

Spiritual?

By

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I have avoided talking much about spirituality from the pulpit because it is such an ill-defined term that it becomes meaningless unless those using it clearly, specifically, and consistently explain what they mean by it. For me, the word is more nebulous even than the word “God,” which, in ordinary use, at least refers to a conscious and powerful entity whom some believe is the eternal creator and controller of everything (that’s what most people mean by it). But “spiritual” lacks a common association, although it’s often used as if we all know exactly what it means. If one tells a friend, for example, “I heard a very spiritual song at church today,” the friend might think it was a song about the glory of God, or a song that was emotionally moving, or one that was intellectually stimulating, or that their friend heard a song that originated from American slaves, or something else entirely.

Looking to dictionaries for its meaning only compounds the problem. There are so many possible definitions, including conflicting definitions, that a dictionary search only proves the point; those using the term and those hearing it may not understand each other even if they think they do. Additionally, many of the definitions define “spiritual” by using it as part of its own definition, which is supposed to be taboo among lexicographers. What they are doing, in these cases, is defining the term extensionally, by pointing to examples of what the term is supposed to refer to, rather than defining it intensionally by referring to the qualities that make something “spiritual.” This, I believe, is because the term too vague to do so.

For example, Oxford Dictionary defines spiritual as “relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things,” then uses it in the following sentence, “I’m responsible for his spiritual welfare.” Explaining that the word is the opposite of material and physical things is helpful, but simply telling us “spirit” or “soul” are different than something else doesn’t tell us anything that is inherently true about either. Is everything that is non-physical spiritual? And what, when it comes down to it, is not physical? Even thoughts and beliefs are produced by our brains. The ancients believed that breath, and wind, and air were the actions of invisible spirits. This is what “spirit” means, *breath*, which is why it’s the root of words like respiration. Expiration refers to one who has stopped breathing, who has expired. According to *Genesis*, “The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”¹

Hence this example of “spiritual welfare” is as meaningless as the term spiritual. Does it mean baptizing an infant into the right religion, as the Catholics do, to assure its spiritual welfare from the start? Or does it mean waiting to baptize an adult who freely chooses their religion, as many Protestants do? Or does it mean freeing one from the trappings of any established religion, as William James suggested in his classic book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* more than a hundred years ago? Or does it mean orchestrating a religious service in which participants have an emotional experience? Or does it refer to one of many other possibilities? Merriam-Webster’s first definition is similar to that of Oxford’s, “relating to, consisting of, or affecting the spirit :

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incorporeal spiritual needs,” and is inadequate for the same reasons; it uses the very word it attempts to define as part of its definition, and, as with “spiritual welfare,” gives us no idea what is supposed to be meant by “incorporeal spiritual needs.” But today, thanks to the 1774 discovery by the Unitarian chemist and theologian Joseph Priestly, we know air is not an entity with a mind of its own but a chemical compound composed of oxygen, the most abundant element on Earth. I wonder if, upon announcing his discovery, some told Priestly he was too intellectual and that calling this invisible element atomic number 8 wasn’t very spiritual.

Here are some of the many other definitions of “spiritual” found in the Oxford, Merriam-Webster, and Cambridge dictionaries, as well as from Dictionary.com:

1. relating to religion or religious belief. "the tribe's spiritual leader"
2. not concerned with material values or pursuits
3. relating to sacred matters
4. spiritual songs
5. Ecclesiastical and spiritual authority rather than lay or temporal
6. concern with religious values
7. related or joined in spirit; our spiritual home
8. relating to supernatural beings or phenomena
9. relating to, or involving spiritualism: spiritualistic
10. relating to deep feelings and beliefs, especially religious beliefs
11. of or relating to the mind or intellect
12. traditional ways of life fulfilling both economic and spiritual needs
13. a type of religious song, originally developed by African Americans in the U.S.
14. relating to the inner character of a person ... the group's spiritual leader
15. relating to or consisting of spirit; incorporeal
16. of or relating to the spirit or soul, as distinguished from the physical nature: a spiritual approach to life
17. closely akin in interests, attitude, outlook, etc.: the professor's spiritual heir in linguistics
18. of or relating to spirits or to spiritualists; supernatural or spiritualistic
19. characterized by or suggesting predominance of the spirit; ethereal or delicately refined: She is more of a spiritual type than her rowdy brother.
20. of or relating to the spirit as the seat of the moral or religious nature
21. of or relating to sacred things or matters; religious; devotional; sacred
22. of or belonging to the church; ecclesiastical: lords spiritual and temporal

So, which of these many definitions is meant by the word spiritual? Does it refer to religious persons, ideas, rituals, and songs? Does it refer to those who gather together for seances to communicate with the dead? Does it refer to supernatural events? To disembodied, nonphysical events? Does it refer to an emotional experience? Or to an intellectual experience? Does it refer to the connection to those who share common beliefs or share a similar interest or attitude? Does it refer to traditional ways, or to the ways of our ancestors? Does it refer to a belief in God or gods? Does it refer to a belief in an intelligent and benevolent Universe?

These questions explain why I am reluctant to use the word myself and why I haven’t given a sermon on spirituality in the past. I like to speak about topics I can study and gain a competent understanding about. When it comes to spirituality, I could go off in a thousand different directions

and still not be able to give an adequate explanation of it. So, here, I will only concentrate on the reasons I don't talk much about it, why I often recoil a little when others do, and why I prefer to use other language instead.

Having already discussed the vagueness of the term, which is why I don't often use it, unless explaining what I mean by it in a particular instance, I will move on to why I often have negative feelings about the term. This largely has to do with my experiences and concerns as a liberal and Unitarian minister, both of which are rooted in the primacy of reason and empiricism. To me, this means the beliefs we hold and the claims we make ought to be rooted in logic and evidence. So, if being "more spiritual" really means being less intellectual—if it is stated to disguise one's anti-intellectualism—then it troubles me and I am offended by the suggestion that a baseless way of thinking should be considered more sound than a rational and scientific one.

Reality is another quality of liberalism and our liberal religion. Liberalism is a means of coping with reality so that we do not delude ourselves. They help, as the Unitarian Universalists Association bylaws now tenuously states, to "warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." Again, I'm not sure what is meant by "spirit," but I'm glad the UUA holds, at least for now, that even our, so-called, spiritual beliefs must be tempered by reason and science. Yet there has long been a tension in our liberal religion between its uniquely intellectual disposition and those who would prefer it to become just another, so-called, spiritual religion, although few ever directly explain what this would mean.

Just this week I heard an intelligent presentation critical of Unitarianism's intellectual approach to religion and to life in general. It was further suggested the solution to this age-old problem with Unitarianism, is to refashion our religious services so that we hear the same message each week—a message about the centrality of emotion and personal experience—and that our services be orchestrated by our ministers and music directors to arouse particular emotional experiences that get us out of our heads. And it was suggested that if we do this people will come to our services in droves and that we will not only save our dying churches but the entire world in the process—because people will be enraptured in feeling and experience, free from the cold, meaningless, and pointless impacts of reason.

There may be some truth to this given the global success of Pentecostalism in recent decades, which is about the only religion that's growing while most others are in decline. According to a now eighteen-year-old Pew Research report, "By all accounts, Pentecostalism and related charismatic movements represent one of the fastest-growing segments of global Christianity."² Given the number of more recent online articles claiming the same thing, I'd say this remains true today. According to a 2014 Pew study of 18 countries, Latin America, which has traditionally been Catholic, has the fastest growing number of Pentecostals and today, worldwide, one in four Christians consider themselves such.

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I bring this up because Pentecostal services are all about mindless emotional experiences, which they define as the utmost of spiritual experiences, like faith healing and speaking in tongues, stirred up by what participants believe is the Holy Spirit. If this is really the kind of experience people want, there are plenty of opportunities besides the Unitarian church, and if this is what we must become to save Unitarianism, why bother? Let's just let our small religion continue dying—if that's truly what's happening. But I don't believe it is. True, Ralph Waldo Emerson, famously referred to Unitarianism as a "corpse cold religion," but that was almost 200 years ago. That's a very long time to be at death's door, for those claiming anew it must fundamentally change before it's too late.

To me, our greatest challenge is staying the course and remaining true to our historic roots and values in the wake of constant pressure to become another religion of emotion and superstition, which is often what I believe is meant by the complaint that our religion isn't very "spiritual." And this is the reason I find myself so often troubled by the word, because over the years I've not only heard people complain that our religion isn't spiritual enough but that I, myself, am not very spiritual. Yet, as usual, those I've asked struggle to define what they mean. I believe what they really mean is not that I should be more spiritual, but less intellectual, by which I mean less grounded in reason and empiricism, and to talk less about real matters.

I draw this conclusion because hostility toward reason is something liberalism has contended with since its inception, and it is such hostility that brought an end to Age of Reason and to modernism itself, leaving our world in the state of ideological conflict and chaos that exists today. Oddly, it was Friedrich Schleiermacher, the 18th century theologian who is often referred to as the father of liberal religion, who said that feeling is the essence of religion, which he defined as "the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the thing, of being in relationship to God ... the longing to surrender oneself and be absorbed in a greater ... the feeling of absolute dependence upon the Infinite."³ He also said "religion is not knowledge and science"⁴ and argued that religious beliefs and experiences should not be judged or encroached upon by the principles of science and physics. In his view, religion has its own validity and should be appreciated without being subjected to rational or scientific scrutiny.

Schleiermacher was theologically radical for his time, embraced historical and critical interpretations of the Bible, emphasized individual religious experience, and was ecumenical in his approach. But I agree with historian Richie Robertson who says it is his approach to religion "where Schleiermacher bids farewell to the Enlightenment." For it requires what he called "childlike passivity." For Schleiermacher, Robertson says, "Religion means abandoning claims to autonomy and accepting that one is utterly dependent upon something far greater than oneself."⁵ So he may be the father of liberal religion, but he is not the father of our liberal religion, which is founded upon the Enlightenment principles of reason, science, independence, individualism, and a belief in universal truths that persist despite our particular feelings and subjective experiences.

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If the word spiritual is subterfuge for emotionalism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-individualism, I personally want no part of it. On the contrary, I consider the problem with our society today in general, and with Unitarian Universalism in particular is emotionalism and irrationalism. The problem is not that there is too much reason and science, but not enough. The problem is not that we need more people leaping over the pews shouting nonsensical words, but fewer.

And I further disagree that intelligent people aren't in touch with their feelings. Intelligent people are just as capable of being emotional and emotionally mature as anyone else, if not more so, meaning they are aware and in control of their own feelings and able to empathize with and get along well with others. The dichotomy between reason and emotions is a false one. People who feel, think, and people who think, feel. Thoughts and feelings are part of the same process. They are not separate or segregated events. Thoughts cause us to feel, and feelings cause us to think. They are married, perhaps even different qualities of the same event.

There are lots of creatures on this planet that have feelings and experiences, including cockroaches, but none can reason like we can. To treat this rare evolutionary gift as curse or as an intruder upon our lives, seems almost inexplicable. Yet I believe this is because too many of us are afraid to face reality on its one terms. So we demean those things that require to do so, like reason and science. We demean our intellectuals as being overly concerned about material and worldly matters, and elevate those obsessed with disembodied spirits, things for which there is no evidence, spiritual things, like beliefs in almighty gods, in destiny, in a benevolent and intelligent Universe that are keeping us safe from life's harsh realities—*be in the world but not of it*, the world is dukkha suffering, so don't cling to it, don't believe in it, it is only an illusion. Statements like these are often said to be "so spiritual."

But to return to my earlier point, the association of spirituality with feelings is only one of many definitions. Again, thoughts themselves are also sometimes considered spiritual. It's also a term that refers to values and ethics, to social and cultural constructs like justice and human rights, as well as to religious beliefs and philosophical ideas about meaning, the nature of reality, and existential questions, all of which are subjects I routinely speak about from the pulpit. So, rather than trying to agree upon one definition of the word spiritual, it might be better to identify various kinds of spirits, of those things that inspire us. Spirit also shares the same root as "spear" and can be thought of, in general, as anything that spears us, that deeply penetrates us, that gets inside us, that inspires us, that possesses us. Spirits can be fleeting in this way, they can come and go, or stay with us our entire lives. They can be good spirits or bad spirits. We can get addicted to spirits, whether it's a bad ideology or to a bottle of booze. We can be overtaken by a collective spirit, a team spirit, the spirit of things, the spirit of an age, like the spirit of '76. The list of possible spirits that move and motivate us is almost endless, which is why it still makes little sense to say someone isn't spiritual just because they aren't necessarily inspired by one's own spirits.

My spiritual experiences are grounded in things that are real. I call myself a creation spiritualist, for example, because I am inspired, in-speared, by nature, as are many of us. This is why I love John

Denver so much and his hymns about Rocky Mountain highs, country roads, sunshine on my shoulders, to sail on a dream on a crystal clear ocean and ride on the crest of wild raging storm, and of senses being filled with real things, like a night in the forest, the mountains in springtime, a walk in the rain, a storm in the desert, a sleepy blue ocean.

These things, these sensual realities fill me with as much awe and wonder and joy and calm as any religion can, and it is because there are real, worldly, physical experiences that I am deeply compelled to use everything at my disposal, including, especially, reason and science, to seek and understand and commune with them. I resonate with those mystics of old, like Meister Eckhart who said, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God."⁶ And Hildegard of Bingen who said, "This Word manifests itself in every creature,"⁷ and Mechtild of Magdeburg who said, "The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures,"⁸ and the old Rabbinic saying, "Creation is the infinite in the garb of the finite. To attend to Creation is to attend to God."⁹ These are my spirits, the breath that move and animates me. It's not about disembodied things, but about embodiment, including appreciation for the astonishing mass of cells in my body's cranium that allows me to think, and wonder, and contemplate the meaning of it all. As a great intellectual, Albert Einstein once said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. [One] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead."

I do not agree that reason and physical reality are barriers to finding meaning, purpose, joy, truth, and wonder in life. On the contrary, they are the very processes that can bring us to our knees before the alter of life, that enable us to better cope with reality, to endure suffering, to pursue the worlds mysteries and wonders, and, to truly live by standing rapt in awe.

¹ Genesis 2:7

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power/>

³ file:///C:/Users/todde/Downloads/ajol-file-journals_339_articles_148053_submission_proof_148053-4045-390273-1-10-20161116.pdf

⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers," (1799) in *A History of Christianity*, ed.

⁵ Roberson, Richie, *The Enlightenment*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 2021, p. 252

⁶ Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1983, p. 35.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. p. 69.

⁹ Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000p. 36.