

# Religion, Spirituality, & Biblical Revelation

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When we compare religion to spirituality, religion appears to be a reality that is visible, organized, structured, and easily recognizable. It has a name and an identifiable membership. It carefully guards its rituals and insists on doctrinal clarity. By contrast, spirituality is invisible (except in its effects), is profoundly personal, and is often suspicious of structures and rituals, though it can be both challenged and supported by them. Finally,

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both religion and spirituality allow for a whole spectrum of relationships, from total separation and animosity to mutual respect and cooperation.

In confronting this issue, the most serious mistake one can make is to turn it into an either/or proposition. Those who have reflected carefully on human experience have discovered a healthy dynamism between these two extremes. The ancient Greek philosophers recognized the healthy tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, that is, between order and spontaneity. Without order there can be no creation; without spontaneity there is tyranny.

### **BIBLICAL TRADITION**

In the biblical tradition of Israel, these two contrasting forces were recognized in the tension that existed between the king and the prophet. The king was expected to provide an orderly and safe society but, if he overreached, the prophet could successfully challenge him. King David was Israel's greatest monarch but when the prophet Nathan accused him, he humbly acknowledged his sinfulness and accepted his punishment. Jesus, who appeared to be more prophet than king, challenged a religious order that had become rigid and suffocating. He symbolically cleansed the Jerusalem temple because its keepers had fallen into the ultimate religious trap, which is to sacrifice the creative, challenging future for a human, familiar past.

These examples remind us that only in the careful balancing of religion and spirituality can we find a religiously healthy environment. Religion without spirituality is a form of idolatry. It sanctions human control and provides the false comfort of external, and sometimes scrupulous, observance. The Pharisees were admirable for their dedication and strict observance to the law, but their religious attitude was so self-righteous and judgmental that it became a caricature of true religion. Religion without spirituality is simply another way of expressing the danger that Saint Paul saw in the preference for good works over faith.

That religious institutions can be, and too often are, rigid and sterile does not justify the rejection of religion in favor of spirituality. Spirituality without the guidance of religion can be very dangerous and, at times, destructive. It is a flame that burns brightly but can easily be manipulated, thereby providing a wonderful opportunity for self-deception. We need only recall

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the tragic mass suicides of the Heaven's Gate cult in Los Angeles and the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas. The dedication of these people to a religious ideal may have been exemplary but it was also terribly misguided.

Spirituality without religion is similar to the blowtorch, whose plume of fire is impressive but useless and until it can be disciplined and thus brought to an intense blue point. The fiery plume of spirituality may be attractive but it needs to be subjected to a constant critique to determine whether it is in contact with reality. The challenge of the Bible is clear and consistent in this respect, as we see from that famous text of Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (6:4-5). This clear statement about the primacy of spirituality in Israel is found in a book that is filled with warnings about Israel's temptation to forget her God and to adopt pagan ways.

We read in Exodus also that God spoke with Moses "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (33:11). Such an intimate, personal relationship with God would seem to represent everything that is meant by spirituality. Yet this same Moses is the source of the moral principles that are at the heart of the Torah and that constitute one of the essential elements of religion. Moses is not a solitary saint living somewhere in a cave. He is the leader of a covenanted people, and that covenant contains prohibitions as well as invitations to profound spirituality.

At the very heart of this covenant is the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments. We must not fail to note that these moral principles of religion are directly connected with the spiritual experience of God's love in one's life. The preamble of the Ten Commandments makes it clear that these precepts are intended for the guidance of those who have already begun to experience the reality of God's love in their lives. It is brief and to the point: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). Having begun to experience the reality of personal freedom, the Israelites are challenged to learn how to use their newfound freedom in a way that pleases God. All the commandments that follow are intended, therefore, for those alone who have already tasted, at least to some degree, the precious fruit of personal freedom.

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Having discovered a God who offers a love that liberates, it follows that the Israelites are now ready to love as God loves, that is, in a way that liberates others. The Pharaoh used power to oppress others; God uses power to liberate others. And now Israel knows for sure what the purpose of power is. I have often thought that only one question may be asked of us when we come to the final judgment: "Did you let my people go?"

### SECULAR VS. TRANSCENDENT

If we wish to evaluate properly the contrast between religion and spirituality, we must be aware also of the contrast between our closed, secular world, and the limitless universe of the transcendent. This transcendent, or divine, universe of religious revelation is readily acknowledged but its implications are often ignored.

A television commentator recently made a most interesting observation: of all the animals on earth the only one that does not know why it is here is the human animal! As I pondered this statement, I realized that, as a farm boy, I had never seen a cow standing by the pasture fence with the concentrated look that asks, "What's it all about?" The sad truth is that, after all these years, there is no consensus at all among us humans about the meaning and purpose of our existence. The widely held conclusion of our dominant secular society is that everything ends with death and that, at all cost, one must find success and happiness in this short life.

To be a spiritual person means to be in touch with a larger, transcendent world from which one has received a revelation about the meaning of one's existence. If we are Christians, we are told that being a loving and caring person is far more important than being wealthy, self-sufficient, and well educated. But we live in a secular world and we are inevitably influenced by its philosophy. Organized religion, which is so often tempted to be rigid and moralistic, is nonetheless the guardian of biblical revelation and of its unlikely philosophy. Every day we have to choose between secular and religious values.

If we are wise we will be attuned to this gentle but insistent message from the larger world. Peter Berger, an eminent sociologist from the University of Chicago, has authored a book entitled *A Rumor of Angels* (Doubleday, 1969), in which he claims that there are in our world

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omnipresent “signals of the Transcendent.” He offers a simple but telling example of this phenomenon. He asks us to imagine that a mother is hurrying to comfort her child who is crying upon awaking from a nightmare. The mother tells her child, “Don’t be afraid...everything is all right.” In saying this she is not drawing upon her conscious and merely human knowledge, for nothing in that day’s news suggests that “everything is all right.” Quite the contrary, in fact. Yet no one would accuse her of deliberately lying to her child. Berger claims that this mother is in fact drawing upon an instinctive wisdom, which is at home only in the transcendent world. It seems to follow that, if you listen carefully at such a moment, you will hear the whisper of angel wings—a rumor of angels would have entered our world. The Bible is full of angels and they play in many ways the role that Berger assigns to them. Gabriel’s announcement to Mary, for example, is all about the presence of divine love in a world that seems to understand only violence.

Celtic spirituality affirms the existence of “thin places” in the universe, where the transcendent world can be touched and felt and recognized. Authentic spirituality enables us to sense the presence of angels and to recognize the power that comes through the thin places in the universe.

But how can we be sure that the angelic whispers are not a siren song that will lead us to spiritual shipwreck? How can we be sure that the thin places are not in fact an opening for the Furies, avenging spirits of Greek mythology? Cipriano Vagaggini, my professor of theology in Rome many years ago, was aware of this quandary and offered a solution that seems to be eminently sensible. To avoid self-deception in this critical area, he noted, we must seek the aid of the theological sciences, which belong to the world of order and religion, and, as a science, theology relies upon reason. As such, it cannot directly analyze and evaluate the profoundly personal, and therefore mysterious, realm of spirituality. The true purpose of responsible theology is not, therefore, to reduce the mystery of God, much less eliminate it; its purpose is to locate the mystery. In other words, it will evaluate the results of contact with the mystery of God by applying the gospel principle, “You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16).

Saint Teresa of Avila, one of Christianity’s most celebrated mystics, certainly did not neglect the spiritual side of our equation. It is interesting to

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note that she is supposed to have said that she would rather have a theologian for her confessor than a saint! The point is quite clear. What she wanted was someone who could evaluate her mystical experiences and, by the principles of good theology, could assure her that these experiences were indeed from God, and not some foolish self-deception.

### THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE

This role of theology has never been more important than during this period of postmodernism. The premodern world of the Middle Ages was centered in the reality of God. Modernity came with the Enlightenment, which placed humans at the center of reality and claimed to have liberated us from the blindness and bondage of the previous centuries. The result of enthroning reason in the place of faith was an amazing flourishing of science and technology, something for which we should all be grateful.

However, we have now discovered that this gain has come at a very heavy cost, for the same primacy of reason that gave us the benefits of modernity was unable to provide the guidance that could prevent the terrible consequences of world wars and ethnic cleansing, culminating in the Holocaust. We have been discovering that human reason without the guidance of moral principles can easily become human madness. The consequence, in postmodernity, has been a loss of confidence in any system that claims to represent truth.

Sandra Schneiders, a professor at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, has written: “The postmodern sense is one of radical contingency, existential rootlessness, abandonment in an impersonal cosmos....The postmodern person suspects that there is no foundation, nothing stable on which to base one’s thought, behavior, hopes, or convictions” (*Finding the Treasure*, Vol. 1, Paulist, 2000).

Spirituality is an antidote to postmodern despair, for it puts us in touch with the transcendent universe, which is rich in meaning and powerful enough to conquer the worst human nightmares of frustration and fear. However, this is also a universe in which human control, so prized by us moderns, is of no real value. The only useful currencies in this world are generosity, vulnerability, and trust. But seeking the transcendent is not at all a blind leap into the unknown. One of the primary purposes of religion

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is to provide guidance for this spiritual journey. Chief among these guidelines is a simple observation about the consequences that flow from such a conversion: if there is only pride, arrogance, and smugness, it is not authentic. If it results in kindness, thoughtfulness, and sensitivity to others, it is indeed the path to an ever greater use of freedom so that others also may be free.

In the biblical world, this is not a conclusion that comes after agonizing analysis. It is an assumption that is as natural as breathing. Throughout the Bible we learn that one must begin in the reality of life and death, love and betrayal, joy and sorrow—and then trust in the promise that choosing to love unselfishly leads inevitably to meaning and joy. To reach such a happy outcome, we must accept the guidance of religion even as we trust and nourish the vision of spirituality.