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Are you religious or spiritual? (Michael Bressemer, Ph.D.)

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Jesus Praying

While getting to know someone you might ask, “Do you go to church?” It is increasingly common to hear the response, “Oh, I’m not religious, but I am spiritual.” Your acquaintance may go on to explain he finds religion to be too hypocritical, legalistic, and full of strife. “Look at all the wars that have been due to

religion!" he exclaims, "And I don't want some preacher telling me how to live my life when he can't follow his own rules!" When asked what he means by being spiritual, the answer is something like, "I believe there is a life-force, I meditate, and occasionally I read books about spirituality; so I don't need religion."

Has religion become passe? Is it valid to separate faith into two opposing camps: religious versus spiritual? Is the Church merely a religious institution? To answer these questions, it is important to: (1) define and contrast what is meant by being religious and by being spiritual; (2) look within the Gospels to see what Jesus taught and modeled; and, (3) have an appropriate understanding of the role the Church plays in our Orthodox Faith.

Religious

A typical dictionary definition of "religious" is: *devotion to a superhuman controlling power, a god, entitled to obedience and worship*. You have to believe in a deity in order to be religious, and "devotion" implies having made a commitment to an ongoing relationship with that deity. Whenever there is a formal relationship there has to be "rules" (laws, disciplines, duties) to maintain a beneficial coexistence. You have to worship and obey God in a particular manner in order to receive God's blessings. Eventually the rules get codified, and the canons by necessity become organized and institutionalized. In the process, you give up some freedom when you become religious; this is what St. Paul meant in being "a slave of Christ" (1 Corinthians 7:22). The antonym for being religious is "secularism:" involvement solely with the affairs of the world, the temporal, and the mundane.

Was Jesus Christ religious? He was circumcised a Jew (Luke 2:21) and received a Jewish religious education (Luke 2:46). He taught at the synagogues (Matthew 13:54) and attended the religious holidays in Jerusalem (John 2:23). He upheld the Mosaic law and prophetic teachings, and He instructed others to also keep the commandments of God (Matthew 5:17-20, 7:12). He encouraged those He healed to offer the Mosaic ritual sacrifice (Matthew 8:4). He affirmed that people must obey their religious leaders (Matthew 23:3) and pay the temple tax (Luke 20:25; 21:1-4). He was tried as a Jew (John 18:12-14, 19-24) and was buried according to Jewish religious tradition (John 19:38-42). Jesus also instituted with His followers new religious practices like Baptism (Matthew 3:13-17) and the Eucharist (Matthew 26:26-29). There should be no question that Jesus was religious.

Spiritual

A typical dictionary definition of “spiritual” is: *being concerned with the spirit—the metaphysical, incorporeal, immaterial, ultimate, ideal, etc.* You can be spiritual without believing in a deity; instead, you can believe in ghosts, witchcraft, ESP, reincarnation, universal love, etc. Also “concerned” in the above definition is merely an intellectual interest or awareness to something. You can acknowledge the truth of a spiritual principle but not necessarily strive to make it an ongoing rule in your life. Therefore, you do not have to follow any particular system of behavior when being spiritual; there are seemingly no set moral constraints. You may try to develop a particular lifestyle in accordance with your spiritual beliefs, but you’re accountable to no one except yourself. Consequently, there is a lot of freedom to being spiritual—believe and act in whatever way you deem is right. The antonym for being spiritual is “materialism:” involvement with the gathering of wealth, sensual experiences, and physical comfort.

Was Jesus Christ spiritual? He went beyond just keeping religious laws and taught that your attitude and character are just as important as your behavior (e.g., “You heard it said. . . , but I tell you. . . .”—Matthew 5:21-48). He said it is what is within rather than outside of us that makes us unclean (Mark 7:17-23). He taught the spiritual disciplines—like alms giving, prayer, and fasting—in ways contrary to the showy style popular amongst the religious teachers of that time (Matthew 6:1-18). He was against the idolatrous pursuit of wealth and being materialistic (Matthew 6:19-24; 8:20; 19:21), so He opposed the luxurious and comfortable life many of the religious leaders had (Matthew 23:6,25). He cleansed the temple of merchants which was contrary to what religious leaders had allowed (John 2:13-17). He spoke against the self-serving and hypocritical practices of the religious leaders in general (Matthew 23). He gleaned and healed on the Sabbath—both considered “work” and therefore contrary to Jewish religious tradition (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:1-11). Though His primary mission was to His fellow Jews, Jesus associated with and helped: tax collectors, Romans, Samaritans, lepers, and others who were “outside” of typical Jewish religious acceptance. So, yes, by our modern definition Jesus was spiritual.

However, Our Lord didn’t directly delineate religiosity versus spirituality. It is more accurate to view Jesus as trying to reform Judaism while also establishing the kingdom of God. Yet it is instructive to see by the definitions given above that Jesus was incorporating a life where both religious practice and spiritual understanding were embraced. He never

abandoned Jewish religion for a life of pure spirituality, nor did He so toe the

religious line that He exhorted external behavioral perfection (i.e., Pharisaical legalism) without internal spiritual transformation.

Religion and Spirituality Compared

The Church Fathers never separated spirituality from religion. When they used the word “spiritual” it was in reference to “life in the Holy Spirit” rather than our modern definition of being interested in the immaterial. The Church Fathers also didn’t separate religion into physical and non-physical; they thought any division of the body from the spirit was non-Orthodox as it denied the incarnation. True spirituality is always incorporated into the life of the Church; the great litany of the Divine Liturgy addresses both man’s material and immaterial needs. So up until the modern era, religion and spirituality were a mated couple. How did they become divorced? Over time, various criticisms were leveled at religion provoking people to look for spirituality apart from the Church; three of those criticisms will be discussed below. Also presented will be how practicing spirituality without religion also garners criticism.



Orthodox Church

(1) The religious hold to an *institutionalized* creed and canons that all within the religion are held accountable to follow. Often the religious will get criticized for having beliefs and practices that are rigidly legalistic or over-defined—seeming governing every minute aspect of life. The religious are also judged for not being able to live up to all their rules despite years of church attendance and

indoctrination; therefore, sometimes the religious are seen as being insincere about their beliefs and the clergy are viewed as being hypocritical.

In reaction to the above, the spiritual want an *individually* defined creed that there is little or no external accountability to. They want the freedom to define their beliefs and practices as strict or loose as they deem fit. Yet in the process the spiritual are criticized for having beliefs that are poorly formulated, confusing, or contradictory. This is because their beliefs are often chosen smorgasbord style from any number of different theologies and philosophies. Also, due to the private, non-accountable creed of the spiritual, they are sometimes judged as being wishy-washy: they change their beliefs depending on the popular guru of the moment or some new discovery made from their spiritual reading.

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(2) The religious are sometimes perceived as being *exclusive* of others who don't share their beliefs and practices. They are seen as rejecting of, sometimes violently, those who hold to a different religion or who in some way don't fit into their social sphere. However, moral exclusivity—intolerance to sinful behavior—is a good thing: it tends to uphold traditional or conservative values which are necessary for the well-being of families and communities.

Because the spiritual tend to believe whatever they want, they see themselves as being non-judgmental *inclusive* of others. They usually accept people's differing spiritual beliefs and practices, because in their thinking "all roads go to god." Yet, because of the freedom and inclusion orientation of the spiritual, they tend to be more morally non-traditional or liberal and so tolerate behavior that can be detrimental to the well-being of the individual or society.

(3) The religious may pride themselves in being committed to their local church, and faithfully volunteering to do charitable and educational endeavors within their community. However, they are sometimes judged as blindly doing what is religiously required of them without full understanding or conviction. Their motive may be a need for social acceptance or status. The religious are sometimes viewed as being overly concerned with raising money and increasing church attendance—*horizontal growth*—than the virtuous transformation of their character.

Conversely, the spiritual may pride themselves as being more active in developing their beliefs. They zealously tend to research and study information about various spiritual interests, and they are open to trying a variety of spiritual experiences. However, their motive can purely be out of a desire to achieve some type of

“spiritual high”—an ecstatic, transcendent, or mystical experience. The spiritual are often seen as being overly concerned with their own enlightened knowledge—*vertical growth*—than directly improving their communities (i.e., “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good”).

Both the religious and the spiritual have their pros and cons. What is needed is a balance where the benefits of religion and spirituality are reunited. Can the Church exemplify a “religious spirituality” or a “spiritual religiousness?”

The Church as both Religious and Spiritual

Ideally the Church, as the visible icon of Christ, is both religious and spiritual. She upholds both “devotion” to God as well as “concern” for spiritual matters. The Church exhorts corporate worship and obedience to religious duties, as well as encouraging individual wrestling with understanding and developing the Faith. She leads us both by consensus (corporate religious accountability) as well as by conscience (individual spiritual conviction). Growth is horizontal and vertical. Socially, She is exclusive when it comes to matters of morality and safeguarding the truth, but inclusive when it comes to caring for people regardless of race or creed. Therefore, the true Church is both conservative and liberal. The *first response* you give to those who are anti-religious is that when the Church is fully exemplifying our Lord and Savior, She is both religious and spiritual.

Unfortunately, over the centuries the Church has sometimes failed to accurately portray itself to the populace in the above ways. As an institution governed by the frailty of men, the Church has at times been overly religious, with all its negative connotations, rather than also being spiritual. The pharisaical religious milieu of Jesus’ time reflects an insincere, pretentious, self-righteous form of faith that is lacking in spiritual depth, grace, and humility (Matthew 23:13-36). However,

you can have profound spiritual experiences without pleasing God through keeping religious commandments. St. Paul wrote of the Israelites:

“Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness” (1 Corinthians 10:1-5).

Yet regardless of how imbalanced the Church may be at times, the New Testament clearly states we are not submitting to God if we do not participate in the Church

(Hebrews 10:25). The Church is the “body” of Christ, and our Lord is Her head (Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 1:18,24). You cannot separate spirituality from religion without decapitation! The Apostle Paul united both religion and spirituality when he stated: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?” and “He who unites himself with the Lord is one with Him in spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:15,17). Your *second response* to those who would denigrate the Bride of Christ (Revelations 19:7-8) as a religious institution is: there is no unity, wholeness, and accountability to the Faith (John 17:20-23; Ephesians 4:1-4) if people are being spiritual without also being religious.

Finally, how do you respond to the charge that the Church is too “hypocritical, legalistic, and full of strife?” The expectations placed upon the Church needs to be more realistic. Within Scripture, religion was seen as being *practical* (e.g, James 1:26-27). There are two connotations to something that is practical: (1) As a tool, the Church’s effectiveness is dependent on the one who wields it. Church leaders do not always direct the Church as She was intended to be used. Tools can be abused, and in the wrong hands tools can also be weapons. (2) The Christian life is something that is practiced rather than being right every time it is applied. People grow in the Faith in the same way people grow physically. It is unrealistic to expect people going to church would automatically have perfected behavior. Would you expect a child to instantly develop a perfect athletic physique, who could seriously contend for a gold medal in the Olympic decathlon, after only a short time of competing at track and field events? Yet, even after becoming full-grown adults, people still have physical mishaps—do something awkward, clumsy, or accidental. In the same way, even the most advanced in the Faith, including our Church leaders, occasionally stumble and fall.

The *third response* to those that dismiss being involved in the Church is that associating with Her is not for the faint-hearted; true religion is definitely not for the cowardly or lazy. Just as in marriage, being involved in the Church can be very difficult at times; She can be exasperating and exhausting. Yet the Church is where you put all your religious behavior and spiritual principles into practice: going to church is where your faith is worked out (Philippians 2:12; James 2:14-17) and where you become trained in righteousness (Hebrews 12:7-11). Can you become a decathlete and avoid the track field? No! Neither can you persevere in winning the spiritual race (1 Corinthians 9:24-27) without attending your local Orthodox parish (Hebrews 12:1).

In summary, can you be spiritual without being religious? Not if you are an Orthodox Christian and understand the necessity for both. The true Church

exemplifies both religion and spirituality: She is where we obey God's will to be unified in the Faith, and through our relationship with Her we grow into maturity, completion, and Christ-likeness. The Church was God's plan all along for His creation. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to His eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:10-11, NIV).