



# Spiritual and Religious: The Benefits of Being Both

James Martin SJ

Many people today define themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’, but is it really that easy, or healthy, to separate spirituality and religion from one another? James Martin SJ thinks not, and in an extract from his popular book, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, he explains why religion should not be dismissed so readily.

Everybody seems to be spiritual these days – from your college roommate, to the person in the office cubicle next to yours, to the subject of every other celebrity interview. But if ‘spiritual’ is fashionable, ‘religious’ is as unfashionable. This is usually expressed as follows: ‘I’m spiritual but just not religious.’ It’s even referred to by the acronym SBNR.

There are so many people who describe themselves as SBNR that sometimes I wonder if the Jesuits might attract more people if they gave the *Spiritual But Not Religious Exercises*.

The thinking goes like this: being ‘religious’ means abiding by the arcane rules and hidebound dogmas, and being the tool of an oppressive institution that doesn’t allow you to think for yourself. (Which would have surprised many thinking believers, like St. Thomas Aquinas, Moses Maimonides, Dorothy Day and Reinhold Niebuhr.) Religion is narrow-minded and prejudicial – so goes the thinking – stifling the growth of the human spirit. (Which would have surprised St. Francis of Assisi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, St. Teresa of Ávila, Rumi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Or worse, as several contemporary authors contend, religion is the most despicable of social evils, responsible for all the wars and conflicts around the world.



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Sadly, religion is in fact responsible for many ills in the modern world and evils throughout history: among them the persecution of Jews, endless wars of religion, the Inquisition, not to mention the religious intolerance and zealotry that leads to terrorism.

You can add to this list smaller things: your judgmental neighbour who loudly tells you how often he helps out at church, your holier-than-thou relative

who trumpets how often she reads the Bible, or that annoying guy at work who keeps telling you that belief in Jesus is sure to bring you amazing financial success.

There is a human and sinful side to religion since religions are human organisations, and therefore prone to sin. And frankly, people within religious organisations know this better than those outside of them.

Some say that on balance religion is found wanting. Still, I would stack up against the negatives some positive aspects: traditions of love, forgiveness and charity as well as the more tangible outgrowths of thousands of faith-based organisations that care for the poor, like Catholic charities or the vast network of Catholic hospitals and schools that care for poor and immigrant populations. Think too of generous men and women like St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. Catherine of Siena, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King again.

Speaking of Dr. King, you might add Abolition, women's suffrage, and civil rights movements, all of which were founded on explicitly religious principles. Add to that list the billions of believers who have found in their own religious traditions not only comfort but also a moral voice urging them to live selfless lives and to challenge the status quo.

And Jesus of Nazareth. Remember him? Though he often challenged the religious conventions of his day, he was a deeply religious man. (This is something of an understatement).

By the way, atheism doesn't have a perfect record either. In his book *No One Sees God: The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers*, Michael Novak points out that while many atheist thinkers urge us to question everything, especially the record of organised religion, atheists often fail to question their own record. Think of the cruelty and bloodshed perpetrated, just in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by totalitarian regimes that have professed 'scientific atheism.' Stalinist Russia comes to mind.

On balance, I think religion comes out on top. And when I think about the examples of the maleficent effects of religion, I remember the English novelist Evelyn Waugh, a dazzling writer who was by many accounts a nasty person. One of Waugh's friends once expressed astonishment that he could be so mean-spirited and a Christian. Think, said Waugh, how much *worse* I would be if I were not Christian.

Still, it's not surprising that, given all the problems with organised religion, many people would say, 'I'm not religious.' They say: 'I'm serious about living a moral life, maybe even one that centres on God, but I'm my own person.'

'Spiritual' on the other hand, implies that freed from unnecessary dogma, you can be yourself before God. The term may also imply that you have sampled a variety of religious beliefs that you have integrated into your life. You meditate at a Buddhist temple (which is great); participate in seders with Jewish friends at Passover (great, too); sing in a gospel choir at a local Baptist church (great again); and go to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at a Catholic church (also great).

You find what works for you, but don't subscribe to any one church: that would be too confining. Besides, there's no one creed that represents exactly what you believe.

But there's a problem. While 'spiritual' is obviously healthy, 'not religious' may be another way of saying that faith is something between you and God. And while faith is a question of you and God, it's not *just* a question of you and God.

Because this would mean that you're relating to God alone. And that means that there's no one to suggest when you might be off track.

We all tend to think that we're correct about most things, and spirituality is no exception. And not belonging to a religious community means less of a chance of being challenged by a tradition of belief and experience, less chance to see when you are misguided, seeing only part of the picture, or even wrong.

Let's consider a person who wants to follow Jesus Christ on her own. Perhaps she has heard that if she follows Christ she will enjoy financial success – a popular idea today. Were she part of a mainstream Christian community, though, she would be reminded that suffering is part of the life of even the most devout Christian. Without the wisdom of a community, she may gravitate towards a skewed view of Christianity. Once she falls on hard times financially, she may drop God, who has ceased to meet her personal needs.

Despite our best efforts to be spiritual we make mistakes. And when we do, it's helpful to have the wisdom of a religious tradition.

This reminds me of a passage from a book called *Habits of the Heart*, written by Robert Bellah, a sociologist of religion, and other colleagues, in which they interviewed a woman named Sheila, about her religious beliefs. 'I believe in God,' she said. 'I'm not a religious 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.'

Even more problematic than Sheilism are spiritualities entirely focused on the self, with no place for humility, self-critique, or any sense of responsibility for the community. Certain 'New Age' movements find their goal not in God, or even the greater good, but in self-improvement – a valuable goal – but one that can degenerate into selfishness.

Religion can provide a check to my tendency to think that I am the centre of the universe, that I have all the answers, that I know better than anyone about God, and that God speaks most clearly through me.

By the same token, religious institutions need themselves to be called to account. And here the prophets among us, who are able to see the failures, weaknesses, and plain old sinfulness of institutional religion, play a critical role. Like individuals who are never challenged, religious communities can often get things tragically wrong, convinced that they are doing 'God's will.' (Think of the Salem witch trials, among other examples.) They might even encourage us to become complacent in our judgments. Unreflective religion can sometimes incite people to make even *worse* mistakes than they would on their own. Thus, those prophetic voices calling their communities to continual self-critique are always difficult for the institution to hear, but nonetheless necessary. In his own way, Ignatius exercised a prophetic role by asking Jesuits not to seek high clerical office in the church – like that of bishop, archbishop or cardinal. In fact, Jesuits make a promise not to 'ambition' for high office even within their own order. In this way, Ignatius not only tried to prevent careerism among the Jesuits, but also spoke a word of prophecy to the clerical culture of church in his time.

It's a healthy tension: the wisdom of our religious traditions provides us with a corrective for our propensity to think that we have all the answers; and prophetic individuals can moderate the natural propensity of institutions to resist change and growth. As with many aspects of the spiritual life, you need to find balance in the tension.

Religion provides us with something else we need: stories of other believers, who help us understand God better than we could on our own.

Isaac Hecker was a 19th-century convert to Catholicism who became a priest and founded the American religious order known as the Paulists. He may have summed it up best. Religion, said Hecker, helps you to 'connect and correct.' You are invited into a community to connect with one another and with a tradition. At the same time, you are corrected when you need to be. And you may be called to correct your own community – though a special kind of discernment and humility is required in those cases.

Religion can lead people to do terrible things. At its best, though, religion modifies our natural tendency to believe that we have all the answers. So despite what many detractors say, and despite the arrogance that sometimes infects religious groups, religion at its best introduces humility into your life.

Religion also reflects the social dimension of human nature. Human beings naturally desire to be with one another, and that desire extends to worship. It's natural to want to worship together, to gather with other people who share your desire for God, and to work with others to fulfil the dreams of your community.

Experiencing God also comes through personal interactions within the community. Sure, God communicates through private, intimate moments – as in prayer or reading of sacred texts – but sometimes God enters into relationships with us through others in a faith community. Finding God often happens in the midst of a community – with a 'we' as often as an 'I.' For many people this is a church, a synagogue or a mosque. Or more broadly, religion.

Finally, religion means that your understanding of God and the spiritual life can more easily transcend your individual understanding and imagination. Do you imagine God as a stern judge? That's fine – if it helps you draw closer to God or to become a more moral person. But a religious tradition can enrich your spiritual life in ways that you might not be able to discover by yourself.

Here's an example: One of my favourite images of God is the 'God of Surprises,' which I first encountered in the novitiate. My own idea of God at the time was limited to God the Far Away, so it was liberating

to hear about a God who surprises, who waits for us with wonderful things. It's a playful, even fun, image of God. But I would have never come up with it on my own.

It came to me from David, my spiritual director, who had read it in a book of that same title, by an English Jesuit named Gerard W. Hughes, who borrowed it from an essay by the German Jesuit Karl Rahner.

That image was amplified when I read the conclusion of one of the great modern spiritual novels, *Mariette in Ecstasy*. Ron Hansen, an award-winning writer who is also an ordained Catholic deacon, penned the story of the religious experiences of a young nun in the early 1900s, loosely based on the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the French Carmelite. At the end of the story, Mariette, who has left the monastery many years before, writes to her former novice mistress, and assures her that God still communicates with her.

We try to be formed and held and kept by him, but instead he offers us freedom. And now when I try to know his will, his kindness floods me, his great love overwhelms me, and I hear him whisper, Surprise me.

My image of the God who surprises and the God who waits for surprises came from three Jesuit priests and the religious imagination of a Catholic writer.

In other words, that idea was given to me by religion.

Overall, being spiritual and being religious are *both* part of being in relationship with God. Neither can be fully realised without the other. Religion without spirituality becomes a dry list of dogmatic statements divorced from the life of the spirit. This is what Jesus warned against. Spirituality without religion can become a self-centred complacency divorced from the wisdom of a community. That's what I'm warning against.

*This is an extract from The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything by James Martin SJ (HarperOne, 2010).*