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Being Spiritual *and* Religious

It can feel nothing short of perilous to tell people what I do for a living. Think *buzz-kill*. No matter how long we've been speaking when the dreaded question arises, I can count down and watch myself disappear before their very eyes; some kind of bogeyman takes my place. Either they do the polite version of running screaming from the room, or they have an "issue" from their religious past or an opinion they're like to share about capital-R Religion. Suddenly, they are talking *at* me, rather than to me.

Probably the most common opener from people who stay to talk is, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." How do you respond to that? I want to share some reflections with you today, which I'm hoping will inspire you to join me in claiming and celebrating an identity that is both spiritual *and* religious.

"Spiritual but not religious" has become the acronym and the Facebook page SBNR. The current backlash against SBNR includes commentary from several quarters. Baptist pastor D.J. Williams wonders, if your beliefs are "taken from various [religions] that you glean-from and combine based on what appeals to you, doesn't the god you end up with inevitably end up looking a lot like, well ... you?"¹ Jesuit priest James Martin agrees, accusing the SBNR of egotism. "Being spiritual but not religious can lead to complacency and self-centeredness," he says. "If it's just you and G*d in your room, and a religious community makes no demands on you, why help the poor?" SBNR is also known, in some circles, as Burger King Spirituality: Have it your way.²

Lillian Daniel, a United Church of Christ minister, throws down the gauntlet, taking the prize for **harsh**. "There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself," she writes. "What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or, heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with G*d gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did

¹ please see djwilliams.truebaptist.org/2010/06/03/spiritual-but-not-religious/

² John Blake, "Are there dangers in being 'spiritual but not religious,'" CNN, 6/3/10

not invent all for yourself....” And, telling us how she **really feels**: “[**Spiritual but not religious people are**] **comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.**” Ouch. Rev. Lillian Daniel concludes, “I [want to] spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter G*d in a real human community.”³

“Spiritual” versus “religious” is a topic worthy of debate, in so many ways emblematic of questions about the soul of America. If we could, in fact, picture a debate raging over this issue, how would we stake our claim in it?

Let's imagine ourselves at a “spiritual” versus “religious” debate, seated at the table of respondents. You raise your hand, saying, “I’ll take that question.” What do you say?

First, definitions:

In Biblical language, religion is the wineskin. Spirituality is the wine.⁴

Religion is the container. Spirituality is what's inside the container.

Spiritual-but-not-religious folks like the contents, but not the container. So ... change the container! You can have one without the other, but why would you? As Unitarian Universalists, we can choose both-and. Unitarian Universalists pride ourselves on being both-and people; our faith combines the giant mind of Unitarianism with the big heart of Universalism. Our faith tradition is a big tent.

The word *religion* is derived from the Latin *ligare*, meaning to bind or connect. We gather to re-connect.⁵ We gather, as Rev. A. Powell Davies said, to grow our souls, not for ourselves alone, but for everyone, everywhere.

Unitarian Universalism is founded on the profoundly radical covenant and affirmation
of the inherent worth and dignity of every being;
and of the interdependent web of all existence.

We believe that there really is no “away” to throw anything or anyone.

To that end, we share a mission: love, service, justice, and peace.

Gathered here, we are greater than the sum of our parts.

At best, we create a feast;

³ Rev. Lillian Daniel, “Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me,” 8/31/11

⁴ Luke 5:36-39

⁵ Etymology courtesy of modern scholars Tom Harpur and Joseph Campbell.

love, the guest, arrives;
and, together, we celebrate the presence of the holy.

Religion is the container; spirituality is what's inside. Religion gets into trouble when the meaning in its rituals drains out. It gets into trouble when a caste is assigned to mediate between the people and the holy, rather than encouraging everyone to experience the holy for themselves. Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “[T]he reason so many of us cannot see the ... X that marks the spot is because we are standing on it.... The last place most [of us] look is right under [our] feet, in the everyday activities, accidents, and encounters of [our] lives....”⁶ On Sunday mornings, we sing, and speak, and listen, both to the music and words, and in the stillness. Our spiritual practice is not comprised of empty rituals, but quite the opposite; we are constantly creating and recreating our spiritual lives to make them vibrant and vital, and, in turn, to make the world vibrant and vital. We give not just an hour a week to our souls, but declare every hour of every day holy. All ground is holy ground.

Unitarian Universalism bids us to seek, together or alone, but never lonely;
to seek, and to find.

To be spiritual *and* religious is both to wander and come home,
called home to share what we have found
with this beloved community of memory and hope.

We are called to nourish our spiritual hunger in spiritual experience,
in a deep and abiding sense of the sacred in every day;
and in religious experience, gathered here as a community of seekers and pilgrims,
devoted to paying attention,
living on purpose,
loving and serving,
and waking up together.

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Two stories come to mind. They're very different from each other, but both have been deeply instructive for me. One image is of a young man at the close of a meditation retreat. The other is of a woman in a hospital bed.

In his book *Awakening the Buddha Within*, my friend and colleague, Lama Surya Das, writes, “In 1984, at the conclusion of my first three-year retreat, our group had a joyous feast and celebration. Then our teacher took us down the road to visit the old man of the monastery, Lama Gendun Rinpoche, a lovely, elderly retreat master who had spent most of his life meditating alone in the wilderness of Tibet.

6 Barbara Brown Taylor, “Introduction,” *An Altar in the World*

“For three and a half years, our group of twenty-two had spent most of the time meditating indoors; we had not been farther than the courtyard of our cloistered monastery. Suddenly, the monastery doors were open; as we walked down the road, everything seemed so bright, vivid, and colorful. In some ways, it was like coming out of a sensory deprivation tank. We went into Gendun Rinpoche's cell-like room, and sat down in front of him, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

“Gendun Rinpoche reminded us that our three-year experience had purified us; we were like new slates on which anything could be drawn or written. 'Watch yourselves,' he said. 'Don't let your minds be sucked out of you by your senses. Don't lose your mind every time you smell, seek or touch something. Maintain present awareness, rest centered in essential natural mind, and appreciate everything equally.'

Lama Surya Das says, “As we practice ... [our faith], it helps if we can imagine ourselves as children, scrubbed clean, open to new experiences, new [choices, new] actions.... At every moment, we are creating our future. What will it be?”⁷

I hear Gendun Rinpoche instructing the young monks

*to remember their faith – the faith that it is possible to wake up and live “bright, vivid, and colorful” lives;

*to remember their spiritual practice – the practice of being made new, creating and recreating their future;

*and to remember the community – those that had upheld them in the purpose of their gathering: container and contained.

Again, to practice our spirituality in the context of a community is to be both spiritual and religious.

And about the woman in the hospital bed.... It was, actually, the hospital bed next to mine. This was many years ago. Both of us had survived rather spectacular falls. I had shattered my arm, and was fine; her leg was badly broken, and she was not fine. She was, in fact, moaning quietly, despite the morphine drip. I spoke to her through the curtain that divided us, and asked if I could do anything for her. She said, “I just need to talk, Lord. I just need to tell my story.”

I said, “Tell me.” Here is her story:

7 Lama Surya Das, *Awakening the Buddha Within*, p. 270

The night before, her boyfriend had held her hostage in their bedroom. He had a huge knife. He'd nicked her once, but, mostly, she had been trapped on one side of the bed while he paced the narrow strip of floor on the other side, ranting and raving in a jealous rage, threatening to kill her. This had gone on, she said, for hours.

When the kitchen 'phone rang just outside the bedroom door, he turned to answer it, temporarily distracted. She made her move. With a huge heave, she forced the air conditioner out the second story bedroom window, and jumped out after it.

The police were looking for her boyfriend. A plainclothes officer stood stationed at our hospital room door, in case he showed up. She was very afraid.

I knew a prayer might help, but I thought, given our different religious backgrounds, that singing a prayer might go better. And so I launched, "I' been in the storm so long, O gi' me a little time to pray." I didn't know much more than the chorus, but it didn't matter; I kept singing, softly at first, and then she joined me, and we sang together. I didn't really know what else to do, so I rolled us into "Kumbayah." Her voice was a little ragged, but it grew stronger, and then we were really singing.

By the time we got to "I've Got Peace Like a River," she got up on one elbow and moved the curtain aside so she could see me, and took the lead on the verses. Then she sang me some prayers I'd never heard, and I joined in on the choruses. And then, when it got quiet again, I started "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," but I got choked up. She kept going.

And then, finally, "Amazing Grace." And in the stillness that followed "was bound but now I'm free," I asked my roommate, "Do you feel a little better? Do you want to call your pastor?" She said, "I don't need no pastor. Now that we sung our prayers, I know I'm gonna get through this thing. I fel' less afraid the minute I started talkin' and singin'. Just you worryin' about me made the fear lie down, remindin' me I ain't alone. That's all. Helps to be reminded, jus' like in church: Even when we feel it, ain't none of us ever really alone."

Confined to side-by-side hospital beds with an armed guard at the door, the curtain was opened. We shared both a spiritual experience *and* a religious experience.

Beloved spiritual companions, may we choose to claim an identity that is both

spiritual *and* religious. May we celebrate both the container, this beloved community of memory and hope; and all that is contained in it, gathered in love and service for justice and peace. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, may we open to new experiences, at every moment creating our future. “Even when we feel it, ain't none of us ever really alone.”

You are my amazing grace.