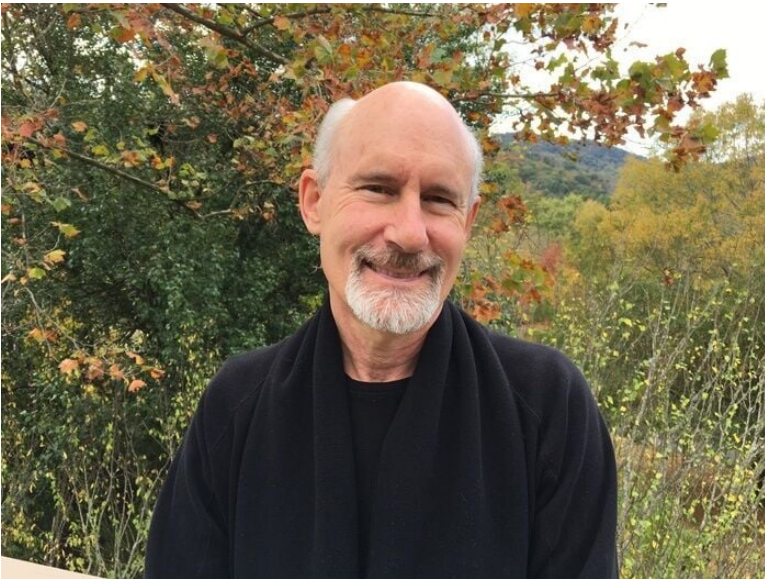


https://www.blackbeltnewsnetwork.com/religion/friendly-freethinker-does-spiritual-but-not-religious-make-sense/article_ce025efc-41bd-452f-9ade-836482b0318b.html

Friendly Freethinker: Does “Spiritual but not Religious” Make Sense?

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I enjoy a good challenge, especially when it comes to questions of faith and freethought. A reader suggested I write a column on his sense that a person can be “spiritual” without being religious. Since this popular subject comes up so often I thought it might be good to address it again, from my own perspective.

The reader—we'll call him Matt—says he is not religious “in the sense that I don't believe in the literal truth of any of the myths of any faith -- the existence of god (or any other supernatural beings), an afterlife, miracles.” That's certainly clear enough. After hearing a statement like this, I wonder how a person can still use any non-natural word like “spiritual.” Yet, he goes on to attempt a description of what he means.

"Spirituality in my view as a humanist, is a matter of what we feel, how we perceive the world [and others] and what we value ...” Now, feeling is something we can talk about—our very human emotions that often guide what we think and believe, and how we behave. This is completely understandable, and a good context for discussing claims of “spiritual experience.”

Matt continues his explanation: “To my mind, spiritual practices (such as meditation, nature and art appreciation exercises, charitable work, spiritual rituals, etc.) promote the types of feelings I mean. . .” He thinks people ought to do these things without leaning on “religious stories and superstitions, beliefs or “faiths.” Here I would agree with him, though I'm still unclear what makes these activities essentially “spiritual.”

My fundamental issue with this is that everyone defines “spiritual” in a different, personal way. That's fine, but we need to begin by digging back to the origin of the word. “Spirit” often meant wind or breath in the ancient world (at

least in biblical Hebrew “ruach” and Greek “pneuma”). For the Stoic philosophers, spirit, soul, breath, life were all pretty much identical, and inseparable from the Universe, Nature, Reason, God (or gods). In other words, we can get rather “squishy” with these concepts. Like describing a walk through fog, our perceptions are clouded and we can’t see clearly, so we (naturally?) try to use descriptive words to describe the indescribable, when the experience is more about using our senses. We try to make sense of what our senses are “telling” us; we feel the need to say something, anything, to give us something to hold onto. For some, this is “God,” for others, “spiritual”; we sense we are a part of the natural experience—it holds meaning for us. We might say “meaning” is the ground beneath the often groundless sense of nebulous terms we grab for like “spirituality.”

Matt believes that “virtually all people have a serious need for the spiritual,” at least as he defines it. He thinks it’s possible to “retain whatever it is that people seek to get from their religious endeavors, without getting ourselves bogged down in the swamps” of imaginary (magical?) thinking. He feels this is “becoming more and more significant as people ... struggle to try to live together with some semblance of mutual respect and regard for a common ethics and morality...” He concludes by saying: “I know I’m asking a lot, but you’ve impressed me as someone with a lot of experience thinking in this area, and I look forward to hearing from you.”

Well, I'm not sure how much I can assist Matt, or anyone else, in these personal decisions, but I did offer a brief reply: "Yes, Matt, that's quite a lot, so here's my rapid response (after thinking over these things for years). You speak of feelings, values, treating others well. My question is, why use the word spiritual at all? If being human is good enough, why can't our human thoughts, emotions and experience be sufficient without adding a "heavy baggage" word that carries notions outside of the natural world (super-natural)? "Spiritual" sounds either light as a feather, or a heavy weight." I followed this with an alternative to "spiritual not religious": "How about "fully human, not religious or spiritual"—this-worldly rather than hint at something behind, beneath, beyond? That doesn't mean you aren't a caring, feeling person, but you aren't distracted by the "add on" words. In my opinion, these are unnecessary and frankly don't communicate much of substance."

My response to Matt aligns with my recent column on the word "God." I don't think we should assume we know what or who someone is talking about when they use the word. The same goes for "spiritual." If someone says they had an experience of beauty, of wonder, that had deep meaning for them, we can be happy for them. But we can't say much more, and maybe they can't either.

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