

May 2009

## Can One Be Spiritual But Not Religious?

Roger Haight  
*St. John Fisher College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum>



Part of the Religion Commons

## [How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Haight, Roger (2009) "Can One Be Spiritual But Not Religious?," *Verbum*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 19.  
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol6/iss2/19>

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol6/iss2/19> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact [fisherpub@sjfc.edu](mailto:fisherpub@sjfc.edu).

---

## Can One Be Spiritual But Not Religious?

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"How many times have you heard the statement that "I am spiritual, but not religious." It is so common that it could easily qualify as a contemporary cliché. But what does it mean? In a former time to be spiritual was to be religious: they meant pretty much the same thing. Today, however, spirituality can refer to a hundred different things, from self-care to mysticism, from yoga to a psychological power of positive thinking. And the diversity of the different kinds of religion, from the recognized world religions to emergent communities, is staggering. So one cannot take for granted that we know what the self-description really means."

## **CAN ONE BE SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS?**

*Roger Haight, S. J.*

St. John Fisher College: March 24, 2009

How many times have you heard the statement that "I am spiritual, but not religious." It is so common that it could easily qualify as a contemporary cliché. But what does it mean? In a former time to be spiritual was to be religious: they meant pretty much the same thing. Today, however, spirituality can refer to a hundred different things, from self-care to mysticism, from yoga to a psychological power of positive thinking. And the diversity of the different kinds of religion, from the recognized world religions to emergent communities, is staggering. So one cannot take for granted that we know what the self-description really means.

If this common saying represents something relatively significant, should we say it is positive or negative? Parents or grandparents usually feel disappointment when they hear that their offspring are spiritual but not religious. But the young mean it quite positively. One has to reckon that the greater part of the twenty million people who have left the Catholic Church in the US in the last few decades think they have grown spiritually. Is there something new going on culturally that is reflected by this aphorism? At least this is clear: the ideas of spirituality and religion, which have always been taken for granted as almost synonymous, are now so distinguished that one can claim to be spiritual and not religious.

We need a strategy to even talk about this issue. I propose, first of all, taking account of our present cultural situation. Against this background I will put on the table the fact that there is an enormous variety of different Christian spiritualities. Spirituality is an open and fluid reality. Then, with this background in place I will formulate descriptive concepts of "spirituality" and "religion" and in the light of these working definitions I will offer some reflections in response to the question, "can one be spiritual but not religious?"

### The Cultural Background of Religion and Spirituality Today

If we wish to speak about spirituality today, we have to take into account the cultural world in which we live. I find that four factors mark our situation today that have a direct bearing on how we speak of spirituality and religion. These are experiences associated with our complex, developed, and urban culture.

Modern times ushered in the separation of church and state. More pervasively it gradually injected various degrees of secularization in which religion does not enter into society's planning of education, business, and political economic strategy. One good reason for this lies in the multiplicity of religions. With so many diverse religious opinions abroad, society gradually makes religious belonging a private affair and relegates it to the margins of public social issues. This results in religion losing its common social support; each person is free to not be religious, and many people experience no advantage or difference in their lives without public religious belonging or without God. In short: some degree of secularization.

Another factor comes from the world becoming a smaller place with increasing migration of peoples so that we are more aware of other religions besides Christianity and Judaism. In fact the world is full of different religions; after the great world religions, there are countless other local religions. This new recognition of religious diversity has a way of relativizing religion itself: so many different religions make it hard to imagine that there is one true religion, and from there it is an easy step to thinking that the object of religion represents no more than a human projection. A good number of scientists and intellectuals share this view. In short: relativism.

Another factor in the common experience of human beings will always be a challenge to the very idea of God. This may be called paradoxically the "non-experience" of God. By this I refer to God's silence when we need God's word most, God's absence when people seem most desperate, God's impotence where we expect God's power, and God's failure to show up where evil abounds. Many people, usually in a situation of crisis, cannot negotiate the unfathomable mystery of how God can be both all powerful and good at the same time when the world is as it is. In short: massive innocent suffering scandalizes the faith of many people.

Finally, when one wants to speak about spirituality and religion in this situation one has to be dazzled by so many different kinds of spirituality. Of course, different spiritualities come with different religions. But even within Christianity there are many different kinds of spirituality connected with different churches, and within each church different theologies generate or reflect different spiritualities. A consideration of ethics also enters into this mix, and the differences in ethical systems and values abound. Suddenly one seems to be faced with the possibility that every single individual has his or her own unique spirituality that is really quite different from even their friends and fellow members of a given church. I will reflect on this in the next section.

In an earlier period where cultures were more isolated and there was less communications between them, less travel and migration, it seems that the relations between a specific religion

and its theology, its ethics, and its spirituality were relatively stable. There was less hybridity or mixture and more homogeneity in what it meant to be a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu, or a Buddhist. By contrast, a new thing has been happening in our days and it consists in a breaking off of spirituality from organized religion. And this is complicated by commingling and interchange, so that parts of one spirituality are being absorbed by people in another religion and even by those with no religion at all. How can we even talk about spirituality and mean the same thing in such a situation? But wait: there has always been a pluralism of spiritualities even within Christianity itself.

### Pluralism of Christian Spiritualities

In this part of the discussion I want to insist on how varied human spiritualities are. The sheer variety of what can pass for spirituality is massive and confusing. Spiritualities of course vary according to religions. Generically, there are Buddhist and Hindu and Islamic spiritualities. Marxism and other forms of atheistic humanism display non-religious spiritualities. People can be absolutely committed to social justice and human values without explicit belief in God. But even within particular religions one finds a pluralism of spiritualities. I will demonstrate this with examples from our own Christian history.

This does not mean that common features are lacking. Pluralism means differences within a wider all embracing unity. All Christians, Paul says, share this in common: "There is one body and one Spirit, as there is also one hope held out in God's call to you; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6). But within this uniting confession of faith, the differences of Christian life and motivation are remarkable. Let me illustrate this with the essential or inner defining marks of seven different spiritualities. This list is by no means exhaustive.

First, the monastic life of Egypt in the third and fourth centuries which John Cassian brought to Europe in the fifth century proposed that the highest form of Christian life was to separate oneself from this world and to completely master one's inner desires. The goal of the spiritual life was to develop such a purity of heart, that is, an inner desire for and fixation on God, that all one's actions in this world would be consciously referred to or dominated by this clinging to what human life was oriented towards from the beginning.<sup>i</sup>

Next, in Thomas Aquinas's theology of grace one finds the basic template for Catholic spirituality since his time. All human beings are ordained by God the creator for happiness. But more than this, human beings are also invited to a personal fulfillment in communion with the

divine life itself. But due to the limitation of nature and the infection of human sin, we are unable to reach that blessed supernatural end without divine help or grace. That grace has been communicated to us through Jesus Christ, and it provides us with the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and love. These are meant to guide our actions. The fundamental structure of Christian spirituality, therefore, is to perform actions that are empowered by faith, hope, and love of God and neighbor and in this way save our souls.<sup>ii</sup>

In the sixteenth century Martin Luther proposed a different, I think one can say radically different, conception of Christian spirituality. It is based on the premise that was shared by Augustine and Aquinas that, because of sin, we cannot initiate our own salvation: it has to come to us through Jesus Christ. And this salvation is negotiated in two steps: first we acknowledge our sinfulness and at the same time cling to Jesus Christ as the promise of our salvation. Then, second, out of gratitude, we love God and neighbor and actively serve them. In Luther the whole drama of acting out our salvation is based on the foundational experience faith in Christ and thanksgiving for God's mercy. This is less a spirituality of activities, and more a spirituality of gratitude.<sup>iii</sup>

The spirituality that John Calvin developed to maturity in his work as a reformer in the city of Geneva looks quite different from Luther's. Calvin's sense of the sovereignty of God, his positive conception of law, and his view of God's providence helped him to forge a spirituality that emphasized the vocation of each person. Each person is who he or she is because God has a plan for the world and for each one in it. In this spirituality, each Christian can read God's will in the constellation of his or her talents and social position, and the living out of one's family and social life gives glory to God as creator and savior. This is a spirituality of participation in the building of social community and stewardship of our earthly resources.<sup>iv</sup>

Two very different modern theologians are the Catholic Teilhard de Chardin and the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As different as they are, they share a modern conviction that we live in a new modern world in which the destiny of the earth is in human hands so that human beings are called upon to become responsible for it and tend it. Both of these men, in the way they thought and the way they lived, turned not to external religion as the source of spirituality, but to Christ who by incarnation showed that God was not up there and out there but within the world of matter and the world of social relationships. This spirituality directly contradicts monastic spirituality and Thomas à Kempis's classic *Imitation of Christ* at several points: there is

no withdrawal from the world because God is found precisely within the world and the quest for its fulfillment.<sup>v</sup>

Consider also the liberationist spirituality that is shared by Latin Americans and in the United States by African Americans and Hispanic Americans. This spirituality rests on the experience and conviction that, like a loving parent, God's universal love for God's children extends special care for those who absolutely need it. This is God's preferential option for the poor and it extends to all, as the brothers and sisters of the poor, the requirement of love to help them in the measure of their need. This too is a modern spirituality because it presupposes that unjust social structures are not matters of fate but can be changed and that we are called upon to change those that injure their victims.<sup>vi</sup>

Finally, a new kind of spirituality has gradually swept through the whole world in the course of the twentieth century which is analogously called Pentecostal. I say analogously because there are of course many differences among Pentecostals. But they share a kind of liturgical spirituality in which the presence of the Spirit to their assemblies is celebrated and demonstrated in a variety of open, enthusiastic ways. This is Spirit-centered spirituality, a new energetic and vividly experienced spirituality that has reached world-wide proportions and is in a consistent process of growth.<sup>vii</sup>

These examples are enough to show that "spirituality" is an almost inexhaustible field of inquiry. Against the background of our contemporary culture and this fluid reality of spirituality we obviously need some working definitions of what we are talking about.

#### Working Definitions of Spirituality and Religion

Just as every single person seems to have his or her own spirituality, so too every theologian has a different conception of what the idea of spirituality represents. I recognize this and therefore do not pretend that the following definitions or descriptions of spirituality and religion are the only or even the most adequate possibilities. But they may shed some light on the subject. My purpose here is not to defend them but to work with them.

The place to begin is with the idea of spirituality. *By spirituality I mean the logic, or character, or consistent quality of a person's living insofar as it is measured before ultimate reality.* This conception is intended to be open and inclusive: according to it, everyone has a spirituality even when they are not conscious of it, so long as they have a character and identity at all. This conception rescues the idea of spirituality from the margins of bizarre or esoteric activity and places it within the sphere of ordinary life. Spirituality is something like personal identity in

action. Even though those with similar spiritualities form groups, still, at bottom, spirituality describes the individual identity of a person. This notion of spirituality rests on the truism that we are what we do, so that the overall character or pattern of our behaviors, their logic, really constitutes the spirituality that in turn defines who we are.

Given this basis, spirituality may also refer to the study of this dimension of human life. And various kinds of spirituality, in terms of religions, types, and schools, can be categorized and compared. But these always refer back to patterns of human living before ultimate reality.

I want to define religion in a way that differentiates it from spirituality without necessarily separating or dissociating it from spirituality. I will look upon religion in this discussion as *a set of beliefs, values, and practices that together define what ultimate reality is and the relationship that obtains between this ultimate reality and ourselves.*

Two elements in this description of religion have particular bearing in this discussion. The first is that I represent religion primarily in objective social terms: the word "religion" seems first of all to refer to the public institutions called religions into which people are socialized and are members. On this first level religions are larger than us and draw us into themselves. But, second, this does not exhaust the meaning of a religion because it is also internalized and resonates with the deepest religious experiences of the members. On the first level we talk about the religions: Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. On the second level we know that the religions are constituted by the very lives of people who live them and would not exist apart from the people who bear them in their daily lives.

These two descriptions of spirituality and religion, especially the distinction between two spheres of religion, the social and the personally appropriated, can offer some first clarifications about the relationship between the spiritual and the religious. The idea of "spirituality," for example, when one says "I am spiritual," tends to refer to the deep inner recesses of a person. This is where each one considers ultimate questions and looks for ultimate meaning. By contrast, the idea of "religion," for example, when one says "I am not religious," often means that one is not a member, or not a practicing participant, of a specific religion or religious congregation. Religion tends to refer to the exterior sphere as in organized religion.

But this does not tell the whole story. Actually religion on the personal level can so approach becoming a spirituality that it is scarcely different from a spirituality. When one really internalizes a religion, it can become the dominant part of one's spirituality. Or, one's spontaneous, interior spirituality may find its clearest external expression in the beliefs, values,

and practices of a religious community. Conceivably, therefore, "I am not religious" may also mean that a religion is deeply internalized within me even though I do not assemble with any community.

To sum up before moving on: the distinction between the ideas of the spiritual and the religious that I am tentatively proposing associates spirituality with the individual and personal logic of each person's life and religion with a more objective and social milieu. But this would be a distortion if one did not recognize how they can overlap so that one's spirituality can become synonymous with the religious. In this view of things spirituality is the deeper and broader category since no one can lack a spirituality: ultimately it defines individual identity.

#### Five Observations

These definitions and clarifications provide the context for a response to the question: "Can one be spiritual but not religious?" It turns out that this is no simple question with a simple answer but requires considerable nuance. The five following statements at least begin to close in on an answer.

*All people have some spirituality, and every spirituality unfolds within the sphere of some conception of ultimate reality that is religion-like in commanding an ultimate loyalty.* This flows from the very definition of spirituality that I propose; it associates spirituality with the depth dimension of our specifically human lives. We all live by some overall vision and commitment that encompasses our lives; and all cling to the object of that allegiance by some form of faith. When one does not have such faith in an explicit self-conscious way, one is either looking for it or it lies embedded in one's action, unattended to and not consciously recognized. But it still guides our lives.

*There can be because there are non-theistic religious spiritualities.* We have to be alert today to the fact of the many religions that surround us. Because of intermarriage, families today are becoming the most vital place for interreligious dialogue. Buddhism and Buddhist spiritual practices show us that there can be deep religious spiritualities that are non-theistic. They are religious because they encompass the total energy of people in ultimacy and require faith, even though that ultimacy is not described as a personal God. The inner coherence of such commitments, often accompanied by values of self-transcending service, provides the rationale for vibrant and convinced atheistic spiritualities even within Christian Western culture.

*Correlatively, there are religions and churches that are founded upon genuine spiritual experience and that no longer address the inner longings and behaviors of their former members.*

I take this as self-evident in Europe; shifts are also occurring in the United States. The numbers in the Catholic Church have remained stable proportionally: in the area of between 20 to 25 percent of the population. But this hides the dropout rate because the absolute numbers have been supplemented by immigrants. The Catholic and mainline Christian churches are losing members, sometimes to churches representing a more vital spirituality.

*Our new open and pluralistic societies and individualistic cultures allow the existence of spiritualities that are purely personal and may be either non-religious and non-theistic or may be deeply religious and even Christian in their substance.* The point here is that inner religious belief and commitment can be distinguished off from social commitments such as membership in a church. The result is often a much deeper commitment or search because it assumes much more responsibility and risk. The assumption is that the statement "I am spiritual" is not a cover for apathy and superficiality. From this perspective, the saying "I am spiritual but not religious" represents mature responsibility and admirable honesty and commitment or a search for an object of religious-like commitment.

*But from a Christian perspective private spiritualities that lack a belief in resurrection and eternal life ultimately appear to be pessimistic about the value and positive outcome of human existence.* Here I simply make appeal, without developing it, to the doctrine of eternal life. Without this possibility or something like it the massive innocent suffering that the world of nature and history dramatically represent to our imaginations ultimately seems to have the upper hand. Without resurrection the world and human life in it are left metaphysically senseless, without ultimate meaning. What happens to personhood? From the Christian perspective Jesus' resurrection bathes this entire range of experience with hope.

### Conclusion

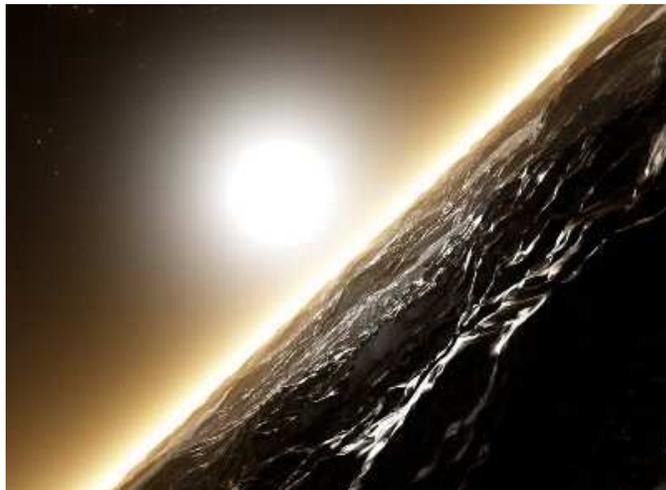
Let me conclude this discussion with the observation that the statement "I am spiritual but not religious" reveals a great deal about our religious situation in the United States today. It is more than a remark made in passing. It reflects a general situation in the West and developed pluralistic societies that in turn contains a twofold challenge to the survival of the churches in a vibrant form: first a challenge to the churches and second a challenge to individual Christians.

*On the part of the churches:* if the churches want to continue to be relevant they must directly address the newly experienced spiritual questions of their constituents. This does not mean abandoning their traditions; but it does mean reinterpreting them. The response of mainline churches to their dwindling membership generally appears to be to close up turtle-like and

reassert traditional doctrines and practices in order to maintain identity. Many have observed that this just compounds the problem: the churches have to address the questions that are being asked by their members and those who look to them for guidance on new issues.

*On the part of individuals:* if deep conceptions of truth have a universal relevance, they tend to communicate themselves. Therefore individualist spirituality is ultimately an anomaly. If such spiritual experience is really true it should spontaneously urge communication of itself and building of community around itself or joining a community of the like-minded. One may be spiritual but not religious for a time, but within every authentic spirituality lies an impulse to enter into some level of community whether it be religious or not.

In sum, my conclusion about the idea that one can be spiritual and not religious is that this may be a true and authentic position, but if it is authentic, it should lead in time to membership in a community. At the same time, the phenomenon appears to be positive, and it contains a significant cultural challenge to our public religious institutions: they may be subject to legitimate criticism.



## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>i</sup> John Cassian, "Conferences," *Western Asceticism, Library of Christian Classics*, v 19, ed. by Owen Chadwick (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 195-214.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1961), On Grace: I-II, qq. 109-114; On the Virtues: I-II, q. 55, aa. 1-4; q. 62, aa. 1-4; q. 63, aa. 1-4; q. 94, aa. 1-6.

<sup>iii</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians (1535) Luther's Works*, v 26 (St. Louis: Concord, 1963), 122-79; Martin Luther, "The Freedom of the Christian," *Luther's Works*, v 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 333-70.

<sup>iv</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. by J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960): On the law: II.7.8-15 (356-64)]; On sanctification: III.3.5-10 (597-603); On the Christian life: III.6-10 (684-725).

<sup>v</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Costly Grace," *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 45-60; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), Letters of 1944, April 30; May 5, 25; June 8; July 8, 16, 18, 21.

<sup>vi</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, "Ignatius Loyola: Trial or Project?" *Signs of the Times: Theological Reflections* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 149-75.

<sup>vii</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995).