



Avoid Judging

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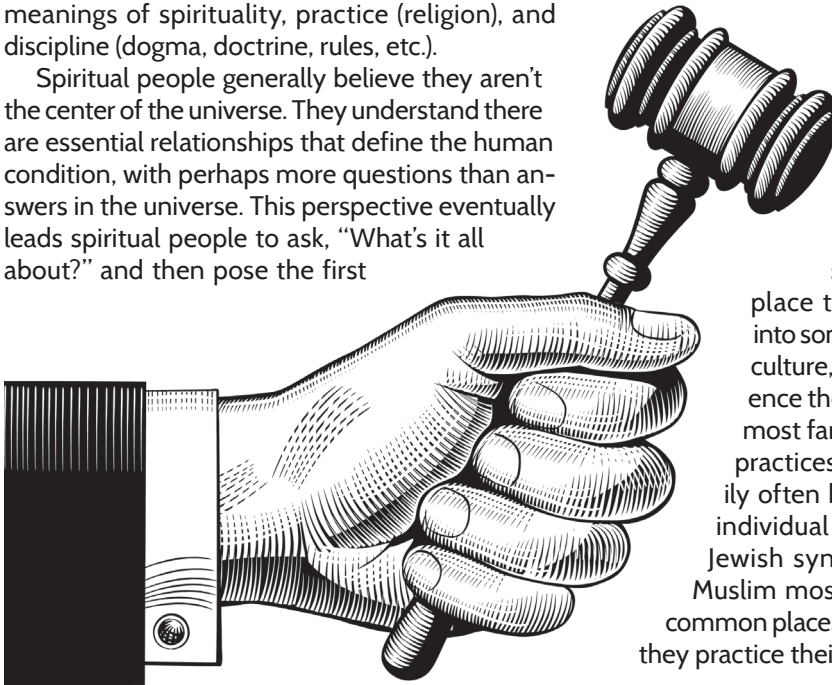
In casual conversation these days, you might hear someone assert, “I’m a spiritual person, but I’m not religious.” The speaker is trying to provide insight into his or her viewpoint about religion. While descriptive and maybe useful, I believe the statement often isn’t fully understood by the listener. What does “spiritual but not religious” mean? To help us understand the assertion and put it into a helpful context, it’s important to understand the meanings of spirituality, practice (religion), and discipline (dogma, doctrine, rules, etc.).

Spiritual people generally believe they aren’t the center of the universe. They understand there are essential relationships that define the human condition, with perhaps more questions than answers in the universe. This perspective eventually leads spiritual people to ask, “What’s it all about?” and then pose the first

question of the old catechism: “Who made me?”

Spiritual people often decide to embrace some idea of divinity that they tend to categorize as sacred, a mystery, or some similar attribute. No matter how people describe spirituality or understand it, spiritual people experience an awareness of something or someone they believe to be divine that both influences them and is outside the physical world.

Religious practice is best understood as the mostly traditional and ritualistic expression of an awareness of the divine and the sacred. By practicing religion, people receive the help and guidance that seems necessary in order to place the awareness of the divine into some sort of perspective. Family, culture, and community often influence the religion people choose. The most familiar and dominant religious practices of the community or family often become the practices of the individual person. Christian churches, Jewish synagogues and temples, and Muslim mosques are some of the most common places that people worship in when they practice their religion.



Here's where it gets tricky. Some men and women are engaged in a religious practice and have not yet experienced the idea of "other than self." They are not, for a variety of reasons, well-versed or practiced in the process of self-reflection that's necessary to be truly spiritual. They're kind of going with the flow and, with ease, can slip from one religious practice to another or from a religious practice to no religious practice. Their practice or lack of practice is not anchored in the experience that's essential for an authentic spiritual response.

This is often the point where some people start to describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." Some people of all ages and temperaments who describe themselves this way have never been reflective to the point of arriving at the necessary awareness that sparks the idea of the divine. This isn't a sin or the result of carelessness; it's simply a fact. Others, who have engaged in the necessary self-reflection that brings awareness, have chosen not to name their newfound awareness as "spiritual" for a variety of reasons. These people often choose another way of describing the experience. For example, they may find science more persuasive than spirituality in answering their questions, even though science and spirituality are not polar opposites. These folks may say they are nonbelievers, neither spiritual nor religious, perhaps even atheistic or agnostic.

The third component is discipline: the distinct rituals, rules, regulations, dogmas, and doctrines that describe a religious practice. Of the three components discussed in this reflection, discipline—and the tendency to judge that can ride along—is the one that most harms those with



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scrupulosity. Although some similarities exist among the many religions, each one is distinct in some or many ways. Members of some religions—including people with scrupulosity—may observe other religions and state that certain disciplines are harmful or blasphemous. This is unfortunate and harms the one doing the unnecessary judging. While I've observed that members of religions with ancient disciplines tend to be more tolerant of other religious disciplines and practices, people who are scrupulous hurt themselves if they're too judgmental.

Is it possible to be scrupulous and not be spiritual? Can you be a scrupulous person and not be religious? The answer to both questions is a resounding YES!

Can you even be agnostic and atheistic and be scrupulous? Yes, it happens, and with some regularity. The answer is yes because scrupulosity has nothing to do with religious practice or whether one is spiritual or not. Scrupulosity is a disorder. The obsession and the compulsion of a scrupulous person who fixates on religious discipline as the primary manifestation of his or her scrupulosity is fundamentally no different than a person who fixates on some other discipline, rule, regulation, etc. A scrupulous person who is religious may have a more complicated disorder because it is wrapped up in the language of God, sin, heaven, and hell. But the suffering is intense whether the sufferer is religious or not.

Please know that a scrupulous person can be very spiritual and very religious and be just as good as any other person who engages in a spiritual or religious practice. The struggle is in the third component, discipline. I pray you ask God for the discipline to avoid judging. ✨

Lenten Path to Healing for a Wounded World

Reflect on your life. When have you been hurt or traumatized by another person or by something you witnessed? Perhaps you suffered a terrible loss and still mourn it deeply. Maybe you are an armed-services veteran with memories of war that haunt you in ways nobody can imagine. You may have suffered trauma through an accident or prolonged illness. Perhaps you were wrongfully accused or shunned by those who should love you most. Maybe you feel abandoned, traumatized by violence, or devastated by the loss of a child, born or unborn. You may continue to experience the aftershocks of the event, even decades later, as you sort through memories of violation and violence, humiliation and horror, tragedy and turmoil.

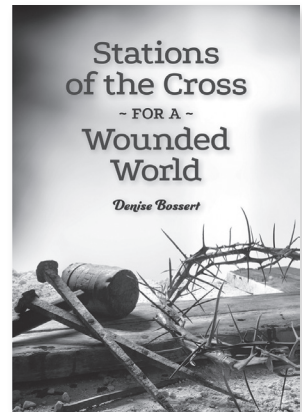
Jesus bears his cross: Think of Jesus as he adjusts his body under the weight of the cross, trying to stand and take a step forward. Imagine him looking into the future and seeing you clearly, with your own cross upon your shoulders. Imagine that he sees you even as he picks up the cross and intercedes in this moment for you. He has come to help you bear the burden that has nearly crushed you under its weight.

Lord, help me to make a deliberate decision to turn to you each time I remember what happened to me. Give me the strength to trust that you walk with me and to believe that you have been walking with me all along. In the moment you said yes to bearing your cross, you said yes to walking with me as I bear my cross. By willingly becoming our suffering Lord, you changed my cross from something I cannot control into an offering that I can lay at your feet. I do that now. I feel the weight of my burden and am surprised that you would want it, that you have always wanted me to give it to you. Amen.

Jesus is helped by Simon: Consider how our Lord felt when Simon of Cyrene approached and bent to carry that cross for him. Did Jesus ask his heavenly Father to send someone who could walk with him to Calvary? Jesus welcomed the help he received from an unexpected source. Think about where you are in the healing process. Have you sought the guidance of a spiritual director? Have you approached your parish priest or confessor for help in picking up your cross? God has placed one such as this in your life. Open yourself to the possibility of asking your “Simon” to journey with you. Who might be able to nurture you and help you heal?

Lord, help me to find the “Simon” who will help with this cross. I will permit this unexpected one to lead the way, to show me where to step and lessen the weight of my burden. Amen. ✨

Excerpted from *Stations of the Cross for a Wounded World*
by Denise Bossert (827891). Copyright © 2018, Liguori Publications.
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Q. *Everything I read clearly states that when people violate a precept of the Church with full knowledge and intent, they commit a mortal sin. Following Church precepts is the minimum required of a good practicing Catholic, or so seems to be the general opinion of the authors I read.*

A. I suggest that you significantly upgrade your reading material. Pay close attention to the publication date of the books you read because the Church and its practices and disciplines change. In order to receive and be able to follow the best pastoral advice and direction possible, it's important for your reading material to be current. What you're reading now doesn't seem to help you on your spiritual journey.

Q. *I really disagree with your answer that it's permissible to take a cruise for vacation that doesn't guarantee the ability to attend Sunday Mass. Missing Mass for such a frivolous reason as a vacation seems to me to be a clear and deliberate violation of what is required. Your answer is generous and too easy. It lets us off the hook!*

A. You're free to apply a stricter standard to your own spiritual practice than what the Church requires. I hope you're making the application with the help of a spiritual director or confessor. That being said, we're not required to apply a strict interpretation of any law, and it's certainly not sinful to choose another way, even if it seems to be generous and too easy.

Ash Wednesday • March 6, 2019

Today, if only you would hear his voice, "Do not harden your hearts."

PSALM 95:7-8 (New International Version)



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