engage in cultural practices, rituals, and traditions without religious belief.
4. **Community:** Jewish communities are often tight-knit and provide a sense of belonging. Jewish atheists might engage with these communities for social, cultural, or even ethical reasons.
5. **Ethical Values:** Some Jewish atheists find resonance in the ethical teachings and values of Judaism, drawing inspiration from teachings about social justice, compassion, and responsibility.

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<sup>19</sup> Langton, Daniel R. "Discourses of Doubt: The Place of Atheism, Scepticism and Infidelity in Nineteenth-Century North American Reform Jewish Thought" *Hebrew Union College Annual* Vol.88 (2018).

Being an atheist Muslim refers to a complex identity where an individual identifies with aspects of Muslim culture, heritage, or community while not holding religious beliefs in a deity or following the religious doctrines of Islam.<sup>20</sup>

1. **Cultural and Heritage Identity:** Similar to being a cultural Jew, one might identify with the cultural, historical, and ethnic aspects of being Muslim.
2. **Ethical and Philosophical Values:** While not adhering to religious beliefs, an atheist Muslim might still resonate with certain ethical or philosophical values associated with Islam.
3. **Secular Interpretation:** Some individuals interpret Islamic teachings in a non-religious or metaphorical way.
4. **Cultural Practices:** Engaging in cultural practices associated with Islam, such as certain foods, clothing, and art.
5. **Community Involvement:** Engaging with progressive or reformist Muslim communities that emphasize cultural, social, and ethical aspects of the tradition rather than strict religious dogma.

Christian atheism involves cultural, ethical, or philosophical aspects of Christianity while not believing in the existence of a deity.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Haider, Shuja. "Can You Be a Muslim If You're an Atheist?" *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, May 4, 2018. Last modified May 4, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/04/can-you-be-a-muslim-if-youre-an-atheist>.

<sup>21</sup> Knapton, Sarah. "Richard Dawkins: 'I Am a Secular Christian.'" *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, May 24, 2014. Last modified May 24, 2014. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/10853648/Richard-Dawkins-I-am-a-secular-Christian.html>.

1. **Cultural Identity:** Like with cultural Jews or cultural Muslims, someone might identify with the cultural traditions, holidays, and practices associated with Christianity in a non-religious context.
2. **Ethical Values:** A Christian atheist might resonate with the ethical teachings of Jesus and the Bible, such as love, compassion, forgiveness, and social justice.
3. **Metaphorical Interpretation:** Some Christian atheists view the Bible and Christian teachings metaphorically or allegorically rather than as literal truths.
4. **Existential Exploration:** Some Christian atheists explore existential questions and seek meaning through Christian narratives and philosophy without a supernatural context.

Spiritual fluidity and multi-religiosity make space for atheism because systems of spiritual development that belong to specific religions provide inspiration<sup>22</sup> to other spiritual identities all the time, even to atheist spiritualities. In a world where diversity of beliefs and perspectives is increasingly acknowledged, concepts like spiritual fluidity and spiritual atheism highlight the complexity and dynamism of human spirituality. Spiritual fluidity underscores the idea that one's spiritual journey can evolve, allowing individuals to draw from various traditions, practices, and philosophies to create a unique tapestry of meaning. It reflects the human capacity to seek and find inspiration, connection, and purpose from a multitude of sources, often transcending rigid religious boundaries. Spiritual atheism challenges the assumption that spirituality must be intrinsically tied to religious belief. It showcases the human drive to explore the profound questions of existence, morality, and interconnectedness without necessarily subscribing to the supernatural. Spiritual atheism illustrates how individuals can find a sense of wonder, awe, and inner peace through practices and philosophies that align with their worldviews.

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<sup>22</sup> Joanna Skurzak, 20

Spiritual fluidity and spiritual atheism remind us that spirituality is a deeply personal and diverse aspect of human experience. They demonstrate that the quest for meaning is not confined to specific religious dogmas and that the boundaries of spirituality are malleable, allowing individuals to shape their paths to fulfillment. Spiritual fluidity and multi-religiosity encourage open dialogue, respect for different perspectives, and a recognition of the multifaceted nature of human identity and belief systems in an ever-changing world.

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