

Who Needs Religion? (A Balanced Diet)

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It is often said that the Church is a crutch. Of course it's a crutch. What makes you think you don't limp? —William Sloane Coffin

Ancient Witness: Acts 2:42:47

For my entire ministry I've been a minister who openly challenged and questioned the tradition. And so it might seem odd to some that I find myself at times—like today—defending the Christian tradition! By “tradition,” I mean the teachings and practices that have endured through the generations, including the sacred texts, our Bible. The tradition provides the soil for the innovative spiritual masters, teachers and mystics to emerge, people such as Julian of Norwich, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Jr. and even Jesus. And then they become part of the tradition itself.

Many times through the years, I've met a lot of folks who say that they are “spiritual but not religious.” I have a lot of respect for this movement. It is based upon the idea that there are a lot of people in the church who are “religious but not spiritual.” That is, often there is the outward, external observance of religious tradition, but there is no internal change. And so “spiritual but not religious” is a critique of the church that there is all of this activity, but it is ego-driven, and it hasn't led to an inner, spiritual realization and change of the heart. This is a very needed and valid criticism of the church, in my opinion.

Jesus, himself, criticized folks for being very religious but not spiritual. In Mark's gospel we hear Jesus addressing them sarcastically, saying, “You've got a great way of upholding the tradition but missing the essence of God.” (Mark 7:9)

Jesus was a merciless critic of those who were religious but not spiritual, calling them HUPOKRITES in the Greek, the origin of the English word, “hypocrite” but also translated as “pretender” or “play actor.” These were people who engaged in all the religious practices of the tradition: they go to worship, pray, give alms to the poor, and fast, but it is all just for show.

Jesus was engaging in the ancient prophetic role of criticizing the faithful. He quoted Isaiah, who conveys a rebuke from God:

*These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

The whole point of following the tradition is to become spiritually awakened and to join one's heart with the heart of the Divine.

The prophet, Amos, also criticized those who were “religious but not spiritual.” He said to them:

*I hate and despise your religious festivals;
I don't like your worship and solemn assemblies;
I will not accept your offerings;
I will not listen to your songs.*

Instead, he demanded some evidence that they were changed to the core of their very being:

*Let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

But here's the thing: being either religious or spiritual are not the only choices. A little over 10 years ago, religious scholar, Diana Butler Bass, wrote a book, *Christianity After Religion: The end of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. (I think it's her best one.) She discusses the results of two polls taken 10 years apart in which people were asked whether they understood themselves to be spiritual or religious. In 1999, the big news in the first poll was that a significant portion of the population, 30%, considered themselves to be "spiritual but not religious." And in 2009, there were still 30% of the people who identified this way, spiritual but not religious. And those who said they were neither spiritual or religious were the same, 9% in both polls. But the big change was in the number of people who claimed to be "religious only," falling from 54% to just 9% in 10 years! While the number of people claiming to be "spiritual and religious" rose from just 6% to 48% of all Americans!

Butler Bass writes that when journalists assess religious change in the 21st century, they often talk about the growth of the "spiritual but not religious" and the new atheists. But the *real story* has been this shift of those who now see themselves as "spiritual and religious." She writes:

In a simple shift of phrase, many Americans are articulating their discontent with organized religion and their hope that somehow "religion" might regain its true bearings in the spirit. Sometimes, much is communicated in a word—institutional failure and longing. One of the most significant religion stories of the decade can be found in the overlooked conjunction and.

I personally believe that the "spiritual and religious" is more authentic than just one or the other. This would be the view of Jesus, the prophets and many other great spiritual teachers through the ages. I think that Diana Butler Bass is accurate when she says,

What the world needs is better religion, new forms of old faiths, religion reborn on the basis of deep spiritual connection—these things need to be explored instead of ditching religion completely. We need religion imbued with the spirit of shared humanity and hope, not religions that divide and further fracture the future.

Spirituality needs religion. If you desire to be spiritually awakened, without the help of a religious tradition, without the framework of practice and teaching, the path is nearly impossible.

Religion needs spirituality. Without authentic spiritual experience religion ceases to function and becomes dry and brittle. Without a holy dissatisfaction, a yearning to seek and search, and a desire to explore with an open heart, religion becomes an end in itself and dies.

One of my favorite metaphors is the Buddhist metaphor of the finger pointing to the moon. Think of religious tradition as the finger pointing the way, guiding one to spiritual experience, which is the moon. Too often, religious tradition has turned it into all about itself. It has focused on the finger and has missed the amazing, beautiful moon. But also we need guidance and direction to learn how to see the moon. There are many distractions and obstructions, and it doesn't come naturally.

Think of a religious tradition as being like a parent. The parent has had these years of experience. And the parent says to the child, "Here's your dinner. It has some protein, some starch, some vegetables, and if you have that you can have some sweet goodies for dessert." The kid says, "How about I just have dessert. I'm not really that hungry." The parent goes, "No. It's not going to work that way. I want you to grow strong and be healthy. Trust me." The kid rolls their eyes. The parent says, "Look, you need a balanced diet. Trust me. You think you know what you need. You don't. Eat your vegetables."

A religious tradition is the result of generations and generations of experience. The result is a collective wisdom that can help us grow to a healthy spiritual maturity. We ignore it at our own peril.

So by all means, criticize the tradition, examine it, scrutinize it. But throwing it out completely, trying to be spiritual without the benefit of any religious tradition at all is like engaging in any discipline with a completely clean slate, without any benefit of all the work and knowledge of all those before us. Whether it be science or the arts or building things like cars, we all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, including in the religious pursuit.

One of my favorite lines is from Mark Twain, and it goes something like this: When I was 16, I couldn't believe how stupid my parents were! When I turned 21, I couldn't believe how much smarter my parents became in just a few years!

And it's true. Often we don't appreciate the wisdom of our parents until we are much older. We are able to look beyond their mistakes and shortcomings, and appreciate their experience and understanding. Same thing with religious tradition. The arc moves from uncritical acceptance, to rejection—and if we have the courage to keep an open mind and heart—to perhaps a critical appreciation. We might find that the tradition isn't so stupid, after all.

And so in the Christian tradition, here are some of the "food groups" for a healthy, balanced diet for spiritual growth:

Community. The Christian path is a *team sport*. To be on a spiritual path is to be a part of a *body*. For Christians, it is called the "body of Christ." One cannot be a Christian without being a part of this body. One cannot be spiritual simply as an individual, isolated, as a free-agent. It is to become part of this community that transcends time and space. We celebrate the sacrament of communion, which celebrates our union with God, but also with each other. And the way we connect with this large body of Christ is through a real, flesh and blood spiritual community, like this one. According to the tradition—the sacred texts and generations of teachings and practices—if you want to progress in your faith, to become mature, actualized and fully functioning spiritually, then you need to be part of a congregation, be there for the long haul, become an active participant, not just attend but get involved. The spiritual community must become a central priority in your life.

A congregation is primarily a *center for spiritual growth*. It's like going to a gym. The word, "gymnasium," connotes the development not just of the body but the whole person. In Europe, they use the word to refer to a type of school the way the early Greeks did. I looked up the etymology, and the word is derived from the verb, GUMAZO, that means "to train naked." The Greeks had these huge facilities to exercise and bathe in the nude. But they were also places of scholarly and philosophical lectures and discussions. In ancient Athens there were three great public gymnasia. Plato founded a school at the Academy, the first one. And Aristotle founded the Peripatetic school at the second, the Lyceum.

And so a congregation is kind of like this. We're not naked, but we are vulnerable, showing parts of our own true selves. It's where we are challenged by ideas we wouldn't be exposed to on our own and a body of knowledge beyond ourselves, a place where we learn that it's not all about you, where we learn to be there to build up others, where leaders and members might get on your last nerve, where being offended teaches important things about ourselves, where fellow members will also inspire and comfort you.

It's a community that asks not, "Do I need religion?" but rather "Does religion need me?" Because to grow spiritually, it is in the giving that one receives. As Jesus said, when we seek to lose our lives then we find it.

In our passage from the book of Acts we see the other things that go into a balanced spiritual diet: "devoting themselves to the apostles teaching," "breaking of bread and prayers" "wonders and signs" (acts of generosity and service), "spending time together in the temple... praising God." And so a balanced spiritual diet also includes **worship and prayer, study and reflection, and deeds of compassion and justice**.

Now, each person will gravitate toward one of these—this will be their natural spiritual path. But with other "food groups" they may need to be reminded and encouraged to "eat your vegetables!" For example, an extrovert's natural path might be action and would need to be reminded to have reflection. And introvert would naturally do reflection but their "vegetables" would be action. One person's dessert is another's vegetables.

Each tradition I've known has a similar balanced diet. For example, there are the Three Jewels of Buddhism: taking refuge in the sangha (spiritual community), the dharma (teaching) and the Buddha. And this is done by the eight-fold path that is balanced into three areas of Moral Virtue/Action, Meditation and Insight/Wisdom.

Look, the spiritual pursuit is not for everyone. That is a choice everyone should be free to make. And of those who do choose the spiritual path, not everyone sees the value of a religious tradition to help in that pursuit. So the Christian path isn't for everyone, and that's perfectly fine. But for those of us who do choose the spiritual path, let's listen to the wisdom of our ancestors calling us to a balanced diet and to eat our vegetables! And may we both follow our religious path and grow in our spiritual awareness.

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