

Patrick French

Writer and Historian

'The idea of karma is quite believable'

Sun Mar 08 2009



Patrick French is a writer and historian, best known for his work *The World is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V.S. Naipaul*.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I suppose it is some intrinsic automatic religious impulse in a person.

And to a certain extent, I also associate it with a late Victorian or early twentieth century term, a social phenomenon of people adopting the idea of spirituality because it would play out well in their personal or social life.

This association probably comes from writing Francis Younghusband's biography – he had all sorts of ideas trying to found a new world religion and so on. And there were many people at the time for whom spirituality had become more of a social activity.

But that meaning is secondary to the first answer I gave.

How does it manifest in your personal life?

It doesn't.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

Yes, I had a Roman Catholic upbringing and was sent to Catholic schools. The secondary school I attended was run by Benedictine monks, so in a way I took on some of the almost political views that the Catholic Church had at the time, particularly the idea of having a social conscience.

But the actual spiritual side I didn't take up particularly.

In fact, I became disillusioned both with the institution and practice of Catholicism pretty young. I was 14 or 15 and thought it made no sense to me – it made no sense in an internal way, and also I disliked a lot of the things the Catholic Church was promoting, like the idiotic policy on contraception, or their teachings on various issues of personal morality. So I moved away from that. And that mental rejection was complete around 17.

Does the idea of a guiding or protective force have any meaning in your life?

Not really. In my late teens and early twenties I got interested in Tibetan Buddhism, but more as a philosophical system than for the Tantric side, the protective deities and so on.

What about the Buddhist philosophy's ideas of mind, rebirth, seeds of karma?

I guess the idea of karma is quite believable. The concept of a consequence to the things I do, and that things come around in unexpected ways, makes sense to me. So to that extent, I could take those ideas on, but in a limited way.

What about synchronicities and coincidences: are events in life random or part of a larger reality?

I do believe in synchronicities and coincidences because they have happened in extraordinary ways in my own life. But I do not attach them to any divine principle. I just think it is the way the world works. I see it as an automatic process.

Is there a specific purpose to your life?

The nearest thing I have to that idea is the sense of having an ability as a writer. If I do not use it, I am wasting a talent which you could call "God given". I basically feel an obligation to put this ability to good use. If a few months go by and I have done very little work, I do sometimes think that being so lucky as to write for a living, I should be doing it thoroughly!

Did you always know you wanted to write?

Yes, since I was a kid.

When writing do you feel sometimes as the conduit for something else?

I do believe in that idea for people who write fiction, but I have not felt it particularly.

The topics of my books come because I have an interest in some issue, and opportunities come up, I meander with them.

You have very involved with India, a land of so many spiritual traditions: has it influenced you in any way?

I have always been interested in going to religious sites, but more to see how people behave there. For instance last year I spent time in Karnataka going to a mosque, but more to see what kind of people are running it, how this part of Bangalore connects with its surroundings and so on.

Or I went to a village next to Mysore, with some important Hindu temple. I went to interview someone who'd had a very bad experience at the hands of the Indian State. Seeing great social disparity in that family and how it connected with the temple nearby, how people behaved inside the temple, how the priests behaved, the money-making there – all those things were the focus of my interest, seeing how things are playing out in a social way, as a consequence of religion.

So you never had a significant or overwhelming personal experience in those places?

No, I haven't. That has to do with the way I look at the world. That is just not how I am.

At times of challenges, where do you find your energy, your anchor?

In the people I love, and in a deliberate internal process of acceptance. At times of great turmoil, when facing the death of people close to me for instance, I would first go through a process of acceptance, which obviously takes time, and then it becomes integrated to the rest of my life.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you choose?

If there was such a thing, I could not make the choice. It would have to be defined by the system.

If there was one question you could ask god, what would it be?

I'd have to be provided evidence of His or Her existence and then I'd ask a question.

What is your idea of happiness?

Love.