

I am Spiritual but not Religious

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In this ever-changing world we are accustomed to changes in both the macrocosm and the microcosm. Day and night rotate without fail. Seasons follow each other. Time changes every being and every thing. Sinners become saints and some saints fall from spiritual heights. History records the rise and fall of great empires. Eating habits change; modes of dress change according to the seasons. Social customs and educational systems are constantly in flux. We must learn to adjust to all of these changes if we are to live in this world harmoniously. If we do not, there will be constant friction and suffering, with no peace and happiness.

In this world of change there is one thing that remains constant: Brahman, Atman, or God, the divine ground of being. The Truth does not change. Christ said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The Prophet Mohammad said, "They will enter the Garden of Bliss who have a true, pure, and merciful heart." Will these statements ever change? Will the ten commandments of Moses and the eightfold path of Buddha ever change? Both Krishna and Patanjali said that the mind can be controlled by constant practice of meditation and detachment. Will this method of controlling the mind ever change?

At the heart of all religions lies truthfulness, purity, renunciation, love, devotion, compassion, forgiveness, unselfishness, nonviolence, self-control, humility, and so on. That inner core remains the same even as rituals, ways of

worship, and religious practices evolve over time. For example, the Catholic mass used to be conducted in Latin only, and now many churches conduct it in the local language. Likewise, the ancient Vedic sacrifices are no longer practised as they were long ago.

The human body goes through six changes: it is born, exists, grows, develops, decays, and dies. Throughout all of this the Atman or pure consciousness that is inside all of us remains the same. God's knowable attributes -- Goodness, Truth, Beauty, Being, Awareness, Bliss, Love, Creativity, and Power -- remain constant. The Katha Upanishad tells us: "There is One who is the Eternal Reality among non-eternal objects, the one [truly] conscious Entity among conscious objects, and who, though nondual, fulfils the desires of many. Eternal peace belongs to the wise who perceive Him within themselves -- not to others."¹

This is the gospel truth: People all over the world and in all religions are trying to attain eternal peace. It cannot be bought in the market, so people follow religious paths and practise spirituality to reach their goal. Religious paths are many but their goal is God or the Ultimate Reality, who is called by various names, such as Buddha, Jesus, Allah, Ishwara and so on. In this modern age, Ramakrishna experienced God in different religions and proclaimed: "As many faiths, so many paths." As the ocean is the final destination of many rivers on different continents, so the goal of all religions is God. Religions are different paths to reach God, but they are not God.

Many modern young people do not care for organized religion but still seek spirituality. There is a movement in the West called SBNR, meaning "spiritual but not religious." According to Wikipedia: "Spiritual but not religious (SBNR) is

a popular phrase and initialism used to self-identify a life stance of spirituality that rejects traditional organized religion as the sole or most valuable means of furthering spiritual growth. The term is used worldwide, but is most prominent in the United States where one study reports that as many as 33% of people identify as spiritual but not religious.”

Some think of religion as “people’s beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of a deity or deities, and divine involvement in the universe and human life.” Some say religion is “an institutionalized or personal system of beliefs and practices relating to the divine.” Again some look at religion as “a set of strongly held beliefs, values, and attitudes that somebody lives by.” The Latin roots of *religion* are *religio*, which means “reverence for gods or holiness,” and *religare*, or “back to or bind with God.” The word *spiritual* means “relating to the soul or spirit, usually in contrast to material things,” or “relating to religious or sacred things rather than worldly things, or connected by an affinity of the mind, spirit, or temperament.”

Once during an interfaith conference in St. Louis I faced some strong arguments from people in the SBNR community. Their slogan was “We love Jesus but hate religion.” This movement is a protest against organized religions and a wake-up call for religious leaders, but it is hard to say what its philosophy is precisely. Some of these people are disillusioned by the luxurious living and immorality they see among some religious leaders; the bloodshed in the name of religion; and the corruption, commercialism, politics, and power struggles in religious institutions. Seeing such hypocrisy in their places of worship shook their faith and they stopped going to church. They have become tired of having their unique identities reduced to bureaucratic codes by religious institutions.

Some people in the SBNR movement claim to be moral and ethical, more so than those religious leaders whom they call hypocrites. Some are free thinkers who do not like doctrines, dogmas, and creeds. They reject the Christian doctrine of original sin -- indeed, they reject the concept of sin altogether. They do not like their spiritual natures to be squelched or denied. They see their version of spirituality as a way to be free from the strictures of religion. They consider traditional organized religion to be moribund, corrupt, old-fashioned, a "comatose religion" -- they want to breathe the fresh air of eternal spirituality.

Some people claim themselves to be "spiritual but not religious" although their characters are questionable. Pointing to them, Huston Smith tried to clarify the word *religion* in his book *Why Religion Matters*:

A cloud has descended over the very word itself. Uncontaminated, *religion* is a noble word; deriving as it does from the Latin *religio*, to bind, the word targets what religion is essentially about. But because it challenges the prevailing worldview, it has lost some of its respectability. Mention the word in public and its sins are what jump first to mind. Still, it is difficult to argue that religion has nothing to be said for it, which leaves us with Tonto's remark when, on entering a barn with the Lone Ranger, he took several good sniffs and pronounced, 'There's got to be a horse in here somewhere.' Enter the word *spirituality* to name (without specification) what is good about religion. Being no more than human attribute, spirituality is not institutionalized, and this exempts it from the problems that inevitably attend institutions -- notably (in religions institutions) the in-group/out-group tensions they tend to breed.

It is a bad sign when *spiritual*, an adjective, gets turned into a noun, *spirituality*, for this has a dog chasing its own tail. Grammatically, *spirit* is the noun in question, and *spiritual* its adjective. *Spirituality* is a neologism that has come into existence because spirit has no referent in science's world, and without grounding there, we are left unsure as to what the word denotes.²

Most members of the young generation are busy pursuing their careers and seeking enjoyment. They have no time to think of God, and they lead a godless life. The Internet is diverting their minds to the external world and making them restless. The world is moving too fast and people try desperately to keep up. They have little time to study seriously or to think deeply. You are considered to be behind the times if you do not have a mobile phone or a tablet computer. All around us we see masses of people are more involved with these modern gadgets than with God or spiritual life.

Every morning when one opens the newspapers one sees fighting and killing going on all over the world. One of the main causes of this is religion. Religion is supposed to bring peace and joy to the world, but it is bringing misery and death instead. However, Swami Vivekananda once said: "Religion, the great milch cow, has given many kicks, but never mind -- it also gives a great deal of milk."³ One should not blame religion; the blame should go to those who use religion for their own selfish purposes. Swamiji also said: "Can religion really accomplish anything? It can. It brings to man eternal life. It has made man what he is, and will make of this human animal a god. That is what religion can do. Take religion from human society and what will remain? Nothing but a forest of brutes."⁴

Organized religions around the world are often deeply connected with politics. That is why Swamiji emphatically said that the Ramakrishna Order should have no connection with politics. He cautioned his Western followers in particular:

If you want to be religious, enter not the gate of any organized religions. They do a hundred times more evil than good, because they stop the growth of each one's individual development. Study everything, but keep your own seat firm. If you take my advice, do not put your neck into the trap. The moment they try to put their noose on you, get your

neck out and go somewhere else.... Religion is only between you and your God, and no third person must come between you. If you and I organize, we begin to hate every person. It is better not to love, if loving only means hating others. That is not love. That is hell! If loving your own people means hating everybody else, it is the quintessence of selfishness and brutality, and the effect is that it will make you brutes.⁵

Generally religions begin with the life and teaching of an avatar or a prophet. After the passing away of those great teachers, their disciples and followers form various denominations or sects according to their understanding. At present there are 296 Christian denominations in the U.S. and Canada. Around the world Islam has splintered into dozens of sects.⁶ Recently the king of Saudi Arabia cautioned fundamental Muslims not to interpret the Koran to suit their own needs and to mislead others.

Each person has his or her own idea of religion. Some of those ideas are strange and vague, and some are narrow and fanatical. Bertrand Russell remarked that he didn't consider himself to be a Christian just because he was born in a Christian country and Christian family. He is a true Christian who follows the life and teachings of Christ implicitly. While in the West, Swamiji presented the ideal of a universal religion and redefined religion in the following ways:

“Religion is the manifestation of divinity already in human being.”

“Religion is being and becoming.”

“Religion is realization.”

“The old religion said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is an atheist who does not believe in himself.”

“Religion is the realization of spirit as spirit.”

It is hard to argue against Swamiji's definitions of religion.

To a Vedantin, religion is the body and spirituality is the soul. The body cannot function without the soul (*jivatma*) and the soul can do nothing without the body. It is spirit and matter, Brahman and Shakti. Brahman or pure consciousness manifests itself through the body-mind organism. This Brahman is the Spirit, or the Self. Only those who dwell in that Spirit or God-consciousness are truly spiritual. Most people live in the physical, sensate, mental, or intellectual planes. Only one among millions lives on the spiritual or transcendental plane. When a person says, "I am spiritual," it is hard to say what he or she means. To a Vedantin, every being is spiritual, from the creator Brahma down to an ant, because Spirit or Consciousness dwells in all.

According to some Vedantins, religion and spirituality are intertwined. Religion is connected with external practices such as rituals, worship, fasting, vigils, prayers, singing, chanting God's name, and so on. Spirituality is connected with practising internal disciplines such as hearing, reflecting, and meditating. Both help human beings to experience their true divine nature. Here are a few examples of the relationship between spirituality and religion:

The flesh of a luscious apple develops slowly, protected by its skin. The flesh would rot without the skin, and the skin would dry up without the flesh. Spirituality is like the flesh of an apple, and religion is like the skin.

The human body consists of flesh and bone, and within the body lie the mind, memory, ego, and intellect. Consciousness animates both external and internal human systems. This body-mind organism can be compared with religion and consciousness with spirituality.

After experiencing the Divinity within, the ancient teachers of Vedanta declared that each soul is potentially divine. All beings are more or less spiritual -- not only saints, but also sinners, robbers, and murderers. The same Consciousness is manifested in birds and beasts, insects and plants. The difference among them is the difference in degree of manifestation of Spirit or Consciousness.

The golden rule of all religions is based on this philosophy of oneness of Godhead and the unity of existence:

Buddhism says: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."

Christianity says: "Do unto others what you want them to do unto you."

Islam says: "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brothers that which he desires for himself."

Hinduism says: "Whatever you consider injurious to yourself, never do to others. This is the essence of dharma."

The problem is that we talk about religion, spirituality, and God, but we do not practise either religion or spirituality. The Vishnu Purana says: "Those who talk about God, but do not do their duties and practise religion, they are enemies of God. This is because God has to incarnate to demonstrate religion to these hypocrites."

One of the critics of the SBNR movement remarked: "What's all this 'spiritual but not religious' claptrap? Saying you're spiritual but not religious is like saying you love food, but hate cooking. It means you can't be bothered to learn to cook.... This just means the person is too lazy to look beyond their adolescent

bias. They are too lazy to learn what it means to be truly religious. They are too smug and shallow and immature to ever regard anything greater than themselves as greater than themselves.... They have dismissed religion before they have even seriously considered it or studied it.”⁷

It is said that an atheist thinks of God more than a theist does. He or she constantly thinks that there is no God and thus thinks of God in a negative way. This is like a person whose mouth burns whether he bites into a chili intentionally or accidentally. One should appreciate the atheists, agnostics, sceptics, and now the SBNR community, who keep religion alive by constant thinking, talking, writing, debating, challenging, and criticizing. They expose the hypocrisy of religious imposters. If there is any truth in religion, it must be questioned and opposed: Truth will finally triumph.

The bottom line is that a person is judged based on his or her character. The character is formed by that person’s tendencies, which originate from actions and thoughts. If a person’s actions and thoughts are good, his or her character is bound to be good and vice versa. We all love perfection and we all seek to be perfect. This perfection comes through sincere religious and spiritual practices. Practice makes a person perfect.

¹ Katha Upanishad, 2:2:13

² Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, Harper One: New York, 2000, 255-56

³ Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Advaita Ashrama: Calcutta, 7:44

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:4

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:474

⁶ The number of Islamic sects is reported as 72 (according to sources including Central Mosque, <http://www.central-mosque.com/fiqh/sectr1.htm>) and sometimes 73 (according to sources such as Real-Islam.org, http://www.real-islam.org/73_8.htm).

⁷ Father Dwight Longenecker, "Spiritual but not Religious?" Retrieved from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/standingonmyhead/2012/01/spiritual-but-not-religious.html>