

Are we wired to believe in a higher power?

Video transcript for “Punctuating Life”

Religion is one of a number of sources of comfort to us in the face of our own mortality, but it also has a psychological function. Religious beliefs help humans to order and bring meaning to their lives. And rituals in particular can punctuate our lives, marking the most crucial events.

Religious and non-religious rituals are strategies of meaning-making and they're common to all human social groups, including atheist groups.

When a baby's born, whether it's a christening or a naming ceremony, there will be a ritual. It's a means of marking the new identity of the child and welcoming that child into the social group.

Similarly, singing the national anthem, or standing in front of the flag, helps to build and reinforce national identity.

On a smaller scale, we might say “Cheers!” at the beginning of a meal or raise a glass to somebody who's died.

All these sorts of rituals help to create and to solidify group identity and mark changes in the social group.

We also recognise that places and objects don't lack significance or meaning in our lives. Every one of us is attached to particular places and objects and we know this instinctively. We know that it's not appropriate to bulldoze a cemetery, and we know that it's not right to vandalise a place like this.

Religion brings meaning, but even for those of us who aren't religious we can still find the most extraordinary joy and happiness in beauty, in art, in music. Believers and non-believers alike can see how stunning this abbey is.

So that's what brings us this sense of joy. It's about what we feel, what we need and where we find meaning.