

THE OFTEN-HEARD: I'M SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

Have you heard people describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious”? I’ve encountered the phrase often and in this brief article I would like to explore the possible meanings and implications.

I should really do a survey, asking everyone I meet who uses this self-description what he or she means by it. Please write to me if you are “spiritual but not religious”; your input would help all of us understand this phenomenon. The reason I have not asked for clarification in the past is that I’ve been afraid of making people uncomfortable. I didn’t want to put anybody on the spot by possibly making them feel they are being interrogated by a traditionalist and have to defend themselves.

There are many possible meanings of this phrase, some simple and some quite complicated, some very muddled and some very carefully thought out, some that are mostly defensive and some that are more critical of the available choices.

In most cases people are simply trying to say that, “There is more to life than the material world, but I’m not prepared to grant anything more specific than that right now”. Thus, being “spiritual but not religious” may imply a holding pattern until more specific beliefs are adopted. Our spirituality is ever changing. We cannot control very well the directions that our spirituality will take.

One very common meaning of the phrase “spiritual but not religious” is that the speaker is searching but regards religion as not a particularly spiritual activity these days. He or she might view religion as consisting too much of things to do rather than things to keep in mind or things to feel. Therefore, using this self-description might be the same as saying that “I don’t have the time or patience for all the ritual”.

Another possibility is that the person who describes him or herself as “spiritual but not religious” is saying that the non-material aspects of life that the religions do put forward are not satisfying. For example the nature of G-d proposed by the major religions, the way in which He acts, the views of life, death, and the soul, are not in harmony with this individual’s sensibilities. Therefore he or she holds an independent outlook that is based more on personal experience, other learning, and thinking.

The person who describes himself as “spiritual but not religious” definitely wants to keep religion at arms’ length. Religions should take note of this and ask themselves some questions. To what extent are the rituals integral to the religions’ goals? Religions must separate customs from necessity and make it clear that the former are completely optional; and if some customs are optional, then the most-visibly affiliated must not frown on those who don’t partake of the customs while trying to enjoy the benefits of the basic ideas.

Religions must also ask whether their theology and other spiritual teachings are not a bit too specific. There really is much that we were not told and do not know. For religions to make it appear otherwise is not right. Are the statements about G-d reasonably abstract, as I believe they should be, or are they clothed in far too many traditions? Are we teaching what we know about G-d, what He told us about Himself, what we have learned from experience, or are we teaching a very specific and misguided, almost wishful, humanized version, assigning Him characteristics that He did not even claim or that are not supported by our lives or history.

Why should the major religions lose all the people who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious”? I call it sad. I would think religion should be able to accommodate these people for the most part. Obviously we need to change things so that “religion” has a better reputation. Maybe someday even the word “religion” will

leave our vocabulary and people will not have to resent some huge apparatus that stands between them and the exercise of their most natural spiritual tendencies.

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