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Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum

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Abstract

In this article the author addresses the current tension between "religion" (usually understood as institutional structure, dogma, and practice) and "spirituality" (usually understood as personal involvement in the growth and development of the self). She suggests that the conflictual or contradictory relation between the two results from a faulty understanding of both and that, properly understood, religious traditions are the normal and healthiest context for genuine spiritualities.

Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum¹

SANDRA M. SCHNEIDERS

The problem with which this essay is concerned is perhaps peculiar to contemporary first world western culture. It is, like many of our cultural problems such as inclusivity, addictions, and family breakdown, ironically a product, to a large extent, of our unprecedented abundance, leisure, and freedom. The problem is the relationship between religion and spirituality.

Familiar statistics detail the decline of the mainline Protestant churches even though fundamentalist denominations and Roman Catholicism are growing numerically.² Nevertheless, Catholic "practice" or institutional participation (in the sense of going to church, espousing Catholic teaching, observing Catholic laws, or referring to the clergy for guidance) is much less widespread than in the past, and Catholics are much more likely to be involved in what was once called "indifferentism" or the relativizing of exclusivist claims for Christianity as the unique path to salvation or Catholicism as the one true Church.³ In other words, although the majority of Americans claim some religious affiliation and religion is apparently a permanent feature of American culture, religion as a powerful influence in individual or societal life seems to be in serious trouble.⁴

On the other hand, spirituality has rarely enjoyed such a high profile, positive evaluation, and even economic success as it does among Americans today. Publishers and bookstores report that spirituality is a major focus of contemporary writing and reading.⁵ Workshops on every conceivable type of secular and religious spirituality abound. Retreat houses are booked months and even years in advance. Spiritual renewal programs multiply and spiritual directors and gurus of various stripes, with or without some kind of accreditation, have more clients than they can handle. Spirituality has even become a serious concern of business executives, in the workplace, among athletes, and in the entertainment world. Spirituality as a research discipline is gradually taking its place in the academy as a legitimate field of study. In short, if religion is in trouble spirituality is in ascendancy. The irony of this situation evokes puzzlement and anxiety in the religious establishment, scrutiny among theologians, and justification among those who have traded the religion of their past for the spirituality of their present.

The justification of intense interest in spirituality and alienation from religion is often expressed in a statement such as "I am a spiritual person (or

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