

First Unitarian Universalist Church

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Spiritual or Religious?

Rev. Sandra Fees



A few years ago, when I was studying for ministry, I began to notice people saying things like, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” When you are a minister or ministry student, you end up in a lot of theological conversations. Most of the time, I consider it a perk of the profession.

I remember once a few years having someone say this to me. And I heard myself saying in response, me too. I walked away scratching my head, wondering what on earth possessed me to say that. I was worshiping regularly at a Unitarian Universalist congregation and an active volunteer at church. I was a full-time seminarian studying for UU ministry. You don’t get much more religious than that.

Still, when I hear this particular expression, I think I have some idea what people mean. And I am sympathetic. The thing is, there was a period in my life when I felt just this way: that I was spiritual but not religious. I did not have a religious community. I wanted one.

I wanted to gather with other people to consider the deeper meaning of life, to have an experience of the holy, to learn how to be my best self, to work with others to make this hurting world a warmer and safer place. But I was disappointed a lot. Many of us have been. I admit I am often a bit envious of the young people in our religious community who have had the opportunity to grow up in this faith, which I love. I can honestly say, I wish I had grown up a Unitarian Universalist, rather than having to stumble onto it as an adult.

It turns out that one in five Americans describes themselves as spiritual but not religious. Some of you here today may even be among them. In his book by that title, Robert Fuller explores the meaning of this phrase. Fuller explains that there was a time in the 20th century when these two words were synonymous. Since then, the word spiritual has come to be associated with the private, while religion has been linked with the public. Fuller says,

A number of modern intellectual and cultural forces have accentuated differences between the private and public spheres of life. The increasing prestige of the sciences, the insights of modern biblical scholarship, and greater awareness of cultural relativism all made it more difficult for educated Americans to sustain unqualified loyalty to religious institutions. Many began to associate genuine faith with the private realm of personal experience rather than with the public realm of institutions, creeds, and rituals.

Many of our members come from a Christian background, which they left for various reasons. Some of our members have a Jewish background, which they left for various reasons. Increasingly new members are coming to us with little or no religious background. Sociologists call this group the unchurched. For those who left a faith tradition, there may have been a rejection of orthodox religion, creeds, and static ritual. For the unchurched, the idea of religion may hold no particular meaning. And in all these scenarios, it makes some sense that individuals might consider themselves, as I once did, spiritual but not religious.

Unraveling the Gender Knot (cont'd.)

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Speaking personally, I can say that during all the years I was practicing a private spirituality without a religious tradition, I was lonely. And I was often stuck. I tried a lot of different avenues for spirituality.

But what I wanted and needed to grow and deepen my understanding of life was a faith community with tradition and history. I needed a relational experience. Not something rigid but a faith community with the graciousness and honesty to allow me to grow in spirit and to be nurtured by others and to nurture in return. I wanted a community of discovery and dialogue, of integrity and passion and compassion. I wanted this faith, Unitarian Universalism, before I even knew it existed or had a name.

Religion and religious community is about relationship – our relationship to each other, to God and to the world. There is a different energy that is created in a gathered community than when we are alone. This doesn't only happen in worship, but it is one place we see it. This past weekend I was at our district conference, at which I worshiped with hundreds of other UUs at the Harrisburg Hilton. People can get pretty fired up in a ballroom at the Hilton. The energy was palpable – we laughed heartily, we clapped while we sang, we were moved by the inspiring stories of UUs. And I know here the youth were offering an inspiring, creative worship experience that touched the hearts and minds of our gathered assembly in a profound way. Such gatherings enrich our individual lives.

Being in relationship means we can find here a place where we can be affirmed and accepted for who we are and where we are called upon to be accepting. We learn to practice compassion and forgiveness. This means learning to be open to each other, learning to be vulnerable. When we can be vulnerable, when we are able to take risks with each other, we can also be touched at a much deeper level (The Gift of Faith, Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar). We can let down our guard. We can sing and laugh and cry from the deepest part of who we are. We can reach out in love.

I think of the story told by colleagues of mine in UU ministry. There was an order of monks in the Middle Ages. Part of the rule at their monastery was that each of them would go on an individual retreat from time to time. When given permission for a retreat, each monk could determine the length of his own retreat. This meant that sometimes the monks would be on retreat for a very, very long time.

One monk sought out the Abbot and asked permission for a retreat. The Abbot agreed. The monk set off for the hermitage. When he got there, he found a Bible. He opened it and came upon a passage in the Gospel of John. It described Jesus washing his disciples' feet. The monk read the passage and meditated on it for a few days. Then he returned to the monastery. He presented himself to the Abbot, who was genuinely surprised to see he had returned so soon. "You are back already," said the Abbot. And the monk said, "Of course. For whose feet would the hermit wash?" (Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse, Kenneth Collier)

Alone, there at the hermitage, there was no one to serve. No one to care for. To give you some history and perspective on this parable, the practice of foot washing was common in first-century Palestine. Sandals there were the primary footwear. The streets were dusty and manure-filled.

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You can imagine what that meant for sandaled feet. They were probably pretty dirty and probably not smelling really great.

When a traveler would arrive at a destination, it was an act of hospitality for the host to offer water to the guest to wash his or her feet. Sometimes a servant would wash the guests' feet, but normally they would do it themselves. In the biblical story, Jesus, as Rabbi, would not have been expected to wash his disciples' feet. His doing so symbolizes the practice of serving others and caring for others. Washing someone's feet is deeply intimate and a humbling service.

I'm not suggesting that any of us need to literally wash each other's feet. There are a few religious communities that still observe this practice ceremonially as part of their liturgical year. But primarily, this is a story that reveals a different kind of truth, a metaphorical reality about how we are to be together as a religious people, of why it matters that we gather at all.

Anne Lamott in Traveling Mercies said that the women at her church when she was expecting her first child and was alone sent her a lifeline. "When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on." Being in relationship means we help each other hold on when we are at the end of our rope.

Ultimately, I believe we are impoverished if we lose touch with either the spiritual or the religious. It is amazing to stand atop a mountain or enter a place of deep contemplation or rest in prayer and have a mystical experience of oneness with all life. We all need our private spirituality, our daily practice of the spirit.

Yet we also need to live out of that experience of oneness. If we truly feel that connectedness, how can we do anything other than reach out to those who are hurting – those who need to be loved back into wholeness.

We see this practice express through the service of our religious education teachers, who we recognized this morning. We see it in those who visit elderly members of our community who can no longer come to church, or in those who call or write members who are physically ill or hurting spiritually. We see it in those who greeted us at the door this morning and in those who are making coffee for us after the service. We see it in those who volunteered at the food pantry this past week. These are not acts of private spirituality. They are part and parcel of religion, of the gathered community.

Story of minister who doesn't want to go to church.

The last time someone said to me, I'm spiritual but not religious, I didn't say, me too. I had a very different response. I paused. I said that I need both. Both. Because there are things that religion offers that private spirituality can't. I need both, and I believe you are here because you do too.

Here together we have the chance to be and do more than we can be alone. We tie knots in ropes when people need them. We wash each other's feet. We make each coffee. We teach each other's children. We feed the hungry. We do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

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Amen and blessed be.