

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Attitudes Towards Spirituality and Other Worldly Experiences: An Online Survey of British Humanists

Simon Dein

This study examined attitudes towards and understandings of the term “spirituality” among members of the British Humanist Association (N = 318). Thirty-five percent agreed strongly and twenty-one percent moderately agreed that it was possible to be spiritual without being religious. Some respondents asserted that the term spiritual was so vague as to be almost useless. They preferred terms such as emotional connectedness, awe, or beauty, which are commonly included in definitions of spirituality. For a few individuals, spirituality referred to the existence of spirits. A minority in the study (12%) had what might be defined as ‘other worldly experiences,’ although these were explained in purely naturalistic terms (e.g., lack of sleep, drugs/alcohol, and brain dysfunction). The primary conclusion from the survey is that many British Humanists see no contradiction between being a humanist and having experiences that are often defined as “spiritual.”

“Spirituality? What on Earth is it?”

—Marilyn Mason,
Education Officer of the
British Humanist Association (until 2006)

Introduction

This paper focuses on attitudes towards ‘spirituality’ among members of the British Humanist Association. The term “humanism” has been used with a variety of meanings throughout history. Modern humanism dates from around the middle of the 20th Century but its antecedents have a long historical legacy. For instance, Protagoras (c. 490 – c. 420 BCE) argued that “Man is the measure of all things.” Humanism was central to the renewal project of the Renaissance and to the optimism of the Enlightenment, and counted among its advocates individuals such as Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Voltaire and Rousseau. Humanism was quite popular during the nineteenth century, and arguably became even more popular in the twentieth century with the development of existentialism. Some prominent 20th century humanists include: Albert Einstein, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, and Richard Rorty.

Many Humanists today are critical of traditional religions and religious ideologies, but sometimes humanism is portrayed as a modern, philosophical replacement for religion.¹ The philosophical worldview of humanism draws heavily upon human reason, ethics, and philosophical naturalism while at the same time rejecting religious dogma, supernaturalism, pseudoscience, and superstition

as the bases of morality and decision making. Humanism typically moves beyond atheism or agnosticism as it posits beliefs rather than negates beliefs. Humanism is an ethical worldview that addresses so called ‘ultimate questions’ about life in the same way that a religion does for believers. Since secular humanism typically does not include belief in God, the onus for deciding standards and values falls on humans. Humanists believe that science, reason, and historical experience are sufficient guides for figuring out what is right or wrong in any situation. These standards will not always be the same, as each person approaches these questions from a different background and with different values. As a result, most Humanists recognize that ethics are relative. Philosopher Peter Cave (2009) asserts that understanding and giving sense to the world without God lie at the heart of today’s Humanism.

Spirituality and religion

Social scientists have debated whether spirituality is an alternative to religion or a middle ground between religion and secularity. The term “spirituality” is problematic. Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) contend that spirituality is a “fuzzy” concept, meaning it is difficult to provide a clear definition. King and Koenig (2009) assert that the need to incorporate spirituality in research and health services provision is assuming ever greater significance. However the field has long been held back by a lack of conceptual clarity about the nature of spirituality itself. The word “spirit” comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which itself is a translation of the Greek *pneuma*, meaning “breath.” Many atheists consider “spiritual” to be an inappropriate descriptor for their life experiences because of its association with the supernatural and medieval superstition (Harris 2014:6).

Many scholars now argue that religion refers to a more organized practice, with some sort of human institution, whereas spirituality refers to a more personal experience, which may or may not fit within an organized religion (c.f., Cragun, Hammer and Nielsen 2015). Koenig (2012) cautions that the term spirituality is so vague that it should be removed from academic discourse. It is impossible, according to him, to define and quantify spirituality as a distinct construct for research purposes. Others have also questioned whether the spirituality construct is valid (e.g. Moberg 2004).

While there has been much discussion in the social science literature in relation to the term spirituality and its links with religion, there has been little scholarly attention given to the relationship between spirituality and atheism. A central question is whether atheists can be spiritual. While, by definition, atheists lack a belief in a god (Baggini 2003: 3), we know little of what they actually believe and what they experience in place of the divine. Cragun (2014) examined whether atheists experienced feelings of awe and wonder in the absence of supernatural belief. The question was prompted by top swimmer Diana Nyad's appearance on *Super Soul Sunday*, where Oprah Winfrey told Nyad she could not be an atheist because the swimmer had stated she was moved to tears by the universe and sees God as the 'love of humanity.' Cragun found that 'spiritual atheists' exist in the United States. Several questions in the 1998 General Social Survey—a nationally representative face-to-face survey of adult Americans conducted every other year by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago—are closely related to the idea of spirituality. About a quarter of atheists in the United States stated that they never experienced inner peace or harmony, and just 16 percent of the nonreligious reported never experiencing such feelings. At the other end of the spectrum, about a quarter of both groups reported experiencing inner peace most days. Even though spirituality and creation are difficult concepts for atheists and the nonreligious to define, 75 percent reported 'feeling touched by the beauty of creation' at least occasionally. Thus, atheists may have what are typically defined as 'spiritual' experiences. However the General Social Survey comprised very few self-defined-atheists (n=37) and the conclusions drawn from such a small sample are limited.

Further evidence supports the possibility of being atheist and spiritual. Ecklund and Long (2011), in their study of scientists in the United States, found that a significant number of scientists who don't believe in God nevertheless affirmed a personal spirituality. Of the 60 percent of American scientists who described themselves as either atheist or agnostic, 22 percent said they were spiritual. Most of these scientists saw their spirituality as more congruent with science than with religion.

The above findings suggest that it is possible for nonreligious individuals and nonbelievers to still identify as and find value in spirituality. I now turn to prior research on the British Humanist Association to provide some background on the membership before presenting my findings on the spirituality of members of that organization.

The British Humanist Association (BHA)

Very little has been published in scholarly outlets about the attitudes of British humanists towards spirituality and other worldly experiences. This internet based study was designed to assess diverse views of members of the British Humanist Association.² They ranged from demographics, to definitions, to parenting and upbringing to issues of meaning and morality to atheism's perceived impact upon mental health (see Appendix A for the complete questionnaire). Here I report on the findings pertaining to spirituality and other worldly experiences.

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is an organization located in the United Kingdom that promotes humanism and represents "people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs". Today the BHA has a membership of around 12,000 (Engelke 2014). There are about 70 affiliate groups, including many local humanist associations as well as groups representing humanists within the LGBT community, political parties, and the military.

While recognizing that the term "humanism" can have many meanings, the BHA adopted in 2003 a definition stating that humanism is:

'... the belief that we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Humanists make sense of life using reason, experience and shared human values. We need to make the best of the one life (we know) we have by creating meaning and purpose for ourselves. We take responsibility for our own actions and work with others for the common good'. (Executive Committee of the BHA 20 September 2003).

In relation to the prevalence of humanistic beliefs in the UK population, Ipsos MORI (2007) conducted a survey on behalf of the BHA. Respondents were presented with four sets of statements (three pairs and one set of three) from which they were asked to choose, on balance, which one of each set most closely matched their views. Where respondents were unsure, interviewers were allowed to select "Neither" or "Don't know", but these options were not presented to respondents and they were encouraged to choose a statement from each set if they could. These statements were: (1) Scientific and other evidence provides the best way to understand the universe. (2) Human nature by itself gives us an understanding of what is right and wrong. (3) What is right and wrong depends on the effects on people and the consequences for society and the world. The study reported that just over a third (36%) of the British population had a Humanist outlook on life. Obviously, not all of these individuals are members of the BHA or supporters, but the findings from this survey suggest that humanism is likely a more pervasive worldview in the UK than the relatively small membership of the BHA would suggest.

Building on an earlier survey of 931 British humanists conducted by Campbell in 1967, Longden (2015) conducted a survey of 1,097 members of the BHA looking at the profile of its members. Current members of the

BHA shared some similarities with their 20th century counterparts: they were disproportionately male, well educated, tended to be professionals, and lived in urban areas, particularly in London and the South East of England. In contrast to their 20th century counterparts, however, members of the BHA in 2015 were typically much older and consequently were far more likely to be retired. The membership profile of contemporary members of the British Humanist Association fits the description of a 'middle class intelligentsia' (Voas and McAndrew 2012).

Longden (2015) did not include in his survey questions about BHA members' views on spirituality. Thus, the current study provides additional insights into the views of members of the BHA regarding their views on spirituality.

Spirituality and British Humanists

After extensive searching, I found very little published work that detailed the views of members of the BHA on spirituality. One discussion of this topic comes from Mason (2006), who is a former education officer of the BHA. She argued that qualities such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of harmony are important and can bring about happiness. However, she believed that these qualities are better defined as emotional or moral and that there is no need for the term "spiritual." Mason went on to argue that mainstream culture had developed several meanings for the terms "spiritual" and "spirituality" and that those meanings were blurred and conflated.

In another piece on this topic, Mason (2010) stated:

'To sum up, "spiritual" and "spirituality" almost always require explanation if they are to communicate clearly, and so I think that it would be better to abandon them altogether, and leave them to the religious. If we are really talking about emotions or emotional development or emotional literacy, or aesthetic awareness or experiences, or love of nature or humanity, or love and goodness, or hope, why just not say so?'

While some may find Mason's arguments compelling, her essays do not answer one of the questions of interest in this article: How do British humanists conceptualize spirituality? There has been, to date, no scholarly research published on the views of spirituality of British humanists. While the findings of this paper are somewhat limited by the methodology, it is a first step toward answering this question.

Other-worldly experiences

One preconception about atheists is that they cannot have other-worldly experiences (i.e. experiences which extend beyond the mundane physical world). Scholars of religion use the terms mystical, supernatural, or transcendental to refer to these experiences. They may involve breaching the boundaries of the self or contact with supernatural entities such as spirits. What atheists don't tend to do is make unjustified (and unjustifiable) claims about the nature of reality on the basis of such experiences.

Scholars investigating such experiences have argued that such experiences are prevalent in the general population (Hay and Morisy 1978). Hay and Morisy (1978) asked respondents in a survey, 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self? These authors found that 62% of their sample answered affirmatively. King and Koenig (2009) argued that surveys show that spiritual experiences are common. Whether or not such beliefs and experiences have any impact on the conduct of people's lives, however, is open to question (Voas and Crockett 2005).

That these experiences can and do occur in the non-religious has been frequently reported (King and Koenig 2009). One example is the near death experience – a personal experience associated with impending death, encompassing multiple possible sensations including detachment from the body, feelings of levitation, total serenity, security, warmth, the experience of absolute dissolution, and the presence of a light. While there is much debate about the mechanisms underlying these experiences (e.g., dissociation, see French 2005; false memories, see French 2001; poor circulation in the brain, see Engmann 2008), it appears they are similar across cultural groups (Augustine 2003).

Later in life, atheist and positivist philosopher A.J. Ayer had a Near Death Experience (NDE) in which he saw a red light. Ayer's NDE had a significant effect on him, as he detailed in some of his writings, "My recent experiences have slightly weakened my conviction that my genuine death ... will be the end of me, though I continue to hope that it will be" (Ayer 1988). NDE researcher Kenneth Ring (1982) concluded that religious belief is not required for such experiences. In his study religious orientation was not a factor affecting either the likelihood or the depth of the near-death experience. An atheist was as likely to have one as was a devoutly religious person.

Intense experiences of a spiritual type may follow prolonged periods of isolation, physical deprivation, or emotional stress. They may also result from contemplation of works of art or intense concentration on a task, such that the separation between subject and object becomes less apparent (Brett 2002). These experiences can also occur during retreats, religious worship, and during rituals (Maule 2001). Scholars account for such experiences by recognizing the universal human capacity to enter altered states of consciousness. There is evidence that self transcendence may even have a genetic basis. Hamer (2004) contends that all human beings have an innate capacity for spirituality and that the desire to reach out beyond oneself, which is at the heart of spirituality, is part of the human makeup.

In this study, I also explore the other-worldly experiences of members of the British Humanist Association, focusing on their qualitative responses.

Methodology

This study was conducted in 2014. Following discussion with and agreement from the Chair of the BHA, the British Humanist Association emailed a short questionnaire

to 1,000 of its members. The survey was designed to assess the attitudes of members of the BHA towards various aspects of humanism. The project was examined by the University College London Ethics Committee, which deemed it exempt. Three hundred and eighteen of those emailed responded to the questionnaire (31% response rate).

The questionnaire was developed based on prior surveys and a review of the social science literature on atheism and spirituality (e.g., Ammerman 2013; Day 2011; Dworkin 2013; Ecklund and Long 2011; Harris 2014). The survey instrument was piloted with five atheists. These individuals reported that the survey questions were clear and appropriate. The questions covered topics that ranged from demographics to issues of meaning and morality (see Appendix A for the complete survey). The responses were recorded on a Likert scale (i.e., strongly agree to strongly disagree) and respondents were asked to elaborate on the responses and provide verbatim data. In this research note I focus on respondents' answers on questions about the meaning of the term "spirituality" ("One can be spiritual without being religious") and their descriptions of other worldly experiences; ("Have you ever had an extra worldly experience? If so, please briefly describe it.").

Results

Demographics

The age range of the 318 respondents was from 16 to 92. Males comprised 65%, of the sample; females made up 35% of the sample (the survey did not provide an option for other genders). A diverse range of occupational groups was identified in the survey, from doctors and lawyers to civil servants and librarians. Thirty percent of the sample were retired. Humanists in this sample overwhelmingly identified themselves as atheists, under 5% respondents identified themselves as agnostic.

Thirty-five percent of the survey respondents agreed strongly and twenty one percent moderately that it was possible to be spiritual without being religious. However they eschewed the term itself. See **Figure 1**. Twelve percent of the survey respondents reported having an other-worldly experience. See **Figure 2**. The rest of the results focus on the qualitative responses from the survey.

Following are quotes from some individuals who contended that the word spiritual should not be used:

"The term 'spiritual' is so vague as to be meaningless."

"There are no such things as spirits – so spiritual is a meaningless term unless you stretch its meaning to include other subjective values such as "happiness", "contentment", "appreciation of art" etc. I generally avoid the term because its meaning is not well defined."

"If I knew what you meant by spiritual... It is a weasel word, means what someone wants it to mean."

"I know what 'religious' means, but 'spiritual' might mean all manner of different things to different people. So I simply can't answer such an ill-defined question."

"I don't understand the word 'spiritual'. I believe that all thought and all human experience is processed by the brain – there is no separate non-physical process. One can certainly be deeply thoughtful, contemplative, sensitive without believing in god – if that is what is meant by 'spiritual'."

The above individuals held a view of the term "spiritual" that reflected its vagueness, but also reflected the supernatural elements of the term. As a result, they rejected the term and preferred more naturalistic terms instead. A few individuals however saw some meaning in the term

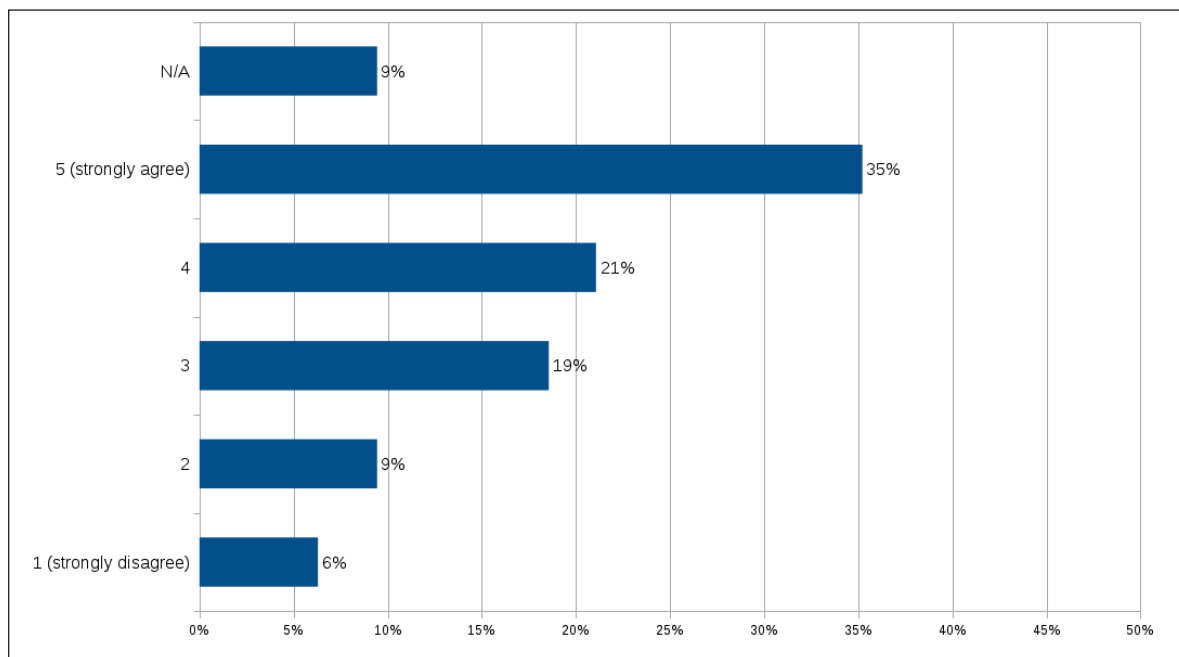


Figure 1: Percentages of British Humanist Respondents Who Agree or Disagree that it is Possible to be Spiritual Without Being Religious.

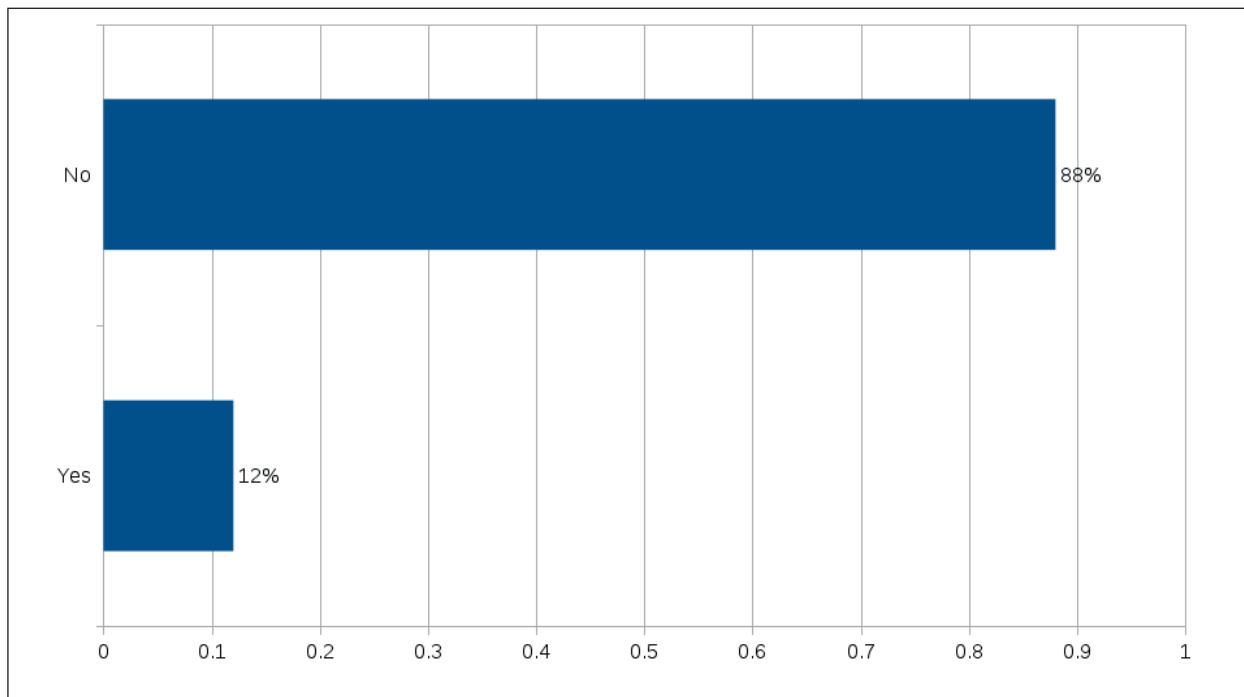


Figure 2: Percentage of British Humanist respondents who have ever had an extra worldly experience.

spiritual as expressing some degree of transcendence, awe, or beauty or relating to relationships or to the human spirit in some way. Below is a representative quote illustrating this perspective

“What is spirituality? It can be seen as recognising the non-tangible forces in life and community and inspiring and nurturing them. We have all seen the great effects of the London Olympics and Paralympics. We can say this was a spiritual experience for all the spectators and athletes who felt the warmth and support and general goodwill of each other and the volunteers, but religion had nothing to do with it. If one of my patients is dying it is important for me to make the experience as pleasant as possible for the patient and their relatives – being kind, open, giving time and explanations, relieving symptoms, using the hospital gardens and facilities to help them through a difficult time. Even though it is a time of great sadness, they can find peace and move on without regret at the end. As a humanist doctor it is important to be compassionate and thoughtful to the patients and relatives all the time, and so both sides can feel relaxed in your care and their trust in you no matter what happens.”

Some individuals proposed alternative definitions of spirituality, like these:

“One way might be to have an awareness of one’s place in the universe. Also by cultivating and appreciation of the things that transcend our everyday lives (e.g. love, beauty).”
 “Experiencing humility and wonder at the scope of the universe.”
 “The spirit is the relationship with others.”

“I see being spiritual as valuing the human spirit and the amazing world (and universe) we find ourselves in.”

“A feeling of wonder at the vastness of it all and the very very small.”

“If by spiritual, you mean the feeling of joy one experiences when seeing a beautiful view, then, I agree, that you can be spiritual without being religious. I suppose it all depend.

These quotes indicate that while respondents generally found the term spiritual vague and of little use, about 5 % of the sample however saw some meaning in the term spiritual as expressing some degree of transcendence, awe or beauty or relating to relationships or to the human spirit in some way.

Other-worldly experiences

A minority in my study (12%) had undergone what might be defined as ‘other worldly experiences’ that is, experiencing the presence of God or spirits. However, all of these experiences were explained by those reporting them in purely naturalistic terms, with explanations like: lack of sleep, the influence of drugs or alcohol, or brain dysfunction.

In one instance a respondent reported that he felt ecstatic in the presence of God but attributed it to a brain dysfunction which was subsequently confirmed (temporal lobe epilepsy).

Some of the other experiences reported by respondents are detailed below:

“As a child, I saw some kind of phenomenon which might be described as a spirit or ghost – however I am unconvinced that it was in any way supernatural in origin.”

"I, like most people, have had strange experiences etc – I don't however presume anything other than natural explanations. They usually happen when tired or drunk after all!"

Drugs and alcohol are well recognised as causes of anomalous experiences.

"As a child I had visitations from the dead. They were very real to me as a child. As an adult I interpret these as manifestations of my grief at my father dying. I suffered from insomnia as a child as a result of the grief which also added to my hallucinating in this manner. Grief and insomnia created the hallucinations. Some people have told me this was 'other worldly' but I don't believe this."

This individual reported the well recognised association between grief and hallucinations (Datson and Marwit 1997).

"I had a God experience in 2007 that lasted for approximately 30 minutes. During this transcendental and ecstatic episode I felt I was in the presence of an all loving God. Although the experience was deeply moving I suspected that the experience must have a neurological origin. A result of this religious experience was, surprisingly, a renewed commitment to atheism and an interest in understanding the basis of religious belief. My suspicions as to the cause of my experience were confirmed a few years later when I was diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy. The nature of my experience has led me to believe that the transcendental experiences described by many religious figures, (the apostle Paul for example) may have their origins in a similar type of electrical malfunction in the brain."

This respondent reduced his experience to neurological causes. In fact, prior research has found an association between temporal lobe epilepsy and hallucinations (Teeple, Caplan and Stern 2009).

"I was brought up in a strictly catholic environment and educated at convents. Manufactured extra worldly experiences via not eating, not sleeping and getting high on your own endorphins ("having a spiritual experience") were fairly common, notably on school sponsored "retreats". I am aware this equates to mild brain washing practices."

In this instance appeal was made both to neurotransmitters and to the psychological strategy of brain washing.

Discussion

Humanism and spirituality are not incompatible, though, of course, that depends on how each of these are defined. Some members of the British Humanist Association who responded to this survey found atheism and spirituality compatible. The humanists interviewed above

profess a form of spirituality which involves a sense of transcendence, awe, and connectedness rather than any conception of or relationship with the supernatural. They, however, often state, in accordance with the findings of other scholars such as Koenig (2012), that the term spirituality itself is vague and possessed little empirical utility and should be replaced by emotional/moral terms. However it was still possible to be 'spiritual' without being religious. In a similar way, Sam Harris (2014), a neuroscientist well known for his New Atheism writings, advocates that the term spiritual should refer to meditation and be divested of any reference to higher powers or to the soul. Where otherworldly experiences did occur these were attributed to purely naturalistic explanations involving the brain, drugs and physiological states. These findings accord with King and Koenig (2019) who assert that quasi-religious experiences are common in the general population, including among those who do not profess any religious faith (Hay 1987, King et al 2006). The findings from this study point to the ambiguous relationships between humanism and spirituality which are not strictly separated (see also Cotter 2011 for similar findings).

Notes

- ¹ Some forms of humanism are explicitly religious. Religious humanists express their humanism in ways more similar to traditionally religious individuals, for example meeting together to discuss values and celebrate certain ceremonies. Typically, however, they still reject many supernatural tenets.
- ² The British Humanist Association uses a capital 'H' to refer to its members. Apart from members of this association I use a small h to refer to humanists.

Supplementary Files

The supplementary files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplementary File 1:** Appendix. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/snr.48.s1>

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Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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