

Guy Sorman

French Intellectual

'We are not a conduit for some supra-force but for ourselves'

Sat Jul 17 2010



GUY SORMAN is a French intellectual championing free market, democracy and human rights.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It has no religious dimension. It is the answer to one question : what do I stand for?
I have one life - what have I done with it, what do I do with it ? What are the ideas and convictions that I stand for?

So spirituality is to be in agreement with the ideas and convictions I decided to stand for.

Did those ideas evolve over time?

Not in my case. They were determined by the story of my family. I come from a family which was victimized by dictatorship, totalitarianism, racism. Maybe because of this family history I decided to stand for individual freedom in any field, should it be religious, political or behavioral. This is what I would define as my spirituality.

You firmed up those ideas very young?

Definitely. At the beginning it was something very spontaneous, I was very individualistic myself, including in my religious behavior. I was educated as a Jewish boy and was always getting into a fight with the rabbi, which actually is very much part of the ever-questioning Jewish tradition.

I was always fighting for people being different, and myself being different. I was a contrarian and I remain a contrarian. What has changed is a more elaborate foundation for those ideas. I have enriched those ideas, but I didn't change course.

Not too many people are that clear about their convictions —

Absolutely. And it doesn't always please the crowds. Because it can also make me rigid and aggressive, especially when I defend the freedom of choice in any field.

I am a so-called "French intellectual", which is like French cheese, something very special, only produced in France. And I am always irritated by other scholars and intellectuals who do not stand for clear ideas. When I talk to someone, I always look for the rock inside – what is the essence and the hardcore of the person? My only personal friends are people for whom I can say without any hesitation that they stand for something.

So do you think we all have a purpose in life, certain things we are meant to do?

Yes, that is why we are created in a way. The mission can be to fight for human rights, or to bring happiness to your spouse and give a good education to your children. It doesn't matter what it is. But we all have one mission.

How would you define yours?

Mission is an ambitious word. But I would say it is to perpetuate a certain tradition of defending complete freedom, and the right to define by yourself what the purpose of your life should be, not letting others define what you should be.

I have other purposes, but this is the main purpose of my life. And if I didn't do that, I would kill myself. Because why would I be here? What would be the reason for me to be alive?

And this mission manifests in so many ways – writing, teaching, advising statesmen etc.?

Absolutely.

On that journey, do you feel there is a larger force, which some people call God?

I wouldn't say a force, or a metaphysical force, but a historical force. I think we are very much defined by history. Some historical trends may be determined by other forces but that I really don't know. And since I really don't know, I don't take it into consideration. I see myself within a certain civilization, a context, and a history but is it all determined by something else? I do not know.

The concept of God doesn't talk to you?

It doesn't. Which doesn't mean there is no God. He simply doesn't talk to me I guess ! Which may be wrong. And I never had the urge to talk to Him. Maybe it has been a complete misunderstanding between God and myself. But this is a fact of life.

Though I would mention this experience I had when I lived for a year in a village in Tamil Nadu. I was there to write a book on India and I had a strange experience. I had this feeling that the gods were present. I felt they were real, that they exist. I felt they were interacting and talking to the people I was living with, and that this family was talking to them. They were not talking to me but to them. I thought it was a privilege of those people that they could interact with the gods and that there was no separation between their daily lives and their experience of those gods.

Why wouldn't they talk to you as well?

I was like a guest at the table. I could see them talk but I would not take part.

What about coincidences and other synchronicities, is everything about chance and probabilities or is there a larger orchestration at play?

No, for me it is all about chance and probabilities only.

There is no such thing as destiny for you and preordained events?

I do not know if things are preordained. And I am very conscious of my limits in a way. There are many fields I have not explored, like spirituality and those kinds of questions, because I feel fully incapable to go there, so it would be completely useless. It would get me nowhere. I am busy enough with my research, my fights, my personal life.

At times of huge challenges, where do you find the energy?

In the people themselves. For instance I could mention a recent experience, supporting Chinese writers imprisoned because of their fight for the rule of law. My energy comes from them and their spouses. Without them I would be non-existent. The energy comes from them, not from me. And I am reinforced by the courage of those people.

I went to a distant region in China where the government sends people with AIDS, like a huge concentration camp with people dying everywhere. But it was amazing and so inspiring to see how they work at helping each other.

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

No question asked. I know the Bible a little bit and the most interesting part for me is the Book of Job. What you learn in it is that it is completely useless to ask God a question – simply because He is God. If you ask God a question, then God is not God. If He exists, there is no place for questioning. In the last line of the book, Job says "I submit". And there are two interpretations of it. One would be "I submit myself to God". The other would be "yes, I submit myself to You, but even though You may be God, I have the last word, because I decide out of my own will to do so".

So I still have the freedom to say I submit or I don't submit.

What about the concept of soul and rebirth?

I am a man of knowledge, not a man of belief. And I would say I really don't know. And I don't believe. But how can I so firmly not believe if I don't know? Yes, I would agree, there is a contradiction here

If there were such a thing as rebirth though, what would you choose for the next round?

To be my wife! Because she is the happiest person I have ever met.

Precisely, what is your idea of happiness?

Certain people have a unique capability to combine personal dignity and happiness by bringing happiness to others. Happiness alone has absolutely no meaning for me. It would be about making people around happy, or at least make them free – free to choose and be who they want to be. But some people actually say that I am incapable of being happy. And I would agree with it.

Why?

Because I am actually not really interested in my personal happiness. It is not my purpose in life. Some people have a talent to be happy. And it is not my talent.

What about contentment, or inner peace?

No, because contentment would mean you have achieved what you wanted to do. And of course I feel I have not even achieved 5% of what I wanted to do.

What for instance?

Let's say in my political and intellectual struggles - I have some satisfactions, but not that many. When for instance, three of my best friends are jailed in China, I cannot be happy or content. It also has to do with the writing or creative activity. Most of my friends are artists and writers. And none of them is content. This is actually why we keep on working.

When you start a book, you always think it will be the perfect book. But then time goes by, and after a year, two years, it is still not completed. Then the publisher takes the manuscript from you. Same for my friends who are painters or musicians. They always feel it is not completed. We are in a perpetual disappointment vis-à-vis what our ambitions were. This is why we write one more book, paint one more painting, compose one more piece of music. Because we have this ambition to fulfill what we think we would like to do and are incapable to do. All artists have this feeling. Life has been too short and we have not been able to do what we are meant to do.

So contentment would certainly not be a defining characteristic of a creative person.

Many people who create actually say they are a conduit for something beyond them, is it the same for you?

Yes and no. I have indeed heard it often. But I think we are our own conduit. When we start painting, writing etc., we reach a different stage. We are not a conduit for some supra-force. But when we create, we are definitely different. There may be some metaphysical or neurological explanation. Some like Derrida or Bourdieu would have sociological explanations. But regardless of the explanation, something happens, and there is a dichotomy between you in your normal life and you when you write. And indeed there is this strange feeling when re-reading oneself, wondering "who wrote this ? It can't be me !" So the process of creation comes from a different personality than your daily self.

Meditation, prayer – do they play any role in your life?

Organized meditation definitely no. But my life as any intellectual or artist is filled with voids. We don't work a lot after all. When you write, you write maybe one hour a day ? To be a little creative you need those long moments of absence of work, and you could call it meditation. Sometimes three days go by and I have done "nothing", not read anything, not listened to any music, not talked to anyone. But if I didn't have those times and spaces of vacuum, I could not write anything.

You mentioned the Jewish tradition you come from, what have you drawn from it?

Nobody knows exactly what it means to be Jewish. For me it is not a religious experience. I consider myself Jewish because I am the inheritor of a very long and complicated history. A history I cannot reject. A habit of constantly questioning things. The need to look for what is "real". This Jewish experience is one of my dimensions, though it is difficult to convey to others what it means. And it is absolutely true that without this long past, I wouldn't be here and I wouldn't be who I am.

It is very bizarre how it actually gets conveyed. My parents were not religious. What you transmit is not what you say but what you are. And I guess it is very much about the debating, and contradicting, and constant questioning that make us quite unbearable in many societies. I really understand by the way why we are unbearable, because we never take anything for granted, we always disrupt the society we are in.

But I think Jews are disappearing. The European Jewish tradition at least is disappearing. Maybe we have fulfilled the contract we had come for. We brought enough contradictions and questions to Western societies ! Assimilation, intermarriage, the end of anti-Semitism, all these factors combined would explain this disappearance. We can actually become happy! And this is not something we can be as Jews . I have never met a happy Jew.

I think Jews were created, or invented themselves to be unhappy, and being so, to constantly try and make a better world. You do need to constantly question in order to grow. But once Jews disappear, who will replace them to disrupt the self-satisfaction and contentment of Western civilizations?

Also, Jews have historically created Christianity and Islam. So the whole religious experience of the Western civilization may be transformed, and may be replaced by paganism, which is a source of worries for me.

For instance I can see it among the ecologists and radical greens, when they put nature above mankind. This is a preoccupation for me. Because in the Jewish experience you put human beings

above nature. Whereas with this new form of paganism you get nature in its most negative, barbaric and morbid dimension. The Western civilization could be disrupted because of this lack of religious experience.

Of course India is completely different since here man and nature are integrated. I discovered in India another way to look at things, beyond the duality we know in the West, and with an integration of man with nature. It seems to me that the Indian way would be more solid on the long run. And the economic development here does not seem to disrupt this unity of man and nature. So India is more stable than the Western civilization. And we see this sense of void for instance by the re-creation of religions in the United States.