

Dominique Girard

French Ambassador

'Atheism is another way of practicing spirituality'

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Dominique Girard, French Ambassador to India.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I have a great deal of distrust for religion and in the West, we often equate religion with spirituality. Indeed, I was born and raised Catholic but when I grew up and discovered the unfairness of the world, I rejected it all: how could all this evil and God coexist? Yet, philosophical and metaphysical questioning about life and its meaning has been central to me. It is just that God faded out of the picture. Being an atheist is just another way of practicing spirituality.

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

I do not believe in an external force; rather I believe that all the phenomena of guidance, intuition, parapsychological occurrences and so on are a reflection, an echo of the complexity of our minds. I believe in an evolution and a continuity from bacteria to animals to humans, driven by a fantastic force of life.

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

The New Testament has this parable of talents, which tells of children receiving many gold coins in inheritance. Their duty is not to misuse them and use them as meant to. So indeed, there is a purpose to life or a duty, which in moral or metaphysical terms is that if given a lot, you must give back as well. It is like drawing a balance sheet in the intimacy of my mind and seeing if the bottomline is positive or not.

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

Buddhism is the philosophical approach which fits best my thinking and it recommends that one constantly question everything, including the need to question itself. So I guess that this love of skepticism, this permanent questioning is my day-to-day life approach: no master, no guru, always trying to find my own truth with my own judgment.

What has been the role of spirituality in your life as a diplomat?

As an ambassador, I have a number of duties. Yet, I should never be fooled by them, become completely identified with them or with the fact that I have to speak for someone else most of my life. The self, my inner compass, must remain distinct. The intellectual and spiritual muscles need to constantly be active. Otherwise I would be like an actor who would never stop acting.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

Of course it began with Catholicism, in which I grew up, going to church and to Sunday school. During my teenage time, I gradually rejected it and found different ways of addressing the meaning of life and other metaphysical questions. Buddhism in particular, with its basic skepticism and intellectual honesty, has seemed the most appropriate theory, providing me with fantastic instruments –like a tool-box –to both answer those questions and stay away from the excesses of all religions.

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

I do not believe in reincarnation but I think it would be extremely exciting to see life through the eyes of a dog. Dogs have an acute mind and consciousness and more strikingly, they have a more direct access to emotions like love, faith, trust than us humans, for whom it is much more difficult to experience those feelings wholly and unconditionally.

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

I would ask God how much time He will give me because I have a lot of questions to ask.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is about both possession and calm – possession of feelings, of the ability to love, of all those ways of feeling genuinely alive; and at the same time being able to face everything with inner calm. This is ultimate happiness.

The writer is a French traveller who has worked in international relations, classical music, journalism and psychology. But it is her particular interest in spiritual matters that has led her to devise this version of The Proust Questionnaire: "It helps us to see people who they really are inside."