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Are You Spiritual or Are You Religious?

“Are you spiritual or are you religious?” There was a time when a question like that wouldn’t compute—spiritual? religious? aren’t they the same thing?—but nowadays that question is not so odd, especially among younger folk. You see, less people are going to church now, and the reasons are diverse, but despite their non-attendance, many non-church-goers have a yearning for the transcendent, a desire to experience that which exists beyond the material plane.

Such a one might describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious;” they may be driven to seek the divine, but they reject the confines of formal worship. In her latest book, Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don’t Belong To, Lillian Daniel, our conference minister who spoke so powerfully in our sanctuary a few months ago, kiddingly chides the SBNR’s, as she calls them (“Spiritual But Not Religious”), noting the lack of rigor or spiritual discipline exhibited by one who only “finds God in a rainbow.” But she acknowledges there are many reasons why some folk are not comfortable showing up in church on a Sunday morning.

For example, they may have had a church experience which was wounding, that made them feel unwanted. Lest we forget, not every church can say as we do, “No

matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!" Many religious institutions draw tight lines around their membership, require strict adherence to specific beliefs, structure themselves hierarchically, and define themselves in great part by whom they exclude. If you've been hurt by the church, it's no wonder you may not want to return.

And more than a few people are turned off by the arcane precepts that religions accumulate over time. Here's an illustration: the idea of "original sin," that every human has been tainted ever since Adam's transgressions, was not part of Jesus's ministry, but emerged about 400 years later. Subsequently Catholic theologians felt it necessary to exempt the Virgin Mary from original sin, so the concept of her "immaculate conception" was developed, asserting Mary's unique purity; this became dogma—required belief—in 1854.

Here's another example: for centuries Christians have been reciting the Apostle's Creed as a statement of faith. The other day, Kay and I were discussing a particularly thorny clause in this document—where was Jesus between his death and Resurrection?—so a little research was required. It turns out church leaders have come up with at least four different interpretations as to the meaning of this clause; in other words, we're asked to affirm our belief in articles of faith that even theologians don't agree on! My friend Norman grew up in Southern

Baptist country; the opening lines of his song “My Own Kind of Jesus” alludes to the “hoops of belief” many churchgoers are asked to jump through: “I grew up surrounded by narrow religion, with doctrines and creeds I still don’t understand.”

Or perhaps the reason some stay away from church is simply that they’ve been raised in a non-church family. It’s certainly true, all over the world, that the vast majority of people attending worship services, be they Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu or any other faith—well, they were born into that faith; that’s what they know, that’s how they were raised. In large part one’s religion is an accident of geography and culture. That’s true of us in this room—all or most of us were raised in a Christian household, in a Christian community, and though some of us have moved over to the UCC from a more restrictive denomination, we learned early on to be followers of Christ. Our upbringing accounts greatly for our attraction to this Faith, and it also explains why someone with no religious background in their life might only visit the inside of a church to visit the great artworks of Europe.

Brian McLaren’s recent book, Do I Stay Christian?, spends the first 80 pages exploring the many reasons why someone might NOT want to go to church. Chapter after chapter provide painful reminders of the imperfect history of our religion and the harm we have done to others. Prominent Christians have taken positions

condoning slavery, scapegoating Jews, subjugating women, forcing conversion through violence, and countless other alarming practices through the centuries; people aware of this record are dismayed that an institution founded on love has exhibited such cruelty to so many. The second half of McLaren's book provides a counterpoint, reasons to be a Christian, but it's no surprise that many cannot overcome the historical evidence of Christian hypocrisy.

So we can certainly understand why many consider themselves "spiritual but not religious." SBNR's may simply be seekers who do not see religion as a useful vehicle for their journey. Can one find God in a rainbow? Reverend Daniel may be right, that many SBNR's lack the discipline to make meaningful spiritual progress, but still and all, if someone were to truly find God in a rainbow, that would be a wonderful thing, for any glimpse of the divine has the potential to transform.

An SBNR might wonder if there is anything to gain by joining a faith community. On the other hand, there's an equally valid question they might ask: is there anything I can offer others by joining them on the path?

Still, perhaps what's more concerning than the proliferation of SBNR's is the presence of RBNS's—religious but not spiritual, though I'm sure RBNS's don't self-identify as such. These are folks who go to church

without fail every Sunday, and so chalk themselves up as religious, but display no understanding of the Christian message the other six days of the week. A perplexed RBNS might ask “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?” Of course, the simple reply from the parable of the Sheep and Goats is, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

Spiritual But Not Religious can leave each seeker on their own, without the guidance, support and community that religion can provide; Religious But Not Spiritual displays a hollow faith, a mere shadow of the truths the Master revealed to us.

So let us consider “religious AND spiritual.” And nobody exemplified this rich combination more than Jesus himself. Our Lord, of course, was a devout Jew; the religion we call Christianity developed a few decades later based on his life, his teachings, and his Resurrection. The Gospels show Jesus preaching in synagogues in Galilee and Judea throughout his ministry, and holding forth in the Temple Courts, the sacred locus of his Jewish faith, first as a 12-year-old sitting among the teachers, and in the week before his arrest, preaching daily to the crowds there. His Jewish religion was the fabric of his life and his teaching; the “Law and the Prophets,” the holy Hebrew Scriptures, were the foundation of his evangelism. At the

same time, his need to pursue his spiritual path, his “alone time” with the Father, is evident in the many times he chose to be by himself, taking leave of his disciples and the crowds to pray on a mountain, or trek into the hills for quiet time.

For the difference between spiritual and religious can be viewed as two sides of the same coin; one is the personal journey one undertakes to grow closer to God, the other the corporate endeavor to grow and thrive as a community of faith.

When Jesus was asked to name the Greatest Commandment, he drew on the wisdom of his Jewish faith and chose two verses from the Torah: first, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength;” and then another verse, equal to the first: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Out of all the hundreds of commandments in the Torah, Jesus chose these two as the epitome of his message. The first verse encourages us, through our love, to grow closer to God every day. The second verse reminds us that we share the world with our brothers and sisters, all of us the Children of God. Each of us has our own solitary, spiritual path towards the Light, and at the same time, we can help one another along this path, drawing strength from our common purpose.

Modeling ourselves on Jesus, one way to obey the Greatest Commandment is to be spiritual AND religious.

Teach us, we pray, O God, whatever the nature of our journey, how we may best love you and serve you.

In the many Blessed Names of God, Amen.