

Reflections on Spirituality and Religion:

Jean-Marc Laporte S.J.

January 20, 2011

(This is part of a presentation made at an ecumenical gathering/retreat at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax NS, January 19, 2011)

Many people today claim to be spiritual but not religious. Broadly speaking, this means that while they are not affiliated with a particular body commonly recognized as a religion or religious organization, they still have a spiritual concern, a concern for their own development towards an ultimate goal, which can be defined in all sorts of different ways.

Further clarity on the distinction between religion and spirituality is required, and articles and books are dealing with this issue. Some useful differences between religion and spirituality have been formulated, but at times those who deal with this topic seem to imply that religion and spirituality as being in some sense opposed to each other. They will say, for instance, that spirituality is on the upswing, and religion is in decline.¹ My approach to this issue is that of a theologian who has in recent years been much more involved in spirituality.

Recent literature on this topic offers interesting sociological and anthropological perspectives. They are worth noting. Here are some of the characteristics which distinguish religion and spirituality:

SPIRITUALITY	RELIGION
Seeks the subjective and internal fulfilment of the individual. Thus: subjective internal fulfillment	Seeks conformity to objective norms set by some external authority. Thus: objective external obligation
Emancipated; free; enlightened life-style	Life-style bound up with obligations, traditions, and disorders within the community of choice
Open to all possibilities: potentially universal	There is a particular path to be accepted and to be trod

We wish to make two principal points about what we have just outlined: (a) there is a continuum rather than a sharp demarcation between spirituality and religion; (b) rather than

¹The title of a recent book which studies the spirituality/religion distinction and its implications is eloquent: *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*. (The main authors are Heelas and Woodhead, London: Blackwell, 2005).

oppose each other, spirituality and religion complement and enrich each other.

The Continuum between Spirituality and Religion: The extreme of spirituality is the plane that flies around but never lands. The extreme of religion is the plane that is stuck on the ground but never flies. In the first case you have beautiful and universal spiritual values but they remain in an ethereal realm, with no embodiment of the universal values in the here and now, no incarnation, or in Pauline terms, no *kenosis* or emptying out. In the second you have a stifling particularity in which the person is imprisoned by deadening observances, shackled to a constricting image of himself or herself. Both of these extremes are to be shunned. There is a continuum between the two extremes along which healthy persons should be situating themselves. Depending on temperament, earlier nurture, personal history, that place might be closer to spirituality or to religion. Indeed in most cases both will be present in a unique blend. Two not untypical examples:

- ◆ Many might practice a religion, but in a cafeteria style that moves them in the direction of spirituality and its universality. They pick and choose what to believe, what observances to adopt, which authorities they will listen to, which parish they will belong to, often to the dismay of institutional leaders. This is certainly my experience as a Catholic priest. People who do not find the ministry of Father X in parish Y helpful go to Parish Z. People pick and choose which doctrines and commandments will have an impact in their life. For example, some might be committed to social justice, but the issues of sexual morality that loom large in official magisterial teaching do not have much impact on them. For others the be-all and end-all is adherence to the magisterium in areas of sexual morality, and what pertains to social justice is in effect ignored. For people of both types the Pope is an inspiring person, except when he preaches on a particular topic which leaves them cold. They acclaim him but do not really take his words seriously. For them there is no seamless garment. Some measure of ranging out of one's tradition to find complementary practices is very healthy, for example a Christian who finds benefit in Yoga or Zen techniques. But in other cases the search for novelty is an escape from the burdens of one's own commitments.
- ◆ Others might see themselves as spiritual, but as they learn the ABC of this or that form of spirituality they find that there are exercises, practices, a regularity to be implanted into one's life. They impose constraints on themselves, constraints akin to those of a traditional religion. In a real sense the spiritual path they have chosen becomes a religion. One could be enthusiastic about Eastern spirituality, dabble in this or that particular practice, or else one might decide to fully enter into the particular Eastern spiritual path to which they feel called, and to practice it wholeheartedly and consistently. Indeed a form of spirituality, as it gathers together disciples, organizes itself. The structure may remain light and minimal, but if it develops an institutional cast, one would refer to the movement as a religion rather than a spirituality.

In both of these examples, there emerges the need for responsible choice., which means commitment. To return to the metaphor of the mountain top: one can visualize, affirm and

maybe even explore to some extent the different pathways to the top of the mountain, but unless one chooses a particular path and leaves the others behind, and follows the markers as he or she climbs, with much struggle and effort, one does not make it to the top.

The complementarity of spirituality and religion: If we seek a deeper understanding of both spirituality and religion, we find that at heart they do not oppose each other but enrich each other:

- ◆ Persons who are religiously observant will be led by their observance to develop their own spirituality, in accord with the unique promptings of the Spirit within each one of them. If their religion does not make room for a personal development which is spontaneous and free, it is not a religion but a cult, and we have examples in our recent history of how dangerous and lethal cults can be. Indeed at the heart of every religion there is a spirituality which has been in some sense codified. For example, the creed, code and cult of Christianity is rooted in the rich and unparalleled spiritual experience of Jesus. This spirituality has to be accessible in an unfettered way to each individual. Otherwise the religion fetters and shackles rather than liberates.
- ◆ Likewise persons who are spiritually active will, as they develop their own spirituality, seek out a suitable community, knowing and accepting that it will have limitations, quirks, weaknesses, troublesome people. A self-enclosed spirituality without outreach, relationships and a community can easily fall into narcissism. It is not sufficient to be universal; we need to take root, become enfleshed in the here and now, and we need to make choices. I ultimately fulfill myself to the extent that I give of myself, let go of myself, enter into relations and communities which shape my life. There is a messiness inherent to human living, a messiness which will test us and shape us according to the law of love, and we are wrong to pretend that we are on a higher spiritual plane which exempts us from being fully human.

From a Christian point of view, these two poles of spirituality and religion respectively represent the activity of the Spirit and the activity of the Word (Son) in our world. Both are required and work in coordination, as we see in Gal 4:4-7. They are complementary: the Word bursts onto the human stage as an objective presence within the space and time which is the stage of human history, becoming incarnate. But then the Spirit is poured within our hearts (the subjective side) so that we might be able to receive the Word in a way that touches our uniqueness. The religion side with its objectivity, its practices, its historical presence and traditions, connects with the Word. The spirituality side, with its inner experience and transformation, connects with the Spirit. Just as you cannot have the Spirit being active without the Word being active and vice versa, so too you cannot have spirituality without some form of religion and vice-versa.

So if we are persons given to spirituality, let us remember that our spirituality, if authentic, will lead us to embrace the scandal of particularity: we cannot be everything, we have to choose: this community, this particular practice of prayer, this set of teachings, of spiritual practices, of

moral and social commitments, will be the organizing principle of our lives rather than that one. And we need to take the time and the effort to make this particular community and its practices a part of ourselves just as our family is part of ourselves. We need to grow roots by a living stream. And if we are persons given to religion, let us remember that our religion if fully embraced will lead us to let go of what is familiar in our regular religious practices to explore, to enter into the path of fuller development according to the rhythms of the Spirit, to discover the wealth of spirituality at the heart of that religion and perhaps other complementary practices. This is an area where for us to be authentic is also for us to be unique. The religious rituals and prayers and practices might be the same, but the Spirit speaks differently to each one who is faithful to them.