

The Road to Null-Spirituality

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Introduction

There is an image I carry in my mind of an eight-year-old child, alone in a bedroom in Longbenton, terrified that she might have committed a sin she could not remember and that God was watching. This child was me. That image — that feeling of being watched, judged, found wanting by an omnipotent and merciless being — is the place from which my philosophical journey begins. Not with books. Not with theory. With fear.

What I want to explore here is how that child, saturated in Catholic guilt and doctrine, grew into someone who could not accept the theological claims of any religion, yet who refuses the dismissive certainties of New Atheism, and who has arrived instead at what I am currently calling *null-spirituality*. It is a concept I have been working toward for decades, and one I find myself finally able to articulate.

The essay has three movements. First, I want to explain agnosticism — the philosophical position that sits beneath null-spirituality, and one I find more defensible than simple atheism. Second, I want to develop the idea of null-spirituality itself: what it is, where it comes from, and why I believe it represents a more honest and more ethical response to the human religious condition than either belief or disbelief. Third, I want to offer a brief coda on what this looks like in practice and why it matters.

Development

Ignosticism and the Question that Cannot Be Asked

Atheism, in its standard form, makes a claim: that God does not exist. Agnosticism makes a different claim: that we cannot know whether God exists. Both positions share a common assumption — that the word "God" is meaningful enough to form the subject of a proposition. Ignosticism challenges this assumption directly.

The ignostic position, developed in contemporary philosophy primarily by M. P. Ferrante (under the term "ignosticism") and by Michael Thalbourne in his work on iganatism, holds that the term "God" is semantically incoherent. By this I mean something quite specific and technical: the word "God" fails to pick out a referent with sufficient definitional clarity that it can function meaningfully in propositions about the world. When I say "God is love" or "God exists" or even "God does not exist," I am, on the ignostic view, not making a false or an unknowable claim. I am producing a string of words that lacks the semantic content to be either true or false. The sentence has the grammar of a proposition but not its substance.

This is a Wittgensteinian point at heart, though it draws also on the broader critique of theological

language found in thinkers like John Mill and, more recently, the philosopher John Gray. Wittgenstein himself was famously reluctant to speak about religious belief, but his account of language games — the idea that words derive their meaning from their use within a form of life — provides a powerful framework for understanding why theological discourse so often fails to reach the level of genuine propositional content. In some language games, the word "God" functions beautifully. In the language game of philosophical theology, where it is required to carry propositional weight, it tends to collapse under analysis into metaphor, utterance, or pure emotional expression.

There is a useful analogy here with the concept of "the ether" in nineteenth-century physics. Physicists once debated whether the ether existed. The debate was genuine, and it was empirical. But it came to an end when physicists recognised that the concept of the ether was, in a rigorous sense, unfalsifiable and incoherent (that it could not be embedded in a testable theory of the world). The question "*Does the ether exist?*" was not answered by experiment; it was dissolved by a better understanding of what kind of claim it was. Ignosticism takes a similar line on "God" in theological discourse: the question of God's existence, in the sense in which theologians ask it, is not a genuine empirical or metaphysical question, but one whose coherence depends on a conceptual apparatus that cannot be made to work.

This does not mean religious language is worthless. It means something more specific: that religious language performs a different kind of work from the work done by scientific or empirical propositions. It performs the work of orienting human life, of providing frameworks for meaning and moral commitment, and of sustaining communities and practices. These are genuine human goods. But they do not require the literal truth of theological propositions to be realised. And this is precisely where null-spirituality begins.

Null-Spirituality: An Ethical Stance Rather Than a Belief

I have been using the term "null-spirituality" for about two years now, and I am still working out its exact boundaries. But the core intuition is this: there is a form of spiritual orientation (a way of inhabiting human existence with appropriate seriousness, wonder, and moral commitment) that does not require, and is not improved by, theistic belief.

Let me be precise about what I mean by "spiritual" in this context. I do not mean anything paranormal or supernatural. I mean something closer to what Paul Tillich meant by "*ultimate concern*" — the orientation of a human being toward that which they experience as most fundamental, most real, and most worthy of unconditional commitment. For the devout Christian, ultimate concern is directed toward God. For the null-spiritual practitioner, ultimate concern is directed toward the world itself: toward other human beings, toward the natural order, toward **the ethical life as an end in itself** rather than as a means to divine favour or eternal reward.

This is where the influence of Karl Marx becomes visible, and I make no apology for that. Marx's famous dictum that "*religion is the opium of the people*" has been endlessly misread. What Marx was pointing to was the way in which religious belief — and specifically the promise of cosmic justice in an afterlife — can function to render people passive in the face of real, material injustice in this life. If you believe that God will punish the wicked and reward the virtuous in the next world, you have a powerful psychological resource for enduring oppression without fighting it. Marx wanted people to fight.

Null-spirituality shares this concern. It is committed to the view that the good life must be built in this world, among these people, in the full knowledge of our mortality and finitude. There is no safety net. There is no afterlife consolation. And precisely because of this, the demands of justice, solidarity, and love are far more urgent, not less so. Null-spirituality does not make ethical life easier. It makes it harder and more honest.

I want to connect this to the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who might seem an unexpected

reference for someone who holds my theological position. But Kierkegaard's analysis of religious commitment is indispensable, even for those of us who cannot make the leap he describes. Kierkegaard argued that genuine religious faith requires a "leap": a commitment that cannot be grounded in evidence or reason, because the evidence and reason point in different directions simultaneously. The leap is what resolves the tension. For Kierkegaard, this leap is not irrational; it is supra-rational. The subjective experience of faith is, for Kierkegaard, the highest form of human existence.

What I take from Kierkegaard without accepting his theological conclusions is this: the orientation toward ultimate concern that characterises religious life is a genuine and serious human phenomenon, one that cannot be reduced to error, delusion, or social conditioning. People of faith are not simply mistaken. **They are engaged in a form of life that addresses real human needs.** For meaning in the face of death, for community in the face of isolation, for moral framework in the face of an apparently indifferent universe. Null-spirituality takes these needs seriously. It simply does not accept that the theological answers to them are the right ones.

This is why I find James's pragmatism so useful here. William James, in *The Will to Believe* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, was not trying to prove that religious beliefs were literally true. He was trying to show that they performed genuine work in human life. They changed how people lived, how they faced suffering, and how they found the courage to act ethically in difficult circumstances. On James's account, the question is not "*are these beliefs true in the correspondence sense?*" but "*do they work? Do they produce good fruit in human experience?*" Null-spirituality says: yes, the religious orientation works, but it can work without the metaphysical commitments.' The null-spiritual practitioner can inhabit the orientation without the doctrine.

Reinhold Niebuhr's distinction between faith and religion is also valuable here. For Niebuhr, faith was a posture of trust and surrender to the "*depth of being*". It is an orientation of surrender and openness that he believed pointed toward something genuinely transcendent. Religion, by contrast, was the institutionalisation of faith: the codification of beliefs, the development of doctrines and hierarchies, the translation of living faith into theological systems. Niebuhr was deeply critical of religion even as he remained committed to faith. Null-spirituality is, I think, the position you arrive at when you take Niebuhr's critique seriously and then ask, 'Can I have the faith without the religion?' And the answer I have come to is: perhaps, partly. But it requires more of me than religion ever did.

The Marxian Turn and the Natural Order

I have said something about why null-spirituality is not atheism or agnosticism. I want to say something now about why it is not simply relativism or nihilism, and why its Marxian underpinnings give it ethical substance.

Nihilism holds that nothing matters, that all values are equally grounded or equally groundless, and that there is no basis for preferring one form of life to another. Null-spirituality is emphatically not this. It holds that there are genuine ethical truths — that justice matters, that suffering deserves response, that human beings have obligations to one another that cannot be dissolved by appeals to self-interest or cultural variation. It is just that these obligations are grounded not in divine command, not in natural law as traditionally understood, and not in any transcendent order, but in the simple fact of human **interdependency** and the historical reality of human suffering.

The neo-Marxist tradition provides the ethical grounding here. From Marx himself, through the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, to contemporary thinkers like Nancy Fraser and Judith Squires, the Marxist tradition has consistently held that ethical judgement is not a matter of abstract principle but of concrete historical analysis. What is right depends on the material conditions of human life and on the power relations that structure those conditions. Null-spirituality inherits this orientation. It is concerned with the real, lived, material conditions of human existence and with the forms of life that

make human flourishing possible or impossible.

And this is where null-spirituality connects with the natural world in a way that religious frameworks often do not. The null-spiritual practitioner has no other world to look toward. **This one** is all there is. And so it must be inhabited with care, with attention, with the kind of reverence that religious language often reserves for God but which makes equal sense when directed at the biosphere, at ecosystems, at the intricate web of life on which human civilisation depends.

There is a form of natural piety that I find myself moved by — the recognition that I am a temporary expression of a 4-billion-year-old biological process, that I am literally made of atoms forged in stars, that the order and complexity of the natural world is, in some sense I struggle to articulate, genuinely wondrous. This feeling does not require a designer to be real. It does not require a God to be moving. It is simply a response to the extraordinary fact of existence itself and to my highly improbable presence within it.

Null-spirituality takes this natural wonder seriously. It takes the human condition (mortal, finite, embedded in networks of relation and dependence) as the proper object of spiritual attention. And it finds in that condition not a reason for despair but a ground for ethical commitment.

Coda (Conclusion)

So what does null-spirituality look like in practice? For me, it looks like a form of life in which the following commitments hold:

I do not know whether there is anything that could reasonably be called "God". I am reasonably confident that the word, as typically deployed in theological discourse, does not function coherently. But I hold this position with intellectual humility, because I recognise the limits of my own understanding and the genuine difficulty of the questions involved.

I take the goods of religious life seriously: community, ritual, moral framework, the containment of existential anxiety, and the provision of meaning in the face of death. I wish religious people well. I defend their right to believe and to practise. I do not think they are fools or cowards or deluded in any simple sense. I think they are addressing real human needs in the best way they know how.

I also think that the goods of religious life can be accessed, at least partially, without the doctrinal commitments that typically accompany them. Community can be built on shared ethical commitment rather than shared belief. Ritual can give shape and rhythm to human life without invoking the supernatural. Moral seriousness can be grounded in human solidarity rather than divine command.

And I think this matters politically. In a world in which religious communities are increasingly marginalised (and manipulated), and in which the dominant secular culture offers little in the way of existential or ethical resources, null-spirituality represents a third way: one that is respectful of religious life and practice, critical of religious triumphalism, and committed to the development of secular ethical frameworks that can do the genuine work that religion has historically done.

The eight-year-old who was afraid of God's judgement has become a seventy-year-old woman who finds that fear incomprehensible and the theological system that generated it intellectually untenable. But she has not become someone who thinks the questions religion addressed were trivial. The questions are enormous. They are the questions of how to live, how to die, how to love, how to suffer, and how to find meaning in a universe that offers no guarantees. Null-spirituality is my attempt to live honestly in the face of those questions, without pretending to answers I do not have.

That, for now, is enough.

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