Spiritual, but not Religious?

"I'm spiritual, but not religious."

If I had a nickel for every time someone said this to me…
Well, let's just say we wouldn't have to do a High Holiday appeal.

But it's true, I do hear this a lot, especially from Jews, and especially when I'm introduced to them as a rabbi. Perhaps some of it is motivated by guilt, an attempt to acknowledge why they haven't shown up at services while explaining that they're still good people! If that's the case, then they worry unnecessarily that I'm standing in judgment of their Jewish choices.

For most people, I think there's something more behind the statement, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." What is it about the times we're living in now, and the culture that shapes us, that leads so many Americans--Jews included--to identify this way? One study found that almost 1 in 5 Americans describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.[1] What is going on with this 20%, and what does it have to do with Judaism, and with us?

One answer comes from a minister, Lillian Daniel, of the United Church of Christ, who posted on the denominations's daily devotional blog a piece entitled, "Spiritual but Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me."[2] In a revelation that may qualify as "Too Much Information" from a pastor, she complains about the people on airplanes who find out she's a minister and then spend the whole flight telling her how they're "spiritual but not religious," and how they "find God in the sunsets." Daniel pulls no punches in describing how she feels about these people:

> Thank you for sharing, spiritual but not religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.[3]

The dismissive sarcasm is, in my opinion, unbecoming a clergy-person (at least in public!). However… Perhaps there is a legitimate point lurking beneath the layers of

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[1] Fuller. There's even a website for this group: www.sbnr.org.
[2] Daniel.
[3] Ibid.

snark--a point about what the words "spiritual" and "religious" have come to mean today.

Although they used to be synonyms, these two words have grown further apart over the past five decades.[4] *Spirituality* has come to refer to the private realm of faith. *Spiritual* people dabble in mysticism and sample from various faith traditions. They are searchers who love the metaphor of a personal journey to describe their quest for meaning in life.

You'll often hear *spiritual* people say they're against organized religion--to which I like to say, "don't worry, we're not that organized!"--but the point is that they seek a highly personalized faith experience. Remember, this is the iPod generation: you don't have to rely on a radio DJ to select music for you; you can listen to <u>what</u> you want, <u>when</u> you want, by yourself. As one religion scholar put it, "America is well on its way to becoming a nation of 310 million people with 310 million religions, each tailor-made to suit themselves."[5] Perhaps this concept of spirituality is best illustrated by what became known as Sheilaism, after a woman quoted in a study in the 1980s:

> I believe in God. I am not a fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice…My own Sheilaism…is just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other.[6]

At its most caricatured, spirituality today is wishy-washy, touchy-feely, and non-committal. It is free-flowing, spontaneous, 1960s-style experimentation.

Religion, on the other hand, has come to mean everything that *spirituality* is not. It is connected to the public realm--to church attendance, for example. It's often associated with institutions and buildings. It is steeped in tradition, ritual, and doctrine. It is fixed and organized, and often hierarchical. Some even see *religious* people as "hypocritical, judgmental or insincere" as well as "focus[ed] too much on rules and not enough on spirituality."[7] *Religion* is sometimes considered

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[4] Fuller; cf. Putnam, p. 96-97.
[5] Blanchard, quoting George Barna. Cf. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/15/make-your-own-religion_n_964570.html?ref=tw
[6] Putnam, 97; original citation from Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 221.
[7] Putnam, 131.

impersonal, cold and uncaring, old-fashioned and stale. At its worst, it is extreme and exclusionary, and even violent.

No wonder spiritual people who see it this way want no part in it.

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Judaism has dealt with this tension ever since there's been something called Judaism. In our tradition, it has found expression in the form of *keva* and *kavanah*. Keva is fixed, ordered, obligatory. Kavanah is intentional, individual, spontaneous. Keva is the direction on the page; kavanah is the direction of the heart.

The Bible's quintessential example of kavanah occurs in the Haftarah for Rosh Hashanah morning, from the book of 1 Samuel. Hannah, the barren wife of Elkanah, desperately wants a son. So she prays:

> *Adonai Tz'va-ot*, if You will look upon the suffering of Your handmaid and will remember me and not forget Your handmaid, and if You will grant Your handmaid a male child, I will dedicate him to the ETERNAL for all the days of his life…[8]

Though she uses some familiar phrases and names for God, there is no script, no required time, no prayer book. Just a woman in need, "pouring out her soul," as she says, "before God."[9]

By contrast, the epitome of keva in the Bible is found in the detailed sacrificial instructions in Vayikra (Leviticus). They are supremely ordered and institutionalized, with apparently little room for individuality. Hannah's prayer is personal and spontaneous. The sacrifices are communal and happen at fixed times, daily.

But the rabbis who shaped Judaism as we know it today knew what was required to create a Judaism with lasting value to the world. Their wisdom is expressed in a famous argument in the Mishnah:

> RABBAN GAMALIEL SAYS: EVERY DAY A MAN SHOULD SAY THE EIGHTEEN BENEDICTIONS [the Amidah]… R. ELIEZER SAYS: IF A MAN

[8] I Samuel 1:11.
[9] I Samuel 1:15.

> MAKES HIS PRAYERS A FIXED TASK, IT IS NOT A [GENUINE] SUPPLICATION.[10]

On the one hand, a requirement to recite a fixed prayer every day. On the other hand, a rejection of the very idea of fixed prayer! One says keva matters; the other, kavanah.

But it's a false paradox. And in fact Judaism will only survive if we realize that keva and kavanah are two sides of the same coin. Then the question is, how do we keep them from being opposites? How can we infuse the script with feeling, make old melodies dance with new meaning?

For the beginning of an answer, let's revisit the idea of the iPod generation and music as a metaphor. Anyone today can dabble in music. Like the early iPod commercials promised, heavy metal can coexist with chamber music: it's all about the shuffle feature. And that's how many "spiritual, but not religious" people approach their faith. *Today is a Buddhism day; tomorrow Kabbalah; then maybe I'll do some hot yoga…*

Now, I'm the first one to encourage us to learn from all the world's wisdom and faith traditions. But I believe we should do it from roots firmly planted in the soil of our own.

Consider the music analogy again. Dabbling in eclectic taste is fine for a consumer, but what about a practitioner? To become a guitarist, or a singer, or a composer takes practice. It takes study and repeated application. It takes hours of drilling scales. And that rigor, coupled with talent and inspiration, yields beautiful music.

I wonder if the "spiritual, but not religious" crowd focuses too much on the inspiration side, and not enough on the rigor and practice. Like music, religion requires discipline. You don't walk into a recording studio with no training and expect to be able to pick up a guitar and make music right away.

The same is true for Judaism. To reach the transcendent in prayer and community, we need to practice the tools that get us there. This might mean breaking our teeth on the Hebrew words, familiarizing ourselves with the thematic flow of Jewish prayers. It means realizing that Judaism contains a vast treasure house of blessings for every day miracles. To embrace these "fixed" and "institutionalized" religious

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[10] Mishnah at Talmud Bavli, Berachot 28b.

rites may seem, to the "spiritual but not religious," like a spiritual buzz-kill. But it's just the opposite. These traditions are vessels of sacredness; they are tools of transcendence.

For some, organized religion is an automatic turn-off. But as one of my teachers, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, likes to say, "There's no rule that religion has to be boring." That's part of *our* job, as clergy: to bring the vast toolbox of institutional Judaism -- the keva -- into dialogue with the spirit of the day, and with each of you in your individuality -- the kavanah.

But you have to meet us halfway. That means trusting that there is real wisdom and sacredness in what may seem, to you, like stale words and practices. It also means bringing your unique perspective to help shape how we employ the tools we've inherited from our tradition.

To be more than a detached consumer requires actual investment. Whether you're making music or prayer, seeking beauty or truth--it takes work. Religious discipline generates far richer, lasting spirituality. Religion makes it possible to share spirituality with our community, and to pass it on to our children.

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I wouldn't be telling you all this if I didn't think it mattered to the broader world. The drifting apart of "spiritual" and "religious"--the growing wedge between them--has spawned two simultaneous social shifts: on one side, an increase in the number who identify as unaffiliated, atheist, and "spiritual but not religious"; on the other side, we see radical religious extremists gaining influence and momentum. Those two groups are getting worse at talking to each other; they barely even speak the same language anymore. As a by-product, we witness the fragmentation of our society along religious and anti-religious fault-lines.

In the face of these challenges, I believe Jews and Judaism can be a uniquely positive force. I'm a firm believer that fighting extremism with the opposite extreme is an exercise in futility. What we should do instead is cultivate the next generation of Jews who know how to combine keva and kavanah.

Consider the experience of a British Muslim scholar who, while a graduate student, encountered the radical Islamic Society on campus. He and his friends who had been raised by Islamic parents were more likely to reject racist and extremist

teachings. "Those who had no exposure to Islam," he says, "prior to the encounter with extremist recruiters seemed more likely to follow them."[11] Ignoring extremism doesn't make it go away. Quite the opposite, in fact. "Thus," he concludes, "contrary to the insistence of some that religion is inherently divisive and harmful, this research suggests that early-life exposure to moderate forms of religion may be a vital inoculator against the dangers of extremist recruitment."

Yom Kippur calls us to think big about the time we have left ahead of us, so here goes:

I believe a Judaism that balances keva and kavanah, the fixed and the fluid, the spiritual and the religious, is one of the last and best bulwarks against the rise of extremism and the fragmentation of our communities along religious lines. The way to fight these dangerous trends and keep Judaism vital and vibrant for another generation is to know it better, and practice it more deeply and authentically.

In the end, I believe we will begin to bring redemption to the world when we join spirituality with religion. By reuniting these estranged partners, we can develop an immunity to extremism. Let's cultivate a faith that makes the fixed fresh, infuses the familiar with spontaneity, bridges the public and private gaps in our lives, sings a new song without forgetting the old. It will be a faith that doesn't promise all the answers, but helps us live with the questions, a faith that guides us in navigating life's narrows toward an existence of depth and purpose.

We shouldn't have to choose between being spiritual and being religious. Let us instead work toward the day when we all say, and proudly, "I'm spiritual *and* religious, and I couldn't be one without the other."

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[11] Razzaque. Many thanks to Maurice Emmer for bringing this article to my attention.

Some of What I've Been Reading

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