

“Spiritual but Not Religious”

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In a January 2011 interview with Piers Morgan, Oprah Winfrey announced that her most important role is “spiritual leader”: “This isn’t about me. I am the messenger to deliver the message of redemption, of hope, of forgiveness, of gratitude, of evolving people to the best of themselves. So I am on my personal journey. My personal journey is to fulfill the highest expression of myself here as a human being here on earth,” said Oprah. This surely makes Oprah not only a savviest of business persons but also the national leader of the burgeoning “I’m religious but not spiritual” movement.

I resent Oprah’s assumption of “spiritual leader.” Unlike Oprah I had to labor three years in seminary before anybody was allowed to call me a spiritual leader. Moreover I fear that some uninformed person in the hinterland might be misled by Oprah into thinking that the “spiritual” is roughly analogous to “Christian.”

I agree with Lillian Daniel who says -- in response to the dear, dumb flight companion who intones “I’m spiritual but not religious” -- “Please stop boring me.” Now that everybody is “spiritual,” it has taken all the wind out of spirituality. Boring.

What, in Jesus’ name, hath “spiritual” to do with the Christian faith?

Martin Luther notes that in his sermon on the Sermon on the Mount,¹ Jesus begins his sermon on the First Beatitude by attacking “the greatest and most universal belief or religion on earth”-- those “crazy saints” who think that the purpose of the Christian faith is spiritual aggrandizement. Luther says that Jesus makes “blessed are the poor in Spirit” the First Beatitude because, if at the beginning of the sermon one feels that one is spiritually well endowed, spiritually rich, then by the end of the sermon -- after the preacher has pummeled you for marrying after divorce, looking at a person lustfully, not turning the other cheek, and returning evil for evil -- everybody looks spiritually destitute!

So the first thing to say to those dear, sweet folk who, when invited to sign on to the church as a means of grace say, “I’m not religious; but I’m very spiritual,” is “Where the heck did you get the idea that Christianity gave a rip about either religion or spirituality?”

Spirituality is another means of turning faith in God into a commodity for our private consolation. (Thank you, Karl Barth.) This privatization of God was done by the modern democratic, liberal nation state in order to neutralize Christianity, to marginalize it from the common life, to bury God in the confines of the self, to trivialize the Trinity, and to keep this governmentally troubling faith from going public. (Thank you, Thomas Jefferson.) What passes today for “spirituality” was invented to silence the church in order to make way for the omnipotent state and its capitalist economy. The government has found that Christians (well, any believer who thinks that his or her God might be more important than the state) are easier to manage if they will confine their faith to something within.

We’ve got our own theologians to blame for this sad state of affairs, with vast numbers of Americans running around thinking that religion is vague and personal. In

an attempt to rescue some shred of the Christian faith from the ravages of the modern world, Schleiermacher thinned the gospel down: the essence of religion is not thought or action but feeling and intuition, faith that dare not utter its name, religion that is felt but seldom seen. God is forced to retreat from the stage of history and to work exclusively within the confines of the modern self.²

Thanks to folk like Schleiermacher and Borg, spirituality has made religion successful and safe, enabling 90 percent of all Americans to say they believe in God. If you crank “God” down low enough, make the term vague enough and emptied of any intellectual content, everybody is a believer. Spirituality enables us to be the first generation of Christians in history who cannot get hurt by following Jesus. Thus the NPR show, that I happen to enjoy on my podcast, renamed itself from “Speaking of Faith” to the even more vague and generic “On Being,” when even “faith” proved to be too loaded a word for NPR.

“Spirituality” is but our most recent attempt to mitigate demands of having God come to us as Christ. “Revelation” is reduced to a class of phenomena that some individuals experience more dramatically than others, an innate something within. We have thus found a way to give credence to Feuerbach’s claim that “God” is another name for the projection of the deepest human desires. Thus Barth warned that “Whoever is concerned with the spirit, the heart, and conscience, and...inwardness... must be confronted with the question of whether he is really concerned with God and not with the apotheosis of man.”³

Barth believed that we know humanity only on the basis of what we know of God in Jesus Christ. Spirituality gets it the other way around, beginning with human subjectivity and asking what we can know of God based upon what we know of ourselves. Christians may not know everything, but we do know Jesus Christ as God’s self-definition that we didn’t respond well to from the very beginning. Spirituality, in its present form (a pale, cobbled together imitation of that risky piety once practiced by the saints), is but our latest effort to fashion a God more congenial to how our God ought to look if God were worthy of worship by people like us.

My theory is that when Christian spirituality no longer meant “piety,” it ran unchecked and untethered. Now God means whatever we want God to mean, whatever is practically helpful to us in our pursuit of whatever it is we want more than God, whatever, whomever we find credible within the limits of modern imagination. Christians historically thought of their piety not primarily as a technique to get them up to God, but rather as God’s appointed means to get down to them. Thus John Calvin defined piety as “that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.”⁴ Note Calvin’s linkage of piety with knowledge of God in Christ, whereas much that passes for spirituality in our age begins with the claim to complete ignorance of who God actually is. “God? Oh can’t say anything for sure about God. That would be intellectually arrogant.”⁵

We wish. Christology gives specific, unavoidable, prophetic content and necessary theological control to pneumatology. Our imaginations are prone to fanciful constructions of God. Incarnational faith regards “faith” as less interesting than “faith *in whom?*” Solid, interesting intellectual content is precisely what is lacking in so many contemporary treatments of “spirituality.”

For Christians, “God is God, not in the mists of some transcendence, not on the basis of their own opinion, thought, or speculation, not in the form of an image

projected by them, but in Jesus Christ,” thunders Barth.⁶

I know this is a prejudiced ecclesiastical statement (the only kind you should expect me to make), but whenever I hear the now commonplace “I’m spiritual but not religious,” my reaction is similar to the one I had to generations of Duke students who pled, “Since we love one another, why do we need to stand up in a church and say it? Can’t we just live together without all that marriage stuff?”

Because “I love you,” so often means in this culture, “I love me and want to use you to love me even more,” the church has found it helpful to test our declarations of love by submitting them to the vows of marriage. Can your “love” endure the test of a lifelong, exclusive, morally formative promise?

“So you say that you are ‘spiritual’? Any specific flesh or muscle on that ‘spirit’ whom you worship? Can your ‘faith’ in God endure the test of obedience to a First Century Jew who lived briefly and died violently and returned unexpectedly? Are you able to love God without despising those whom God loves? If not, why bother?”

See you in church on Sunday.

Notes

1 “The Sermon on the Mount,” *Luther’s Works* (American Edition), (1955-1976), 11-19, (1530-1532).

2 Barth said that Schleiermacher made Spirit “identical with subjective stimulation,” a merely “supreme enhancement” of the human spirit that eventually degenerated, in Barth’s estimation, to Troeltsch’s equation of the Holy Spirit with “direct religious productivity of the individual.” Cited in Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth’s Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co. Grand Rapids, Mich), 2004), 221.

3 Karl Barth in his introductory essay to Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), xxlv.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, Vol 20, Library of Xtian Classics, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.2.1.

5 Kant, precursor to Schliermacher said, “I had to do away with knowledge in order to make room for faith.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965/1787), 29. John Milbank has had lots to say about the “false humility” of modern theology.

6 Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV, 4, Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, Mich.), 1981, 93.