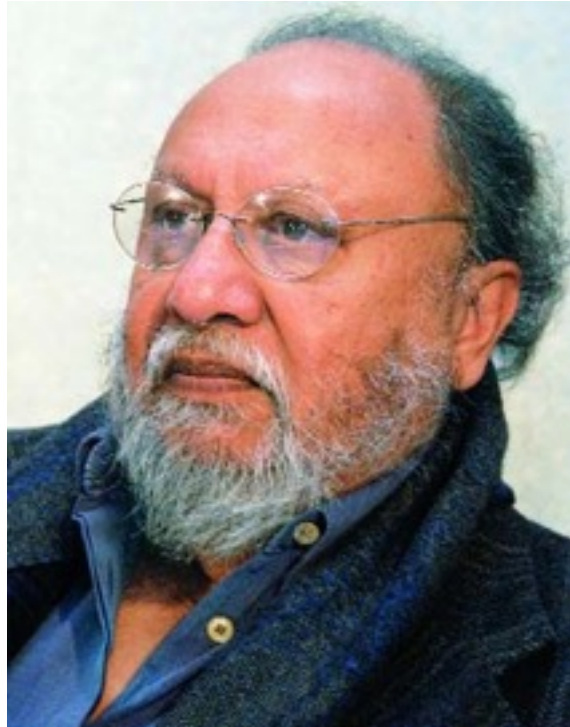


Ashis Nandy

Psychologist and Sociologist

'I am the Secular Age's lost child'

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Ashis Nandy is a political psychologist and sociologist.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about a theory of transcendence, cutting through faiths, ideologies and the divide between the sacred and the secular.

Even people who overtly reject any concept of spirituality actually can have a sense of transcendence. It is often the case with great artists, musicians, thinkers.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

If you are in tune with your environment and the people around you, guidance and protection come to you whether you call them that way or not. It comes through the network of people around you but also of many unknown to you. At times of difficulty I think of my mother who told me that her blessings and my father's would always be with me. I also draw immense sustenance from the blessings of unknown people writing to me or telling me that somehow my books or ideas have touched their lives.

I feel enveloped in all that and find energy in it at times of challenges, more than in any concept of the divine.

But even though I am not a believer, I have great respect for believers. Conservative secularist dogma is not only terribly short-sighted but also totally contemptuous of ordinary citizens who believe. And I have to confess it has taken me years to get out of that thinking.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

I do not have a sense of mission, but I do believe that times choose people and think through you. You do not think or write yourself, you are thought and written through. Culture, society, civilization think through you. If I had not thought and written those books and articles, someone else would have. It is like being a conduit, a channel for it. It is not only about the individual. We are necessarily also a product of our times, our reactions are not entirely individual, they also are cultural and social.

As a child I did not have a clue of what I would want to do. Yet coming from a family of doctors with successful and established practices, it was a given I would become a doctor as well. What a boring prospect to know in advance all that one's life should be about! So even though it would tremendously disappoint my middle-class family, I chose not to pursue my medical studies and instead went for clinical psychology. Then as I was searching for my vocation, I stumbled upon public affairs and thought that the intersection of politics and psychology had not been paid enough attention. And thus I had found my vocation. And I have been moving around this particular area ever since. I see my role and my responsibility as creating self-awareness, holding up for instance a mirror to sections of society that can be very self-satisfied and sanctimonious. It was the case in that article about the Gujarati middle-class. Creating a sense of discomfort is also part of it.

I would not call it a profession though, but a vocation. I am not an academic and never wished to be one.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

I have at least fragments of a micro-theory of transcendence. It has inspired me all these years and has driven me through my intellectual journey. So this is my way of touching sanctity in day to day life.

I actually feel we have desacralized too many sectors: the sanctity of human life has been especially annihilated in the 20th century, with maybe 250 million people killed, in violence mostly perpetrated by secular states; the sanctity of nature, which has been instrumentalized as a factor of production, as a mere resource to be used for "progress"; the sanctity of childhood, which used to be a phase in itself and not only a preparation for adulthood. Instead, children as much as elderly people are now often seen as intrusions in our lives. So childhood should be resacralized as a phase in itself but also as a symbol of ways of looking at life. Finally, the fourth domain I would mention is the desacralization of the unborn generations, in the spirit of what one American famously said: "why should I do something for the future: what has it done for me?" Some responsibility for the next generations must be reintroduced – the right to live in this cosmos with dignity and so on – and this could happen if some sense of sacredness was reattached to our responsibility for the next generations.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

I never thought about it in that way. So the temptation would be to say there is none. But in fact there always is a touch of transcendence somewhere – transcendence of the self, of everyday life, of contemporaneity in itself, of the individual lifecycle, of one's own culture and civilization.

Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

My grand-parents converted to Christianity and I therefore grew up in a Bengali Christian home with devout parents. Yet early on, as a teenager, I revolted against it all, finding organized religion utterly boring. I guess it was a combination of childhood defiance and even if at that age I had no word for it, a dislike for its anti-philosophical aspect. Today I would actually think that organized religion does have some form of tacit underlying philosophy, but it is not manifest most of the time. So losing faith back then as a teenager was a turning point. And faith of that kind does not come back.

What has come back though is a sense of sanctity. This shift was a by-product of my attempt to link up my ideas to the rhythm of life of everyday India. I had to grant some legitimacy to the presence of sacredness in the lives of so-called ordinary people. I had to confront the fact that this sense of sacredness gives them a certain way of looking at life which could not be trivialized in the name of some 19th century social evolutionist theory. So I guess this is what brought sacredness back into my life.

In the end, I am probably the secular age's lost child.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

Rather than spiritual inspirations, I would talk about the understanding of transcendence. And here I would mention Gandhi, but also Dostoyevsky with his enormous psychological sensibility imbued with a deep sense of the sacred, and the Mahabharata. In it, the play between the sacred and the profane is taken for granted in such an easy and natural way. I have even toyed for many years with the idea of writing a book about it. It would have nothing of the original text but capture some of its worldview and weave contemporary themes around it.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

That's a tough one! I never thought about it and that shows how secularized my thinking is. But now that you ask, I guess I would want to be a Tibetan monk in exile. Fifty years ago most people did not even know where Tibet was and what Tibetan monks are. Today it is different. And I feel that this very particular combination of belonging while experiencing uprooting gives a touch of wisdom which is deeply tinged with compassion.

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

Why don't You have a greater sense of humour? My relationship with God would have been different if He or She had a better sense of humour; I would have kept more in touch.

What is your idea of happiness?

I have been oscillating between two positions: happiness may be when you do not have to think about happiness. Confucius famously said that the first step to be happy is to find a comfortable chair to sit. The other view is that actually you can never find happiness as a grand concept and should only build your sense of happiness from small things.

No matter what, I definitely do not believe in this obsession of finding happiness, especially as it has been pursued after World War II, with even entire schools of psychology dedicated to it.

Similarly, I find tremendously tiresome all those gurus vending instant happiness. I suspect that as they talk so much about it, they actually are not happy themselves.