



Religion, Spirituality and the Secular

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Door, photo, Cetta Kenney

Is there a difference between religion and spirituality? In 1993, I was helping to organise a big conference in Bangalore and went to invite the Governor of Karnataka to inaugurate the event. We talked about a religious conference and I realised we were not getting anywhere, so I said it was a spiritual gathering. His attitude changed immediately. At the time, India was in the midst of fierce communal struggles between Hindus and Muslims – religion stood for division.

Religion is indeed closely related to identity. As Richard Gombrich of Oxford University has said: “For most people in the modern world religion is first of all an identity, a label, a badge of allegiance of a group... For them, religion is first and foremost what you do, not what you think. A Hindu or a Jew must avoid certain foods.”¹

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a recent article in the *Church Times*, wrote, “For me, ‘spirituality’ describes that element of our faith that brings it to life.”² But, perhaps because I value the Christian sacraments, that for me is a false dichotomy. The great Muslim scholar and mystic, Al-Ghazzali, said towards the end of his life: “Trust the religion of the old women.” I think he meant that we should not judge the inner devotion of a person by their external acts. Another mystic said that the crushed flower offered on the altar by a child is more pleasing to God than long hours of meditation. Certainly the externals of religion are not enough, but perhaps I am not the only one for whom they are necessary stepping stones in our approach to the Holy One. Indeed, I think the separation of the spiritual from ritual reflects a Gnostic separation of the physical from the spiritual.

The Dalai Lama in a rather different way also makes a distinction between religion and the spiritual. He has very effectively reached out to those who have a “spiritual” or a “holistic” approach to life but do not identify with a particular religion – one of the strands of religious life identified by the British sociologist of religion, Paul Weller, in his new book *Religious Diversity in the UK*.³ In addressing this group of people the Dalai Lama has said: “It does not much matter whether or not a person is a religious believer. Far more important is that they be a good human being”⁴ – “practising the qualities of love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, humility.”⁵ But he at once,

however, goes on to say: “At the same time, I should make clear that I believe that these [qualities] are most easily and effectively developed within the context of religious practice.”⁶

Those who are spiritual but not religious are distinguished by Paul Weller from members of so-called New Age movements, which is what some people are referring to when they speak of spirituality. This term New Age covers a great variety of groups, but Weller says they are characterized by a concern for personal growth and they draw upon spiritual practices and traditions from a variety of sources, as can also be the case with those who follow esoteric teachings and traditions.⁷

This description is echoed by others who make a clear distinction between Religion and Spirituality. John Heron for example, contrasts the authoritarianism, which he claims is inherent in almost every religious tradition, with what he describes as the new self-generating spiritual culture. Those who belong to this culture, he says, affirm their own original relation to the presence of creation and find spiritual authority within and do not project authority onto teachers or texts.⁸

Other writers distinguish between ‘life-as’ and the subjective life. By this they mean that religion – the ‘life-as’ approach – presents us with role-models to which we should aspire – for example, the faithful husband, the dutiful wife, the good parent, the faithful disciple. The subjective life, by contrast is person-centred. What matters is to discover your true self.²



Spiritual Beings: photo, Cetta Kenney

The difference, however, I think, between the religious and the spiritual in Heron's sense is not as he suggests primarily accepting an external authority in the sense of a Church or *Sangha*, but whether spirituality is self-engendered or the response to a Holy Other. Some years ago there was a film in which the hero thought he was God. Eventually he saw a psychiatrist. When the hero was lying comfortably on a couch, the psychiatrist asked him "When did you first think – I mean realise – that you were God." The hero replied, "When I was praying, I found I was talking to myself."

Some years ago I was asked to write an introductory book, *Learn to Pray*, for people who had never prayed. It could not, of course, be faith-specific. Moreover the book was part of a series of self-therapy books, like "Learn to be Happy", "Learn to be Peaceful". I soon

realised that the editor regarded prayer as one more form of self-therapy. I agree that prayer has a therapeutic effect, but for me it involves a relationship with a Transcendent Reality.

Such a relationship should not mean bowing down to a Heavenly Victorian Father or to some human substitute, but it does mean commitment to a spiritual path. We still have to explore but we start with a map and follow a well-trodden path. This is why I am uneasy about an individualistic self-generating spiritual culture in which one picks and mixes from different faiths. I value the discipline of travelling with others who have chosen the same path and by learning from those who have in past centuries journeyed by the same route.

On that journey one meets with other groups whose starting point was different – maybe members of another

denomination or of another religion. I hardly need to say, I hope, how much I have learned from their company, but I am still conscious that I journey as a follower of Jesus. Of course, some people may prefer the company of another group and change over or convert to travel with them along their chosen path. If we picture the paths climbing a mountain, at a certain point the paths converge. Can one belong to several groups? The Dalai Lama does not think so – but I was sent recently a cutting headed “Episcopal Church appoints first openly Muslim bishop”¹⁰ and there are a number of people who claim a religious “dual-membership”.

But I have said nothing about the secular. Paul Weller gives seven different definitions of a secular state,¹¹ but I do not have time to discuss them. My final point is that the goal of the religious path is not perhaps, as Christian tradition has often supposed, the vision of God, but empowerment by the Spirit to share in redeeming a suffering world.

At a Colloquium held at Blackfriars when the Dalai Lama, both Buddhist and Christian speakers stressed that what really matters is Love and Compassion. The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna wrote:

*Even three times a day to offer
Three hundred cooking pots of food
Does not match a portion of the merit
Acquired in one instant of love.*¹²

The goal of the spiritual path is not, I believe, the realization of your true self, as John Heron suggests, but the surrender of self in service of others.

I recognise that serving others can so easily be to make us feel good – motivation is very mixed – and I realise that only as we are changed can we be of help. But it is noticeable that so many of the great spiritual figures of the twentieth century expressed themselves in service of the poor or in the non-violent struggle for peace and justice. Mahatma Gandhi once said: “if I could find God in a Himalayan cave, I would go there immediately, but I can only find him in the service of others.”¹³ The Buddhist monk Maha Ghosananda, on his return to Cambodia after the collapse of Pol Pot’s regime, declared that the refugee camps had now become the temples and *viharas*. Recent years have seen the growing importance of Engaged Buddhists who not only are committed to social service, but also, as we have seen in Myanmar (Burma), in political action.

The contemplative person sees with greater clarity and sees through the deceptions of the world – he or she is in Thomas Merton’s words “the true subversive”.¹⁴

Both the political and natural world do have a certain God-given autonomy. God does not directly intervene to strike a dictator dead or to send an earthquake. This is not, however, because religion has nothing to do with the secular. I do not think a committed member of any faith really accepts a division between the sacred and the secular. The whole world reflects the glory of God. But God has, I believe, given the world far greater freedom than traditional theology has suggested. I prefer the alternative reading to Genesis 1.1, which instead of “In

the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” has “When God began to create the heavens and the earth.”¹⁵ This implies that creation is a continuing process (cosmogogenesis) and the future is genuinely open and history is not a pre-recorded playback. God calls us to share in his work as co-creators. He entrusts the future of this Planet into human hands. Only the deep spirituality to which true religion leads will transform us so that we can share in the healing of the world – in what Jewish tradition calls *tikkun olam*.

NOTES

¹R. Gombrich, “What Kind of Thing is Religion?”, *SHAP Handbook on World Religions in Education*, Commission for Racial Equality, 1987.

²*Church Times*, 9 May, 2008.

³Paul Weller, *Religious Diversity in the UK*, Continuum, 2008, p. 9.

⁴H. H. the Dalai Lama, *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World, Ethics for a New Millennium*, Little, Brown and Co, 1999, pp. 19-20.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁷*Religious Diversity in the UK*, p. 9.

⁸John Heron, *Sacred Science, Person-centred Inquiry into the Spiritual and the Subtle*, PCCS Books, Ross on Wye, 1998, p. 3.

⁹Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, et al, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

¹⁰In *The Seattle Times*, from an April 2008 edition.

¹¹*Religious Diversity in the UK*, p. 106.

¹²Nagarjuna, *The Precious Garland and the Song of the Four Mindfulnesses*, trans. J. Hopkins and L. Rimpoché, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1975, 283.

¹³Quoted from the periodical *Harijan* (but with no reference) by Bede Griffiths in his *Christian Ashram*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966, p. 127.

¹⁴See Kenneth Leech, *The Social God*, Sheldon Press, 1981, chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁵See further, Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, Princeton University Press, 1988, *passim*.

On the Path; photo, Cetta Kenney

