

# Goodall's Gospel: The hopeful philosophy of Jane Goodall



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Naturalist, writer and expert on chimps, Dr. Jane Goodall, remains an impressive and influential voice. From her work in Africa to her international youth program "Roots and Shoots," she has traveled throughout her 87 years to spread the gospel of humanity's intricate relation to all life on earth.

I've been intrigued for a few years by "Goodall's Gospel," her rather creative expression of faith drawn from early experiences in her family and moments of meaning. Recently, a neighbor gave me a copy of her book, "Reason For Hope: A Spiritual Journey." I once had a copy and also gave it away.

One sentence seized my attention: "Lost in awe at the beauty around me, I must have slipped into a state of heightened awareness ... Self was utterly absent: I and the chimpanzees, the earth and trees and air, seemed to merge, to become one with the spirit power of life itself." As I read this, I was struck by how close, very close, her description would be to my own and many other secular people in a wonderfully natural moment

like that. For me, the "Self" would be completely present, not absent. Though I understand her point. She is emphasizing the interconnections with the beings around her. I get that. Yet, when it comes to the last phrase, I would have to "bracket" one word to be with her description: everything seemed "to become one with the [spirit] power of life itself." The need to add another dimension to the experience is understandable, I suppose, but entirely unnecessary. Isn't the power of life, exposed and celebrated in the thought and emotion of awe-inspiring moments like these, enough? I don't think Goodall means to do this, but to inject religious language into a natural event serves to create a sense of otherness rather than oneness or unity – it excludes huge numbers of people who sit just fine with beauty, awareness, self, nature and life.

In the introduction to "Reason For Hope" she tells how she sat in the cathedral of Notre Dame in 1974. In the quiet and stillness she heard and felt "a huge volume of sound: an organ playing magnificently." It was a familiar Bach Fugue "but in the cathedral, filling the entire vastness, it seemed to enter and possess my whole self." She goes on to say this moment "was perhaps the closest I have ever come to experiencing ecstasy, the ecstasy of the mystic." This led her

to exclaim: "I must believe in a guiding power in the universe—in other words, I must believe in God." The freethinking skeptic in me responds: Why? Why must this power be named? Gratefully, a few lines later she notes: "As I grew older and learned about different faiths I came to believe that there was, after all, but One God with different names: Allah, Tao, the Creator ... God, for me, was the Great Spirit."

Those two little words – "for me" – rattle the whole history of Religion. If each person who identifies with a particular faith, chooses a specific tradition, and wishes to express their devotion, would be honest enough to say: this is what God/Life is "for me," what a difference it would make! Goodall seems to have a very honest, expansive, inclusive view of faith. Her message is one of hope and that hope doesn't originate with faith. Though her grandfather was a Congregational minister and she tends to frame her religious perspective in Christian terms, she never shies away from using natural images to describe her interactions with nature. She speaks of being "lost in awe at the beauty around me," and sometimes finds herself "in the state of heightened awareness." Returning to England from Africa she feels something missing. It is a "sense of the presence of God" yet also

a disconnect from "the peace of the forest within."

Goodall offers a helpful image for framing the interface of Science and Religion. The scientist observes the world through analytical windows. "Yet there are other windows [through which mystics] contemplated the truths that they saw, not with their minds only but with their hearts and souls too." Of course, it's good to know which windows we're looking through and who interprets what we're seeing.

In 2021 Goodall published "The Book of Hope." A reviewer on NPR quotes her: "there are many people leading ethical lives, working to help others, who are neither religious nor spiritual" (NPR, Oct. 19, 2021). This fits well with her comment about atheists: "A life lived in the service of humanity [with] a love and respect for all living things" is all that matters.

The Goodall Gospel is awfully close to a secular humanist outlook. Awe, fully, close.

*Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at [chighland.com](http://chighland.com).*