

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

Isaiah 40: 1-5; Luke 3: 1-9

Do you consider yourself religious? How would you define being religious? Is being religious based on what you believe or what you do? Does it involve belonging to a community of some kind? By far, the fastest growing demographic within North America when it comes to religious options are those who claim no religion. The “nones”, as they are called, include some who claim to be atheist – those who believe there is no God. There are also agnostics – those who question whether there is a God but are not so certain as atheists there is none. But by far, the fastest growing group within the category of those who claim no religion are those who define themselves as spiritual but not religious.

What does it mean to be spiritual but not religious? The most common understanding is that you believe something larger exists – call it God or a higher power or karma or truth... but you don't belong to any particular community. Being religious is belonging to a community. But being spiritual means you connect to a higher power, you pray and you do all kinds of spiritually based activities in your own way. You create your own path rather than follow one laid out for you.

Theologian Linda Mercadante identifies some common values of spiritual but not religious persons (SBNRs). SBNRs tend to be individualistic, she writes, trusting their own experience and intuition as a guide. They reject claims that any one religion contains ultimate truth. But they also believe religions possess wisdom and “offer many paths to the same summit.” Christianity has many good things and many SBNRs will pray to the God of Jesus as they understand such a God. But they believe churches are generally places of moral hypocrisy and judgementalism, with too many doctrines that are irrelevant. SBNRs are committed to creating their own spiritual path, not relying on some organized religion to offer them something ready made. To be authentic, spirituality has to be your own, created and chosen by you, not given to you.

Now, before we evaluate whether SBNRs offer an authentic alternative to organized religion, let me say that the phenomenon of being spiritual but not religious is not new. In fact, from its very beginnings 500 years ago in Europe, Protestantism included some who would fit the spiritual but not religious category. All Protestants were protesting church corruption, hypocrisy, and irrelevant doctrines disconnected from the experience of the heart. All Protestants were also calling for personal transformation rather than rote ritualism or fear-based devotion. Most Protestants also believed that every person needed spiritual community and every person needed some higher authority. While the bible was the means to revelation and the highest truth about God, the bible needed interpretation from trained preachers and scholars within communities. God spoke into each person's heart, but people needed to be part of a community to engage their personal beliefs within a larger communion of mutual worship, sharing and caring. Christianity without collective interpretation of the scriptures within a worshipping community led by trained teachers was not the full deal.

But there were some Protestants whom scholars have grouped together as “spiritualists”. Spiritualists could be very different from one another. For instance, one of my favourite spiritualists was Thomas Muentzer. Muentzer was a fiery revolutionary calling for social justice for poor peasants. All of society had to be transformed from the bottom up. He rallied the peasants to protest for better working conditions and greater human rights. But Muentzer also encouraged resistance even if it meant using force. He interpreted Old Testament passages, especially from the prophets, that sanctioned violence as a means to achieving divine justice. Sadly, Muentzer and many peasants were slaughtered by imperial forces who were bent on protecting their privilege and power.

But there were other spiritualists who were much more individualistically oriented and peace oriented who advocated for more indirect spiritual influence within society. Two notable names are Sebastian Franck and Hans Denck. Franck and Denck focussed more on inner transformation and purity of heart rather than social justice. The best you could do for society was change yourself and purify yourself before God. The world as we know it would come to an end soon because of the rampant corruption in society and the church.

But even though they were very different, what connected all spiritualists was the belief that “God’s Word” or the “spark of the Holy Spirit” or the “inner light of Christ” was within all of us as a seed waiting to be watered and grown. Some spiritualists even gave up on the bible altogether and definitely on organized religion. Even as many tried to build communities of like-minded and like-spirited persons, you can imagine that spiritualism works best on an individual basis rather than in any organized way. When everyone is their own authority and God speaks to you personally more than God speaks to you through a community, it’s very hard to build the kind of community where people are seriously committed to one another believing God speaks through others as much as in yourself alone.

And this is just as true for SBNRs today as it was in Europe 500 years ago. Spirituality has to be your own. God or the divine is within each of us and speaks into each of us. We can choose to be part of communities or not. It’s secondary at best and many SBNRs pick and choose what communities they float in and out of. Authority is also something a person has to choose for themselves. If I like what you’re saying and teaching and if it helps me and inspires me, then I’ll listen and even join in. But if I hear things that challenge my beliefs, I’m out.

And this, my friends, brings me to someone who may be a very early pioneer of the spiritual but not religious movement: John the Baptist. What makes John the Baptist spiritual but not religious? Think about his message: repent for the forgiveness of your sins. Life is hard and difficult for many people. And many experience this difficulty as a judgement from God. Repentance is about coming clean and opening up your heart. Don’t hold anything back, John is saying. God doesn’t want to judge you but forgive you. God loves you. But God needs honesty. God doesn’t want rituals or hypocrisy. God wants an open heart. Be free of the burden of guilt and shame. Trust God’s love to flow into you, cleanse you and take away the weight of your spiritual burdens.

But in addition to calling for honest, heart-felt spirituality, John is also engaging individuals outside religious communities. He is basically saying you don’t need a religious community or official to declare

you forgiven and loved by God. You have direct access to God through your heart. This is also why John is seen as a threat. He is functioning totally outside the system set up to keep people bound and dependent on the religious systems of the day.

But John is also a threat in a totally other way. Yes, he is preaching forgiveness for those who genuinely open their hearts before God. But he is also preaching judgement on all those who come before God as if they are entitled to God's favour. He minces no words: "You brood of vipers!" he says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Wow! Pretty harsh for our modern ears. But let's appreciate what John is saying here. Too often, our self-made spirituality is too cozy and comfortable. We embrace all that props us up. We are spiritual children of Abraham, after all. We are loved as we are. If someone challenges us or if we are made uncomfortable by ethical demands or the needs of others to be heard and supported, we can just opt to tune it out. We are individuals after all, free to make up our own spirituality. But being part of a community challenges us to listen as much as to share, to open our hearts to God speaking to us through others as much as God speaking straight into our hearts and consciences. We need a higher authority that often addresses and engages us through others in community. How else do we verify internally and check what we are feeling within and how that connects in a positive or negative way externally. It's not just about how we feel inside, but how others feel in relation to us too.

John lives in a world where your spirituality is defined by your culture, your nationality, and how you fit into the system. Preaching a call from God to you as a person outside any system, religion or community is revolutionary. It's about empowering you to take responsibility as an individual person for yourself and the kind of person you want to become. Don't keep blaming others or making excuses for yourself. Take responsibility for your spirituality and get pure before God. The language of fire and purification, of the crooked being made straight and the rough ways made smooth is about inner purification and transparency before God without barriers.

On the other hand, unlike John's world, today we live in a time and place where individualism is God. Any talk of higher authority and binding communal obligations are seen as an impediment to our individual development. We need more of a communal mindset today, not less. We need to really listen to one another because God speaks to us through others as much as God speaks straight into our own hearts. If we just isolate ourselves spiritually and just listen to our own voices we will miss so much God is trying to tell us through others.

So then, being spiritual but not religious has been an option well before this generation of our time. Prophets and visionaries have always called on people to get real in their heart and soul, to have the courage to face themselves and the imagination to connect to a higher power through their own hearts and consciences. At the same time, the great spiritual traditions have all taught the importance of

community as a place through which the divine speaks to us and a space where we are challenged and supported to grow our spirituality.

We also need to recognize that God's voice is about love, affirmation and empowerment, but it is also about challenging us to repent and change, to come clean and to become ever more transparent before a Ground of Being who sees and knows all. How do we hear the challenge to repent and to change if we are simply our own authority as individuals?

In this season of Advent, as we begin again a church year, may we begin again a new chapter in our spiritual lives, and may this community we call Armour Heights be an instrumental part of our own personal journey. May we open our hearts to God flowing into us and opening our eyes to our own personal path. But may we also recognize God speaking to us through others, through a community, an evolving tradition and scriptures that people have read and wrestled with over thousands of years. We are precious before God each and every one of us, but we are also part of a larger whole. How important is spiritual community for your own spiritual journey?

Amen.