

Finding Your Religion

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Half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions, for example, are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies. —Joseph Campbell

Ancient Witness: Acts 2:42-47a

A rabbinical student is about to leave Europe for a position in the New World. So he goes to his rabbi for advice. The great rabbi offers him an adage that, he assures the young man, will guide him throughout his life: “Life is a fountain.”

The young rabbi is deeply impressed by the profundity of his teacher’s remarks, and departs for his career in America. Thirty years later he hears that his mentor is dying, so he returns for a final visit.

“Rabbi,” he says, “I have one question. For 30 years, every time I’ve been sad or confused I thought of the phrase you passed on to me before I left, and it has helped me through some of the most difficult times. But to be perfectly honest, I’ve never fully understood its meaning. And now that you are about to enter the World of Truth, perhaps you can tell me what those words really mean. Rabbi, why *is* life like a fountain?”

Wearily, the old man replies, “All right, so it’s *not* like a fountain!”

As we make our way through our journey in life, it’s important to have teachers and guides. Sometimes we can give them too much credit. Sometimes they can help us in spite of themselves. And sometimes we might become disillusioned and disappointed in them.

We have seen how abusive religion can be. Pascal once said, “People never do evil so cheerfully as when they do it in the name of religion.”

Eminent author of *War and Peace*, converted Christian and pacifist, Leo Tolstoy, thought that churches were basically self-centered institutions. He said,

The churches as churches...are anti-Christian institutions, utterly hostile in their pride, violence, and self-assertion, immobility and death to the humility, penitence, meekness and progress and life of Christianity.

Many people, like Tolstoy, have rejected the guidance of religion because they see how it fails to meet the radical call of God, perpetuating the status quo and blocking change.

Over the years I’ve heard many folks tell me, “You know, I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual.” Of course, these folks see the weaknesses of institutional religion. They would probably agree with Whitehead’s statement: “Religion is the last refuge of human savagery.” And so they are saying,

perhaps, that they can avoid the savagery and the negatives if they dispense with the religious tradition, and “go it alone.”

And there are those for whom religion is just not relevant. They say, “I don’t need religion to satisfy my own spiritual needs.” Perhaps this is part of the hyper-individualism and self-reliance of our day. Every year, it seems, Gallup does a poll in which 90% of the people in this country claim that they are Christian while less than 40% say that they have gone to church worship more than a couple times during the year (and the actual numbers are lower.) Most people, it seems, think that religion isn’t too important for their faith development.

And it seems to me that the church, itself, needs to take some responsibility in this matter. There was a time when the church demanded—and was given—too much. So in a way, it’s healthy to see that people no longer buy the notion that the religious institution was the *only way* one could access the divine. The church has been too arrogant, too often an end in itself, disconnected from spirituality. There has been too much “religious but not spiritual.”

But, for me, it’s sad to see that many have gone to the *other extreme* and find religion has *no use* in their spiritual development. For to attempt the spiritual quest without a tradition or without a spiritual community is, it seems to me, a grandiose thought. The most realistic view is “spiritual *and* religious.” Some external framework is vital. What I’m saying today is that while religion is no substitute, religion is *important* in order to be spiritual.

One could say that a main difference between spirituality and religion is the importance of the word, “community.” Spirituality is pretty much an individual enterprise, a smorgasbord approach, whereas “the topic of religion,” said Whitehead, “is individuality in community.”

Despite their shortcomings, religious traditions can be helpful. I remember how poet Robert Bly once described folktales and traditions like water at the bottom of a well that has been filtered through all these layers of earth—through all these generations. And what you get is something that is pure in a real sense.

You have all probably heard how Mark Twain once described his parents. When he was 16 he couldn’t believe how stupid they were. When he was 21 he couldn’t believe how smart they had become in just a few years. We often view our tradition this way. First we are awed by it and obey it unquestioningly. Then when we are teenagers we can’t believe how stupid it is. Then, in a matter of a few years, we can’t believe how wise it has become.

In all religions of the world, being part of a larger tradition and religious community is an essential part of our development. It calls us to be spiritual *and* religious; they can’t be separated. Whether we realize it or not, we need the give and take of being part of a larger community. When we look to the spiritual needs of others, our spiritual needs can be met. When we move beyond looking out just for the self does the self come alive. In the serving we receive. And so maybe it’s the wrong question, “Do I need religion?” Maybe the better questions are: “Do others need religion? Does the world need religion? Does religion need me?”

James Finley, one of my favorite teachers, often puts the spiritual journey like this:

*Find your practice and practice it.
Find your teaching and follow it.*

Find your community and enter it.

In Buddhism they talk about the importance of three aspect of religion for enlightenment. The Three Jewels are: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. For our spiritual journey we need the teacher, the teachings and the spiritual community.

The early Christian followers, says our text, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” They committed themselves to their spiritual community, “breaking bread together” and “holding all things in common.” And they followed the spiritual practices of “attending the temple, worshipping God and prayer.”

There’s a book by a Unitarian minister and college chaplain, Scotty McLennan, who was the inspiration for *Doonesbury*’s Rev. Scot Sloan. Garry Trudeau and McLennan were roommates at Yale. In his book, *Finding Your Religion*, he uses the metaphor of climbing up a mountain for the life of faith.

Many people I’ve known reject all denominational labels and say, “I’m spiritual, but I’m not religious.”

...They aren’t interested in buildings, clergy, denominations and groups of people who gather in formal worship. They don’t want much to do with scripture, theology, doctrine, or authoritative teachings and practices.

Theirs tends to be a pick-and-choose approach...

In my experience, though, the spiritual mountain is best climbed along trails and paths. Of course, it is possible to make progress by striking out on one’s own and bushwhacking through the brambles and undergrowth. That may seem a lot more exhilarating and much more fun---for a while anyway. It’s also a lot easier to get lost, exhausted and burned out. This can be lonely and frightening if you’re by yourself.

...There are major world religions that have been around for millennia and have had billions of followers. These great traditions offer wide paths...

This is not to say that in mountain climbing one might not try different paths at different times... even on one route, it’s helpful to talk to pilgrims on other paths at trail crossings about what they’ve encountered and seen... notice common experiences at different altitudes no matter what path you are on.

A couple observations:

First, let’s be clear. *We don’t get “closer” to God as we climb.* God and God’s love is with us and others no matter where we are. And in many ways, one could say that we start off at the top, and then we spend the rest of our life trying to return—becoming “as children to enter the reign of God.”

So religion, while never an end in itself, is all about helping to increase one’s *awareness*. As we develop as human beings, our abilities increase. These abilities give us problems, so part of the reason we climb is to overcome the difficulties and distractions that accompany each stage of development. And as abilities change, so does our potential for awareness. Each “altitude” has its

own beauty, vista, and landscape. At each stage of life we have a spiritual potential. The only real tragedy is not to climb to one's ability. As we change and grow, often our spiritual life doesn't change and grow with us.

Second, *embarking on the spiritual journey is difficult*. All the traditions seem to say this. It's not easy; it requires effort, practice and dedication. It's a very demanding task just to be on one path well and to do justice to primarily one tradition. It's practically impossible to deeply follow more than one path at a time.

It can be an arduous, strenuous journey. And religion—the teaching and the community—is a vital help with this task. There are good reasons trails have been worn in the mountainside.

This reminds me of one of G. K. Chesterton's great sayings:

*Christianity hasn't been tried and found wanting.
It has been found difficult and not tried.*

Committing oneself to a religious tradition and a community requires discipline and effort—like enrolling into a university or joining a gym. The results don't happen unless there is diligent effort over a long time.

McLennan writes about a time when he spent the monsoon season with a Hindu Brahmin priest and his family in northeastern India:

"There are many paths up the mountain," he would say, "and they all reach the top, but you need to follow a path and you can't be on more than one at a time."

By the end of the summer I had decided I wanted to become a Hindu. On the morning I approached the priest with my request, he took me to sit with him in the front room on a Persian rug. The rain was coming down in sheets and banged loudly against the roof. I was stunned by his response. "No, no!" he chided. "You've missed the point of everything I've taught you. You've grown up as a Christian and you know a lot about that path. It's the religion of your family and your culture. You know almost nothing about Hinduism. Go back and be the best Christian you can be."

I remember how the rain against the roof seemed to rattle my brain. I was upset. "But I don't believe Jesus was any more divine than Krishna or the Buddha," I pleaded. "And Christians would condemn you for knowing about Jesus and not accepting him uniquely as your Lord and Savior." His response was simple: "Then go back and find a way to be an open, nonexclusive Christian, following in Jesus' footsteps, but appreciating others' journeys on their own paths." The more I could learn about others' paths, he explained, the more it would help me to progress along my own and deepen my understanding of it. Those words have remained my marching orders for life.

Hard rain always reminds me when I forget.

I'll end this morning with a remarkable interview that I heard Bill Moyers do with Charles Houston, who wrote *The Savage Mountain*. Houston was recounting a treacherous descent his climbing party was making down K-2, the second highest mountain in the world. One of the party slipped and fell,

and pulled each of the other five off, until there was only one left holding all six on a nylon rope. It took them five days to get down, and they lost one of the climbers. Moyers asked Houston about an expression that he used, the “fellowship of the rope.” Houston remarked,

You knew that your life was in the hands of somebody else, and his was in your hands. And it made you climb perhaps more carefully. You didn't push the envelope quite so hard...

I don't think people spoke about this. Maybe even didn't think about it. But we did realize that there was an emotional or a psychological bond between us that was at least as important as the physical bond. And that's why climbing with rope is... to some extent, it's more dangerous, because if one man pulls, slips and pulls you off, you're both gone. But on the other hand, as happened in our case, the fact that we were roped together saved all our lives.

And to climb with a rope meant “reaching beyond your grasp,” said Houston, “even pygmies standing on the shoulders of giants can reach, can see further than the giants can.”

Yes, it is good to be striving—climbing up that mountain for its breathtaking view and beauty—for the new perspective we can gain and carry within. It is good that there are paths made by countless others that can guide us—tried and true. But equally as important is that we help those who will follow. We wear down the grass and help make the path ourselves. And on the way up, it is also good and smart to be in community—bound together—on the fellowship of the rope. Together, there are risks and downfalls, of course. But we can also accomplish so much more than in mere isolation—tied to a religious tradition, ancient witnesses—to generations past and future—with present-day companions—together—we can reach beyond our grasp!

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)