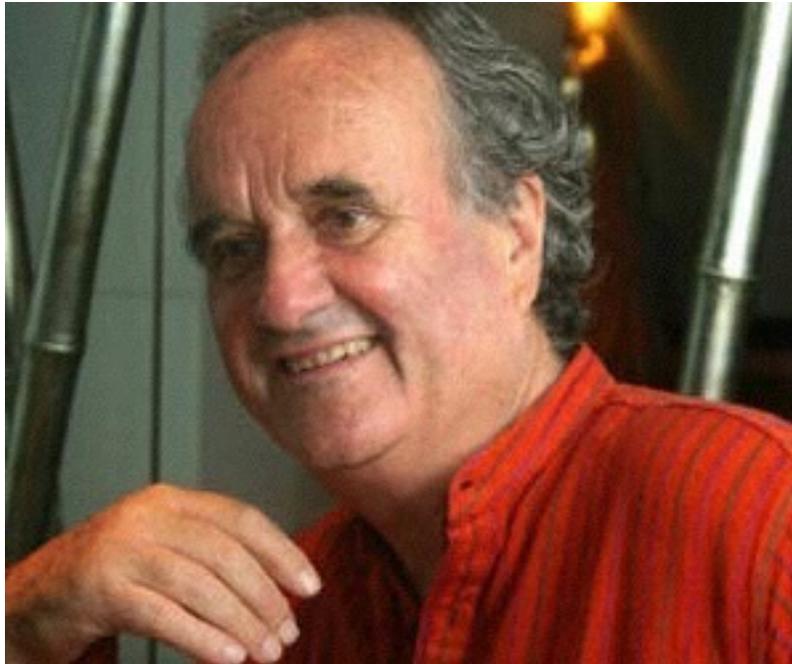


Mark Tully

Author

'Life would be dreadful if we believe the mind controls all'

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Mark Tully is the author of several books on India, a failed priest and a journalist "made by India".

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is the concern with the transcendent, and the search for personal development within it. Religion plays a very important role in that context. I am strongly opposed to the idea that organized religion and spirituality are conflicting. I have always questioned in my mind, or even been suspicious of the idea that one can be spiritual without religion. Because the search for the transcendent is a human activity and as all human activities, it ought to be built on a tradition, on past knowledge. One cannot sit and meditate, and hope that the transcendent will come. It would be lacking a most crucial virtue in the search for the transcendent – humility. It would be like saying that all those holy people of the past and present are irrelevant, and I can be better on my own.

Yet my own search has not been a clear and linear evolution. As a friend once said, I have been going about religion and spirituality like a crab – sideways. Someone else also said I look for God through the bottom of a beer glass, as I am quite fond of discussing God with a couple of glasses of beer in the evening.

I was never a totally convinced orthodox Christian but always wanted to be. That is why I read theology for one year at Cambridge and went to a theological college in the hope of becoming a

priest. But while there, it became clear to me and to the warden that I should not stay, for two reasons: I was not sure I would have the moral strength to live the life of a priest, nor was I as convinced about orthodox Christianity as I should have been.

So from there life became busy, building a career, travelling a great deal, and it all started to slip away. I always felt though that the pursuit of ambition – not material, but wishing to become a well-known journalist – was somehow all nonsense, and that it was absolutely not worth it.

Then I fell very ill, with very high fever. And when I came out of hospital, the British High Commissioner came to see me and gave me a book by a Roman Catholic. I then felt I must revive that interest, it had been stupid to lose it all. And since then, I have been stumbling along, like a crab indeed. I draw enormous strength from my readings, from the discussions I have on those topics. I do pray at times though I do not have the discipline to do so regularly. I go to Church (though not every Sunday), as I find it a tremendously reviving experience, bringing me back to a certain sense of belonging. I have a great love for liturgy and for the literature of the Church. Rituals in general are hugely important to me.

I would be the last person thought to pretend being a very spiritual person or particularly pious. Evil in many forms has been tempting at times and the struggle with it has been constant. I certainly will never be a holy person!

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

Rather than a guiding force I would call it a purposeful and forgiving force. The concept of God is fundamental to me, even though I have gone through doubts in my life. I have wondered at times if it was not all nonsense. I have felt sometimes that my life would have been much more decisive had I not believed in religion and God. It would not have taken me so long to find my vocation, I would not have been such a mess in university, I would have led a much more straight-forward, easier life. I do struggle to believe and I have been fighting with some of the nitty-gritty bits of religion. I definitely accept that some of the Church's teachings have been wrong, for instance its obsessive stance on sexuality or its positions on homosexuality. How could a loving God discriminate between people according to their sexual orientations? I also observe that Christianity is more often about morality than spirituality, which can be dangerous. But on the overall, I see it as a shade around a candle: you need it for the wind not to blow the candle out, but the shade also takes some of its light.

So even though my idea of God has evolved over time, I can see it as energy, to which we can plug in, because clearly, there is some energy keeping the show on the road!

India has taught me that one can access God in different ways. If God had wanted a unique road to access Him, there would not have been such religious plurality. But I am convinced one should stick to one access road. If we keep changing directions, thinking that there is a better road on the left, then on the right and so on, we will never reach our destination. On the other hand, religions should be sufficiently broad to allow for other beliefs. Certainties should therefore be kept to the minimum. One of the reasons I could actually not join Roman Catholicism, despite all the respect I hold for it, is because it entails too many certainties, too much dogma.

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

In my heart of hearts, I have no doubt there is some purpose, as much as there is some God. I feel, in a very Indian way, how small of a point we are in some hugely important thing. Every flower, every tree, every bird, every human is part of it, with its own role to play. That role is actually largely spelled out for us. So the ultimate goal in life is to find the balance between what we are given – fate – and free will, avoiding the terrible trap of fatalism but also the one of the ego.

In our society, we are constantly urged to compete and achieve, therefore using our free will. But we must also see that we are actually led, we must see how and where we are led, we must draw strength from it and do our best in a context which is larger than us.

This is one of the reasons I believe the religion one practices should be the one we are born into – because it is an important fact in our lives that we were born into it. And if we try to find a balance between where fate has placed us and free will, we can avoid the terrible temptation to create ourselves, to make ourselves something we are not. I know for instance that I can be a reasonably confident journalist, but I also know that I lack the mind of a deep thinking academic. That profession has been the right one for me – though I did not know from the beginning that it would be that way.

The very fact that I ended up in journalism is one of the reasons I believe in fate. When leaving the theology college, I did not have the slightest idea of what I would do. My tutor at Cambridge found me a job in an NGO which then split and I quit. I joined the BBC in the personal department, maybe because of some Christian hangover and the idea that I could do something good for people in such a position. I quickly realized it was a complete illusion and out of the blue, was offered a posting in India.

The first day I landed in India was one of those life-changing experiences. All the sights and flavours brought back my childhood and I knew that India would mean something very special to me. I combined fate and free will in that I fought hard within the BBC to preserve my position in India and I deliberately stayed here when I left the BBC. It is coming to India that made me a journalist.

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

I believe the biggest battle in life is about finding balance between free will, which represents the ego, and fate. You need an ego, otherwise you are nothing. But on the other hand it is so easy to get carried away by it. If you are a clever person, you may have well developed and used that talent, but initially it was given to you. It was not yours. So there is no reason to take pride in being clever or a good athlete. That is what you may call karma, or fate. If someone says something nice about your book, or if it sells quite well and so on, there is a real danger you may think very highly of yourself. On the other hand, it is justifiable for you to hope that people will be interested by it and want to discuss it.

So keeping the ego in control and finding that balance is the struggle I have on a day to day basis and I regard it as spiritual. I look back at my early years, at how much I did not think about it, and how many mistakes I made because of it.

In more practical terms, daily spirituality is also about prayer at times, though not in a systematic way. And quite often, I find comfort in saying the Hanuman Chalisa. Books are as important as prayer these days. And I am also quite fond of superstition, because it reminds me there is more to it than just this

rational business. The most awful and dreadful thing would be to live life without any concept of it all, as if life was entirely controllable by our mind. It would be absolute death to me. And this is one of the reasons I find it so difficult to discuss with staunch atheists. I find their attitude so arrogant, as they think "I have sorted it all through, I have the brains to see it is all nonsense". I can understand agnosticism or humble atheism but not this kind of arrogance.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

Journalism is such a competitive profession and I think that thanks to my spiritual understanding, I have been much less competitive than others, therefore writing with more confidence. Also, I would guess I have been more tolerant and even tempered, whether in my work or more generally in my life.

It is quite extraordinary that as I left the BBC in some disgrace – as I had criticized its management – I was offered two projects that went directly back to theology. One was a television series called "the Lives of Jesus" and the other a weekly radio show called "Something Understood", running 30 Sundays a year. Those have been a hugely rewarding experience as they make me think about those matters, they make me meet spiritual people, read spiritual literature, listen to uplifting music and so on. They have been giving me a wonderful relationship with my producer who is much more spiritual than me and with whom I have been working for 13 years.

And all that was GIVEN to me. We have done programs on coincidences and I actually think that they are a huge factor in our lives. What matters is the skill to spot them and understand their meaning. They are also a reminder that things are given to us rather than us creating it all.

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

I see my spiritual journey as zigzagging rather than a linear progress. I probably have even gone backwards compared to my early days. I certainly never had any lightning experience. And I guess there is a tendency to look back at things and bestow a deep meaning to events rather than realizing it when they happen. Still, I could mention a couple of defining moments.

I well remember my communion at a wonderful Anglo-Catholic service. There I suddenly thought to myself, I do not know what it means, but I know it is something wonderful and really important to me. And that was enough. It was one of the powerful experiences that remained stuck in my mind.

Also, one of the moments when I felt most strongly how infinitely small we are in something so huge was in the Holy Land. We had visited a number of touristy religious sites, and were now high up above the Sea of Galilee. Suddenly there, I was overcome by that feeling of small yet strong existence.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

First of all, a series of wonderful priests, including Philip Francis who was with the small church we used to attend as children. I had a tremendous admiration and love for him, in particular for his humility. And even though he was Christian, he believed in reincarnation, which opened me up to that possibility way before I came back to India.

I hated boarding school, particularly for its harsh competitiveness, but I loved its chapel which was a heaven of peace for me, and where I developed my love for liturgy.

Later on, the warden of the theological college I attended was a tremendous influence and inspiration. And as I came to India, a number of people opened up many worlds for me, including the one of Hinduism. Once I stopped daily journalism, books became another major source of inspiration.

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

I would like to come back with the gift of music because of all arts, I think it is the most transcendental, the most above reason.

And I would like to resume the search for the transcendent, with many signposts on the way to help me stop worrying about the ego and be content within myself.

But the question itself of reincarnation does not bother me too much. In some ways I think it is the most realistic possibility, but I am also convinced that everything related to the transcendent should have an element of mystery, of what one cannot know. The essence of transcendence is that it is beyond knowledge, beyond reason in some way. The less certainties we feel it is necessary to have, the better.

And I would put it in a simplistic way: if you believe in a loving God, you ought to feel that God will look after you after death as well, even if it actually is in eternal death.

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

Could You make it a bit easier for us to be confident about You? It would be awful if it was inevitable and so on, but at least You could reveal Yourself a bit more.

What is your idea of happiness?

My ego would be completely under control, I would be in a totally calm and relaxed mode, enjoying the peace of God that passes all understanding. And that point is very important: it is not only about peace, but also about it passing all understanding. Very occasionally, I do have such a feeling.