

Is Religion a Good Thing?

Alister McGrath writes: “Paradoxically, what propels people toward atheism is above all a sense of revulsion against the excesses and failures of organized religion.”

History has validated Professor McGrath’s observation many times over. But, I have noticed another common reaction to organized religions’ failings that may not seem as severe as atheism. For those who prefer to hedge their bets regarding the existence of God and still dismiss organized religion, it has become popular to celebrate one’s own “spirituality” without being religious.

These days, the very term “religion” is virtually a dirty word in secular circles, while the term “spirituality” is well received. “I am spiritual, I am not religious.” I hear this often, and frankly, it fits nicely into this current age of pluralism where no truth is absolute and all roads allegedly lead to God. Spirituality can be all-inclusive. Spirituality can be experimental. Spirituality can dismiss dogma, creed and theological certainty. Spirituality can be open-minded. Religion, on the other hand, is considered to be narrow, restrictive and bigoted.

Today, it is fashionable for “spiritual” people to custom-design their own personal faith systems - picking, choosing and blending elements from Christianity, Judaism, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, New Age as well as from any other source that has something allegedly sage to offer.

“I am a reformed Taoist, part-time Buddhist, Hindu, animist, pagan, Jewish mystic, and Christian. I always got along great with priests and rabbis and mullahs and gurus, even though I spend most of my life constructively criticizing them.”

- Steven Van Zandt, former guitarist for Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band

“I consider myself a spiritual person. I believe in an idea of God, although it's my own personal ideal. I find most religions interesting, and I've been to every kind of denomination: Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I've taken bits from everything and customized it.”

- Sarah Michelle Gellar (*aka* Buffy the Vampire Slayer)

We need to understand that the claim to be a spiritual person means nothing. We are all spiritual beings for we are all created beings who bear the image of God. Most of us yearn for the answers of origin and eternity. Only the fool silences those yearning by saying in his heart, “There is no God.” Modern spirituality has no intellectual boundaries. Religion on the other hand, seems too narrow to the modern spiritualist, as though it inflexibly locks a person into something that’s non-negotiable. Stephen Carter writes: “Religion is, at its heart, a way of denying the authority of the rest of the world.”

Spirituality can muse upon the mystical without ever extending a cup of cold water to anyone. As Christians, we cannot separate our religious convictions from how we

morally and ethically live our lives. For good we reason, we prefer to think of Christianity more in terms of a “relationship” than a “religion,” but Christianity must look like something. There is such a thing as the “practice” of Christianity and that practice or “religion” has certain distinguishing marks. Spiritually, it is a faith relationship with Jesus rooted in a number of non-negotiable theological truths about His atoning work. Practically, it is learning from Jesus and yielding to His Lordship as God fashions us into His likeness.

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