

“*Spiritual but Not Religious*”

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Eighteen years ago last August I walked into the Chapel of Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church as its newly called minister. I was immediately overtaken by an almighty question: What do ministers actually do?

This may sound like an odd question for a newly minted minister to ask, and the truth is it really is odd. And scary. And almost tragic.

On that day, August 1, 1990, I was paralyzed to think of a response. Well, I thought, the big stuff will come along and I will do what I need to do—as a minister. But for now, what is the first thing to do as a minister?

My answer: Bookshelves! That’s what I need to do: build bookshelves. And that’s what I did. For the first two weeks of my tenure here, I built a most amazing array of shelving for the hundreds of books I had brought from seminary. I figured that if I could get them up on shelves, surrounding me, staring down at me, somehow their wisdom would, by osmosis perhaps, seep into my life as a minister.

Amazingly, I have struggled with that original question all of these subsequent years. Every day I wonder at the nature and quality of what ministry really means.

Oh, and there’s the hidden part of the question, what does a *Unitarian Universalist* minister do? We really are different, you know, from the traditional ones, since the traditional ones have the Bible to rely on, as well as the traditions which evolved from the Bible. We UU ministers are pretty much on our own.

Sometimes I think that as a UU minister, I am mostly a *translator*. That is, my job is to review the cultural assumptions regarding religion and spirituality—and ministry—and to translate them for the benefit of Unitarian Universalists and other liberal religious people.

Of course, those assumptions are embodied in the words “spirituality” and “religion”. They come together in the sentiment I have heard a million times from folks: “I am spiritual, but not religious.”

What in the world does that mean? Well, as a minister, my translator job is to figure it out.

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Back in 2004 this book was published, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: the None Zone*. I took a class from one of its author over at Seattle University.

The premise of the book is a detailed examination of how *geography* affects the religious environment of the Pacific Northwest. The authors, Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, did a massive survey asking folks here about their religion and spirituality. Included was a list of the various religious traditions and denominations located here, and participants were asked to check which one they identified with. The majority marked the box called *NONE*.

Thus we here in the Pacific Northwest became known as the “NONE ZONE”, the only such area in the country.

In the survey the phrase, “spiritual, but not religious” emerged over and over. And like I said, I hear that phrase a lot too.

The survey attempted to find definitions of the two words and what people mean when they say the phrase. That quest is, of course, what ministers are also supposed to do.

The book records their findings. As a matter of fact, most of those books on my bookshelves also deal with the question. By osmosis, I have absorbed some of the findings.

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When people use the word *religion*, they are usually referring to what is called “organized religion”, exemplified by the myriad names of religious denominations and traditions. When people say they are not religious, they are usually saying they are not Baptist or Catholic or Jewish. Their reasons for that disavowal, of course, are also myriad.

One element is clear. Religion refers to an *institution*, and in a way, we are speaking of “institutionalized spirituality”. And whenever you institutionalize something, there are rules necessarily put in place in order to define the institution. Sometimes this is called the “creed”, and many of you may remember reciting the Apostle’s Creed or the Nicene Creed.

The rules *bind* people into the institution. According to Killen’s book, people here in the Pacific Northwest don’t want to be tied down that way. Actually, they don’t want to be tied down at all.

We should remember the origins of the word *religion* come from Latin *legare*, which means to “tie together”. (Remember old hymn which proclaims “Bless be the tie that binds”?) The root word is the same as *ligament*—that structure which holds the body together.

For me, then, *religion* is about *relationships* and how they are formed and executed. It is about our responsibilities to others, and especially to the community into which we gather, the Community of Faith. And you know what? That is not a bad thing.

The other difficult word is *spirituality*. Its word origin come from Latin, Greek and Jewish words that mean “breath”. Each of us has our own breath, our own spirit.

Spirituality can be defined that way. It is our personal breath, our individual relationship with all that is around us. *Spirituality* may be said to refer to “that aspect of our experience which can be felt but not seen, which is as ubiquitous as air, and as intimate and essential to our own existence and well-being as breathing itself.”

The Rev. Carl Scovel, Minister Emeritus of King’s Chapel in Boston has this definition of spirituality: “It speaks to me first of all of an individual yearning for and reaching for some experience and some conviction of that which is greater than self, yet fulfilling of self.” I like that.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, says, “Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit—such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony, which bring happiness to both self and others.” I like that too.

Another colleagues writes, “Spirituality is our direct experience of the Holy. Religions are systems by which we derive meaning from (those personal) spiritual experiences.”

“The demands of church discipline teach enduring values like trusting in others, sacrifice, and self-restraint, as well as opening new vistas for the experience of joy and peace at levels more profound than those available through a religious spirituality. Communities exist because their members practice certain disciplines like loyalty, democracy and charity, and religious communities are places where religious values are practiced as disciplines.

“While being spiritual without being religious frees practitioners from the awkward necessity of being accountable to others, it leaves them solely responsible for their spiritual fitness; a responsibility for which they have no real training, no dedicated mentors, and no insight. Being spiritual without being religious is like throwing seeds on unplowed ground. Plants may spring up here and there among the tares, but the waste is unconscionable.”

Here’s another colleagues’ words: “When people tell me they are spiritual but not religious, I can predict with some accuracy that they are operating under a self-made religion cobbled together with a less than systematic theology. It is effective as long as their larger world is stable, but in times of social/familial flux, private religions can readily become toxic.”

“Because private religions are created by their practitioners, they are entirely dependent on the practitioner's perceptions for their authority, so they are incapable of effecting transcendence in the individual. In effect, the practitioners can't get out of themselves. By contrast, established religions with history and external religious authorities can provide support and growth during times of personal transition, helping the practitioner to find new and more comprehensive meanings from their ongoing spiritual experiences.”

Also, I would suggest that those who self identify as “spiritual but not religious” are the most likely pool from which Unitarian Universalism can draw new members. They are the secular searchers who are seeking a sense of awe, wonder, purpose and meaning, but have been turned off by the narrowness of beliefs and practices that characterize organized religions in today's news. Many of them are Unitarian Universalists and don't know it, because they've never heard of us and do not know that there is another way to be religious.

A cautionary note: we must be careful of those who are seeking “The Church of Me”—the *“faith community and tradition that I can trust because it projects all that I want and nothing that I don't want.”* The antidote for those who are “spiritual but not religious” is a faith community clear and forthright about its spiritual identity throughout time, and which, when one gives consent to walk with others, demands a transcendence of self that, when one joins to be changed, multiplies freedom and generosity and broadmindedness like fishes and loaves.

I love what the great 20th century UU theologian, James Luther Adams said about what he called the “immaculate conception of virtue”. He said, “Spirituality on its own is surely an immaculate conception.”

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And now, here’s my definition of religion: it is a *“shared spirituality which is grounded in the community.”* Further, it is a “shared breath”, that which binds us into community. Even though our individual beliefs about spirituality are various, our collective

vision is founded in the *sharing* which takes place here, within and among us.

Our own member Tracy Monaghan has this to say: "I'm religious, but not spiritual." What he means, I think, is that the community aspect of this great question looms larger than any personal belief system. What individuals believe is important, and we try to do everything we can to encourage individual spiritual evolution, but the significant thing is that we are all in this together. Community.

Here's the Benediction:

*O Spirit of Life and Love,
we aren't the giants we'd like so much to be,
and the world can loom so large.
When all is quiet and we are small
and the night is dark,
may we hear the tender breathing of all
who lie awake with us in fear,
that together we may gather strength to live
with love, and kindness, and confidence.*

For this prayer I say, "Amen"!