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Sunday Sermon: “Spiritual but not Religious”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

Like Lillian Daniel, I heard many people tell me that they are spiritual but not religious. But what does that mean? Spiritual in my view means that a person sees themselves as part of something greater than themselves, but does not want to be identified with organized religion. There is a certain ego identity by identifying as spiritual. In one survey about 33 percent identified themselves as Spiritual but not religious. It is also used to describe these people who are unchurched. Among the millennials, those that were born between the early 80's and the millennium, 72 percent claim to be spiritual but not religious and are unchurched. This demographic has also been described as spiritual eclectic, freethinkers or unaffiliated or independent. Most identify themselves as having a belief in higher power or the transcendent. These “nones” (NONES) believe in God without a religious affiliation.

Previous generations had equated religion with spirituality. These could be differentiated by describing religion as a social construct coming from the understanding of spirituality as an individual experience. Take communion, for those who feel some commonality with others who take communion it can be an act of spirituality that is expressed in the Christian tradition in a variety of rituals, from the Mass in Catholicism to a simple meal in some protestant sects as Universalism once practiced. One psychological study noted the differences of who identified as spiritual and those who identified as religious found that the spiritual identify their view of the numinous as loving, forgiving, and nonjudgmental. While those who identify as religious see the divine as more judgmental. This distinction, I think, leads almost to a difference between liberal and conservative religion, and yet the spiritual but not religious folks are avoiding all religious organization with equal zeal. One Jesuit priest called the SBNR lifestyles as “plain old laziness” stating that “[s]pirituality without religion can become a self-centered complacency divorced from the wisdom of a community.

Robert Wright, the author of *The Evolution of God* said, "I think in a way that kind of cliché 'spiritual but not religious,' which apparently is a thing more and more people say to describe themselves, is in a way an attempt to reconcile in some cases with science. In other words...if I say I believe in this highly anthropomorphic God, if I'm religious and too old-fashioned in a sense, or buy into specific claims of revelation, that might not sit well with the modern scientific intelligence."

Robert C. Fuller, a professor of religious studies at Bradley University in his book *"Spiritual, But Not Religious,"* says "A large number of Americans identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious." It is likely that perhaps one in every five persons (roughly half of all the unchurched) could describe themselves in this way... A group of social scientists studied 346 people representing a wide range of religious backgrounds in an attempt to clarify what is implied when individuals describe themselves as "spiritual, but not religious." Religiousness, they found, was associated with higher levels of interest in church attendance and commitment to orthodox beliefs.

Spirituality, in contrast, was associated with higher levels of interest in mysticism, experimentation with unorthodox beliefs and practices, and negative feelings toward both clergy and churches. (Isn't this being a UU, I wonder.)

Most respondents in the study tried to integrate elements of religiousness and spirituality. Yet 19 percent of their sample constituted a separate category best described as "spiritual, not religious." Compared with those who connected interest in private spirituality with membership in a public religious group, the "spiritual, but not religious" group was less likely to evaluate religiousness positively, less likely to engage in traditional forms of worship such as church attendance and prayer, less likely to engage in group experiences related to spiritual growth, more likely to be agnostic, more likely to characterize religiousness and spirituality as different and non-overlapping concepts, more likely to hold nontraditional beliefs, and more likely to have had mystical experiences.

Those who see themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" reject traditional organized religion as the sole-or even the most valuable-means of furthering their spiritual growth. Many have had negative experiences with churches or church leaders. For example, they may have perceived church leaders as more concerned with building an organization than promoting spirituality, as hypocritical, or as

narrow-minded. Some may have experienced various forms of emotional or even sexual abuse.

Forsaking formal religious organizations, these people have instead embraced an individualized spirituality that includes picking and choosing from a wide range of alternative religious philosophies. They typically view spirituality as a journey intimately linked with the pursuit of personal growth or development, sounds like scientology, doesn't it? A woman who joined a meditation center after going through a divorce and experiencing low self-esteem offers an excellent example.

Another Professor of Religion, John David Dawson from Haverford College, a Quaker College, tells of teaching a class titled *Introduction to Christian Thought* and asking the students to reflect on their own religion.

One student piped up saying, "I think of myself as a spiritual person, but I don't have anything to do with religion." Almost the entire class expressed the same sentiment. The professor had prepared himself to deal with various Christian Theologies, but found a post-Christian class. The students were into Starhawk, the Wiccan Movement, The mindfulness of Thich Nhat Hanh and the poetry of environmental farmer, Wendell Berry.

Dawson maintains that this generation which represents one-fifth of our country's population has no relationship to any religious organization yet they consider themselves spiritual.

At All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., my colleague, Rob Hardies, spoke once of observing of people on a bus; an African-American woman was reading *Awake!*, the magazine of the Jehovah's Witnesses, A Latina woman was reading a book in Spanish "*A Metaphysical Guide to Happiness*," and a young Anglo man was reading an anthology called "*The Best Spiritual Writing of 2002*."

These three very different individuals were engaged in the same pursuit; seeking a spiritual path, looking for something spiritual that was missing from their lives. If asked each would probably state they were very spiritual people but were not very religious; something to the effect, "I care about God or something great than myself, but I could care less about the church." For them and for a growing number of Americans organized religion has become irrelevant. (a hard word for this dyslectic.)

Now I believe many of the ideas and avenues these Spiritual but not Religious folks seem to be pursuing can be found in our faith. One statement I can make after my almost fifty-year association with Unitarian Universalism is that Unitarian Universalism is not organized religion, disorganized yes, but certainly not organized.

What are the Spiritual but not religious people finding to replace the community of religious people? One parent remarked that his under-five son saw God in a sunset. And that he felt presence while walking in the forest or by the ocean. This was a revelation? Don't us that attend churches feel something special under those same conditions?

My most spiritual experience was in South Dakota at a Lakota sweat lodge and after sweating, chanting and praying for two hours We all emerged from the sweat and laid on the grass and looked at the early August sky where there was no ambient light except the stars and watched the Perseid Meteor Shower. It was magic, it was spiritual. But it came after a two week UUSC Work camp organized and including many members of my congregation in Bethlehem, PA. This was Spiritual and Religious.

These past week watching the reactions to horror of the black deaths in Chicago and watching the reaction to Syrian refugees and the opposing views we saw expressed at the Capitol yesterday where no less than 5 UU congregations were represented. This is organized religion. The Civil rights movement could not have accomplished much had they all been Spiritual and not religious. Church, I have said many times, exists for community and doing social justice.

Spiritual but not religious is a cop-out, an excuse for other Sunday priorities. Yes, no church truly represents our individual principles and teaches it well. Like all human beings, churches which are composed of us humans who are imperfect. We make mistakes; we are sometimes inconsistent and hypocritical; we aren't always as kind nor as democratic as we should be. Show me an organization, or minister or leader who is perfect. Churches, Temples, and Synagogues, do hypocritical acts, but we are also a very powerful force for positive social actions and justice, but to do this work takes work. Religious organizations take work to remain in relationship with each other. The spiritual but not religious folks I feel are too self-centered to do this work.

Lillian Daniel in her book states “Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn’t interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by yourself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on your stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.

Thank you for sharing, spiritual but not religious sunset person. You are now comfortably the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone ... brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that’s who I want at my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church.”

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world, Amen.