

## **“Spiritual Vs. Religious”**

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Leviticus 7:1-16

Today we are talking about two very misunderstood concepts: religion and spirituality. Sometimes there is a clear distinction between the two, and at other times the line can be fuzzy.

There are also a growing number of people today who self identify as spiritual people, but not religious.

In recent years, there have been many schools in Michigan and throughout the country that have integrated yoga and mindfulness activities in the classroom. These have often been considered spiritual activities.

This is a growing trend, but it has been met with some resistance, even legal action because yoga and mindfulness have not only been considered by some as spiritual activities but also religious.

Last week, there was a story published asking the question in its title, “Are yoga and mindfulness in schools religious?”

The author of the story, Candy Gunther Brown, is a professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University. She is sometimes called into court as an expert witness to help determine if school districts are in violation of state laws regarding religious instruction.

In one case, the court ruled that while yoga might be religious in some contexts, that particular district’s yoga practices were “devoid of any religious, mystical, or spiritual trappings.”

However, she testified in two other cases where the school districts were found to violate state law that prohibited public schools from providing any religious instruction.

As much as people declare they are spiritual but not religious, the line isn’t always so clear. So, let’s take a look at each.

First, what does it mean to be religious?

A religion is a cultural system that organizes energy and attention toward the worship of the divine, and encourages life in sync with the divine. Religion involves certain behaviors, rituals, practices, morals, and ethics — all within a certain worldview that includes people’s relationship with the divine.

As a Christian community, we recognize that God is all around us and within us. We together attest that life is sacred, we praise God, pray to God, and affirm our hope in God. Together we sing to express our faith, belief, and commitment to life in God's world. In our worship, we eat, we sing, we pray, we share stories, we sleep. (wait, we sleep?)

I would like to read for you about a certain kind of worship in ancient Israel. It might feel archaic, and in some ways probably disturbing and uncomfortable because it talks about sacrificing animals and involves a lot of blood as an integral part of their religious practice. I want to remind you that this only one expression of their worship.

### **READ LEVITICUS 17:1-16**

In the ancient Hebrew religious life there were different kinds of laws, some for religious leaders like priests, and others for everyone else. What I read from the book of Leviticus were laws called the "holiness code." This was a legal code to be followed by all people in order that all might be holy in relation to God.

The priests' job was to lead worship in such a way that all

people would understand how to live their lives in holiness.

In ancient Israel, blood offering was an important ritual in their religious practice. But why?

Blood was important because they understood that the life of an animal, including people, was in its blood. God, as the Creator, cares greatly about all life and therefore all blood is sacred. That is why so many laws and rituals involved actions related to blood.

When an animal was killed in a worship ritual, people were to understand it as an offering to God for the benefit of the people. With every sacrifice, they were taught to acknowledge God at the center of their lives.

How often do you think about God at the center of your life when you order a cheeseburger at McDonald's, or a gourmet salad from the Townhouse in town, or when you make a casserole at home?

It wasn't only about the ritual of sacrifice in worship. Whenever they slaughtered an animal to eat for a normal meal, they did this at the temple altar, even when it wasn't part of worship. This ritual, done religiously, reminded them

that their lives were patterned around their relationship with God.

The ancient Israelites were led by the priests to be thoughtful when they sacrificed an animal, and to remember that what was feeding their bodies was a gift from God.

The sacrifice reminded them of where they stood in relation to their Creator God.

Another of the more important purposes for religion is to remind us of who we are at the deepest level. In one of her books, church historian Diana Butler Bass described religious communities as “conveners of memory.”

By participating in rituals, songs, stories, and relationships, we are continually invited back into remembering who we really are as unavoidably connected with one another and entirely worthy of love.

However frustrating it might be, Bass points out that we need each other to remember this. Going solo with a disconnected personal spiritual practice just isn't enough. In her book “Christianity For The Rest Of Us,” she wrote that “memory is dependent on relationships; in a culture in which relationships are broken, memory becomes impossible.”

Phyllis Tickle, a highly respected authority on religion in America, wrote in “The Age Of The Spirit” that religion has always had a social role in society, both for those who consider themselves religious as well as those who very decidedly are not religious or even spiritual.

The cultural role of religion has been to wrestle with and articulate for society how people are to live in the world. What are our collective moral standards, and where does our authority rest. She points out that this is not an easy task, especially considering the dramatic way that the world, including religion, is now changing.

Religious worship was never intended for our own amusement or entertainment. Rather, the purpose of religion, back in the ancient days as well as today, has always been 1. to provide a pattern for living life well, 2. giving people a sense of purpose and connection, and 3. providing a moral compass for society.

This is religion. Now what about spirituality?

It isn't a stretch to say that all of us are searching for meaning in life. We are all looking for answers and purpose. And we need to be honest about the fact that none of

us has this life all figured out. We find handles and understand parts, but so much is still a mystery. So, we enter this conversation about spirituality with curiosity because we are exploring, and with grace because none of us have it sorted.

It reminds me of a delightful, even angelic little boy named Duffy who was waiting for his mother outside the ladies room of a gas station in a small town. As Duffy stood there, he was approached by a man who asked,

“Sonny, can you tell me where the Post Office is?”

Duffy replied, “Sure! Just go straight down this road two blocks and turn right. It will be there on your left.”

The man thanked Duffy kindly, complimented him on how smart he was and said, “I’m the new pastor at the church in town. If you and your mom come to church on Sunday, I’ll show you how to get to Heaven.”

Duffy replied with a chuckle, “You’re kidding me, right? You can’t even find the Post Office.”

I can testify to the fact that not even pastors have it all figured out.

In Hebrew, the root word of spirit is “breath” or “wind,” so we could say that spirituality, in all its mystery involves how we experience life as it blows through the center of our being. Spirituality is more than our beliefs, but the vital essence of life from within us.

It is the center within from which comes everything that we think, say, feel and do every day, integrating the physical, emotional, mental and social dimensions of our lives.

It includes our beliefs about life, creation, identity, sexuality, family, and the divine.

Our spirituality shapes our expectations for ourselves and others. It directs our attitude toward life goals and relationships, and shapes the quality of our hopes and dreams. It is what has us searching for meaning in life.

Spirituality is also about our connectedness to all of life from our inner most place.

It is often accessed and nurtured by different forms of meditation, mindfulness, the inner experience, nature.

We all have spirituality, whether we realize it or not, because this is how God made us.

Religion, at its best fosters a healthy and expansive spirituality, however, there are a growing number of people who break apart from any organized religious institution and say that they are spiritual but not religious.

Diana Butler Bass captured this sentiment. In her book “Christianity After Religion” she says that when people call themselves “spiritual” this is often a critique of or push back against institutional religion, but it’s also a longing for meaningful connection.

Spirituality, she says, is a stage of awakening in the search for new purpose from a higher power.

People have lost faith in what the old institutions have offered: what they preached, what they preserved, and what they protected. The old religion has lost credibility in their eyes. It’s language and words have failed. It’s stories of hope have grown stale and lost their meaning.

These people are searching for new stories, new paths, new understandings to make sense of their new experiences and the realities they see in the new terrain of their world.

Spirituality, while an ancient term, is the word that they use to

describe this search. It is taking on a fresh dimension in a continually changing and increasingly pluralistic world.

Bass wrote, “To say that one is ‘spiritual but not religious’ or ‘spiritual and religious’ is often a way of saying, ‘I am dissatisfied with the way things are, and I want to find a new way of connecting with God, my neighbor, and my own life.’”

Linda Mercadante, in her book “Belief Without Borders,” lays out seven themes for those declaring they are spiritual but not religious.

1. They reject religious exclusivity.
2. They reject the hypocrisy of organized religion, and the lack of acceptance for people identifying as LGBTQ.
3. They prefer personal choice and experience over tradition.
4. They shift the center of authority away from religious tradition to their experience.
5. Without being very well educated in religious heritage, they consider all religions essentially the same. They feel that choosing a religion closes off options. They feel they can stand apart from all religions and have the unique

ability to understand the true essence of spirituality.

6. They borrow from many traditions and blend the ideas and practices together into a personal hybrid spirituality. They don't understand the need for shared worship, tradition, commitment, or trained clergy. Millennials have a spirit of discernment and question different spiritualities.

7. They find joy in the spiritual experience of connection with nature. They think of nature as a more pure sanctuary than worship with a group in a building. This diminishes their felt need for organized religion.

We might want to argue some of these points with those holding this perspective. However, I believe we must refrain and listen.

Sure we might acknowledge that as a congregation, at our best we are open, accepting, nonjudgemental, full of grace and love and can hold a healing space for those who have been hurt by the church or who are questioning.

But let us pause and listen to the voices of the spiritual but not religious. Let us hear and their criticism and take it to heart.

We need to be humble and own where we have allowed the message of our hope to grow stale.

We need to watch for how our religious traditions have taken precedent over God's mission.

We need to be aware of how we have created an "in crowd" and insulated ourselves from our neighbors.

We need to be alert to the unrealistic requirements that we have sometimes placed on others.

And we need to follow God's nudging out beyond our comfort zone to become curious about other people who are not part of any church.

In all of our relationships, we also need to take one more step toward being fully authentic and full of grace as we also create the space for others to be authentic.

God will meet us there in that risky place — that is where miracles happen!