

The Divorce between Spirituality and Religion

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Spiritual Seekers, True Believers

Steve and Julie, a young California couple with two small children, looked back six years to the time in their lives when they first decided to go "church shopping."

Julie was born into a military family in the deep South in the early 1970s. Her parents sent her to the local Southern Baptist Sunday school, and to Bible class on Wednesday nights. When she was ten, Julie's dad was transferred to California and the family pulled up their roots. One of the torn roots was religion. Julie stopped going to church when her family moved to the Golden State.

Steve had no church to leave. He was born in Southern California in the early 1970s and raised in a loving, middle-class, "unchurched" family. His grandfather had been a conservative Methodist minister in the Midwest, but Steve's father was a "preacher's kid" who moved to California in the 1960s and left organized religion behind. Steve's mother was half Jewish, half Protestant, but as an adult had no particular interest in either faith.

When Steve and Julie met in high school, church was the last thing on their minds. Partying was high on the list. "I wasn't really living life like I should, but I still remember praying," Julie said. "One day I asked Steve if he believed in God, and he said he didn't think so. That seemed so weird to me."

Their life together took a dramatic change when Julie became pregnant and at age twenty the couple found themselves with a son. "Having a kid changed everything," Julie recalled. "It made me think how I wanted my kids to grow up, and what I wanted them to believe. I decided I had to learn more so I could teach them."

As an experiment, Steve and Julie went to the Protestant church down the street from their apartment. They were the youngest people at the service. No one talked to them. They didn't go back.

Steve started asking his friends and family questions about religion. His uncle gave him a book about Buddhism. A guy at work invited him to a Baha'i service, and he dragged Julie along.

"That freaked me out," she said. "I mean, they were nice people, but thinking Steve would get into that just freaked me out. It made me start to think about what I believed."

Julie was the child of Southern Baptists, but the couple felt little loyalty to that denomination. Steve certainly wasn't going to join the local Methodist church just because his grandfather was a minister in that faith. Their decision on what congregation to join had little to do with doctrine, and lots to do with the kind of music played, child care offered, and the feel of Sunday worship. They shopped for a church like they would shop for a car, looking for something comfortable and practical.

They were also looking for someone to marry them.

"We were both out looking for a church, messed up, and had no idea what we were doing," Julie recalled. "I guess the low point was when I went to see this one Baptist preacher. I told him I grew up in the Baptist Church. He asked me about Steve. I said he was kind of Methodist, kind of Jewish, kind of nothing. This preacher told us we shouldn't get married because we were of different faiths. Can you believe it! Here I am, twenty years old, an unwed mother, and he says we shouldn't get married! It was embarrassing. I felt ashamed. I just ran out of his church."

Amazingly, that experience did not sour Steve and Julie on church shopping. They soon found a church that accepted them for who they were, welcomed them into the fold, and helped them down the Christian path.

We'll get back to their story several more times in our book, when we talk about how Americans settle into a religious congregation, and how they grow in their faith, applying their beliefs to the world around them. But let's first consider the story of Miriam, a single woman old enough to be Julie's mother. Born in the middle of the baby boomer generation, Miriam is someone who may never settle into a religious congregation, a seeker who may never "find it."

Her first memory of organized religion is a bitter one, from when her parents sent her to Hebrew school in Brooklyn. This is how Miriam, the granddaughter of a Sephardic rabbi, remembers one of the first prayers she learned in school: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who hath not made me a woman."

"Talk about invalidation," she steams. "I got that totally distorted conditioning of the Jewish religion that God is a vengeful God, to be feared."

Miriam's old ideas about God and spirituality were blown away one weekend in college, when she swallowed a dose of LSD on a lonely mountaintop. "Until then, I thought of God as an entity that existed someplace else, separate from creation," she recalled. "That LSD trip gave me my first experience of divinity inside my own being. It was absolutely orgasmic, as if every cell was thrilled."

Her curiosity sparked, Miriam began reading books on Buddhism and Taoism, and others written by Ram Dass, the bearded and beaded icon of 1960s counter-culture. Her spiritual journey continued with a correspon-

dence course with the Self-Realization Fellowship of Swami Paramahansa Yogananda. That was followed by what Miriam calls her "Christian era," when this Jewish girl from Brooklyn joined a metaphysical Christian sect in San Francisco.

Two years later, Miriam traveled to India, changed her name, and became a follower of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the Indian guru who would later move to America and start a controversial commune in rural

Oregon.

"There was lots of criticism from people saying I was just jumping from one group to another," Miriam admits. "But this is all beyond the mind's consideration. It's the energetic link between you and the divine."

America has always been a spiritual melting pot, a place where believers claim the right to invent new theologies, to grow their own religion. It says so in the first line of the First Amendment of the Constitution and has been noted by social commentators throughout U.S. history.

In the new millennium, there will be a growing gap between personal spirituality and religious institutions. Religious beliefs and spirituality have traditionally been viewed as the province of churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques. Yet spirituality and religious faith are increasingly viewed as individual, private matters with few connections to congregation and community. Gallup polls show that seven in ten Americans believe that one can be religious without going to church. Clergy and denominational leaders dolefully note rampant individualism even among members of their own congregations. They are particularly concerned about the growing number of "seekers"-those who have dropped out or never became institutionally involved, despite a keen personal interest in spirituality.

Most of the world's religions began with individuals and their perceived encounter with the sacred. All faiths, no matter how communal and collective they eventually become, are based on revelations that were initially directed toward individuals, whether it was God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses, Jesus starting his ministry with a small group of followers, Allah revealing the Koran to Mohammed, or Buddha gaining enlightenment and bringing his teaching to others. It is only after these individual encounters that followers gather to decipher and apply the teachings, institutions are built, and successors are chosen to pass the word along to future generations.

For millennia, religious groups fought to keep spiritual energy contained within a community of faith. Mystics and saints have always clashed with religious institutions when their experiences of spiritual ecstasy transcend established rules and regulations. But North America, especially the United States, may be unique. It is a highly religious *and* strongly individualistic society. Though the country is dotted with communal faiths, and congregation attendance is higher than in other Western societies, the Protestant notion that there should be no mediator between the individual and God runs deep in the American soul.

This split between institutional religious life and private spirituality is especially clear today. The 1960s, which brought the sexual revolution and the breakdown of millions of American families, were also the turning point in this bitter divorce between religion and spirituality. It was the decade that brought no-fault divorce and no-fault religion. Sociologist Phillip Hammond asserts that what happened during the 1960s and 1970s was more than just another form of American religious populism. Though membership in religious congregations has long been voluntary, family ties, peer pressure, and social status traditionally impinged on Americans' religious freedom. The social revolution of "the sixties" elevated the values of free choice and experimentation in the religious marketplace.

Most studies of American baby boomers show declining church attendance and less adherence to church teachings. In a major study of baby boomers' religion, sociologist Wade Clark Roof found that, as children, the baby boom generation was as religiously active as preceding generations. By their early twenties, however, only around one in four boomers was involved in organized religion. This does not mean that most baby boomers became agnostics or atheists. Rather, they adopted a religion tailored to individual preferences and experiences. Roof's survey found that baby boomers view "being alone and meditating" as far more important than "worshiping with others." They are drawn to experiential spirituality, which "places primacy not on reason, not even on belief systems, but rather on a mystical experiential stance." This divorce between religion and spirituality will be experienced differently in various parts of the nation. Regional differences have not been completely flattened out by the mass media and nationwide franchises, especially in American religion. In a study of the four U.S. regions represented by the states of North Carolina (the South), Massachusetts (New England), Ohio (the Midwest), and California (the Far West), Phillip Hammond finds that North Carolina has the least amount of religious individualism, while Massachusetts and California have the most.³ Gallup polls also show the East and West Coasts as incubators of religious individualism. The West Coast ranks high in unchurched people, but continually shows a higher percentage of individuals pursuing spiritual practices such as meditation.

Let's linger for a moment along one stretch of the West Coast, the breathtaking Big Sur coastline in central California, and visit two places that speak volumes about religion and spirituality in the new millennium.

Immaculate Heart Hermitage, a Roman Catholic monastery, chapel, and retreat house, is perched on a bluff a thousand feet above the Pacific Ocean. From here, the sea is an ever-present source of inspiration, its

moods changing with the weather and the tides. Sometimes, when the fog rolls in and rests at the cliffs below, the monastery sits above the clouds, nestled celestially in the lap of the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Solitude is the central experience of the laypeople who come here for spiritual retreat, and for the twenty-five Camaldolese monks who live here all year round. The monks live in twenty-five cinder-block cottages, or "cells," aligned in four rows behind the chapel. Five times a day, starting before sunrise with morning vigils, the monks don white robes and come together in the chapel for praise, prayer, meditation, and Holy Communion.

Several of the monks are true recluses, living in tiny cabins and trailers hidden in the woods behind the compound. Their home is a forest of redwood, oak, and madrone that reaches back into the hills, where all that can be heard are the sounds of streams tumbling to the sea, spraying ferns and gray-green boulders with cool mist.

Anne, one of a dozen guests staying in private rooms in the Immaculate Heart guest house, pauses on her way to evening vespers. She works in San Francisco, a four-hour drive up the coast, as a busy executive with a major clothing company. "My job takes a lot out of me," she says. "If it weren't for this, I probably wouldn't even take a vacation. I live by myself and can find quiet time at home, but there's something about the collective silence here that is amazingly different. Most of the day, we keep silent, and that's very freeing. It lets us slow down, to be in a beautiful place and listen to God's will."

The sun sets and a deep orange glow melts into a distant fog bank.

Warning bells sound for evening vespers. Fifteen monks carrying hymn books walk quietly into the monastery's central chapel. They come together in song-sweet and strong. They and the retreatants file into the chapel rotunda for a half hour of silent contemplation. In the center of the rotunda, beneath a single cross hanging from the ceiling, two small candles illuminate the Blessed Sacrament, which sits atop a plain white table.

After the service, it is dark outside, the sea a silver shield under the moon. It is so quiet that the soft crunch of pebbles under your feet makes soft echoes into the hills. To preserve the stillness, you walk softer, feeling every step.

"Surprising things happen in solitude," explains the Reverend Robert Hale, who first came to Immaculate Heart in 1959, when he was a senior in college and thinking about becoming a monk. "Some people who come here get terrified and leave after the first night. People lead such distracted lives of job, family, television. Many are not aware of how many problems and conflicts, how much unresolved grief, dwells inside them. Others are delighted when they get here, connecting with the prayer, silence, and meditation. It's like coming home to their deepest center, to a God who loves them."⁴

About fifteen miles up the coast from Immaculate Heart Hermitage is another spot that helps us tell the story of religion and spirituality in America. Back in 1962, Michael Murphy and a Stanford University classmate, the late Richard Price, started an experiment at an old hot-springs resort at Big Sur. They called it Esalen, and it became ground zero of the "human potential movement" of the 1960s and 1970s, a blend of spirituality, psychology, massage, and mysticism. "There was an explosion of imitators, many of them right down to the letterhead we used," Murphy recalls. "About five of them made it through the 1980s. Now, it's starting all over again. It's like a second pulse. It's a social invention that's here to stay—a new kind of learning center." At Esalen Institute, today's offerings range from "mind brainwave training" to t'ai chi with Chungliang AI Huang. To many visitors, the place may seem more like a hedonistic mecca than a spiritual retreat. As they have for nearly four decades, naked retreatants soak in the silky radiance of natural hot springs that pour into stone pools cut into the side of the Big Sur cliffs. Nearby, masseuses offer nude body work under a brilliant California sun.

In some ways, Immaculate Heart Hermitage and Esalen Institute seem worlds apart. One is a place of solitude and tradition, the other a center of constant experimentation. If there is anyone who can bring these two worlds together, it's a monk we know named Brother David.

Monk, mystic, and spiritual teacher, Brother David Steindl-Rast divides his time between Immaculate Heart and Esalen, a modern-day circuit rider along one of the world's most spectacular stretches of coastline. Interlocutor in the dialogue between Catholicism and the New Age, Brother David's message blends Christianity, mysticism, and humanistic psychology.

"There is something happening in our time, and one of the most significant shifts is in the realm of religion," he says. "The emphasis is moving from the institution to personal experience. It is happening in people's individual lives on a very large scale, and it is absolutely irreversible. After 2,000 years, the institution has become so rigid and ossified it is collapsing under its own weight."

Brother David is something of an enigma to the Roman Catholic Church. One of the institution's sharpest critics, he is also a man who has brought thousands of lapsed Catholics back into the fold. Born in Vienna in 1926, he has, through his books and lectures, reenvisioned some of the key elements of Christianity in a way that provides new meaning for many Catholics unable to find a place in the institutional church. Prayerfulness becomes mindfulness, an awareness and gratitude for what life brings. Jesus is seen not as a messianic prophet who will return to judge but as a teacher of wisdom.

"When Jesus used scripture from the Hebrew Bible, it was not like the teachers of his time who laboriously interpreted from the text-like the church does today," he says. "Jesus talked about experience, about

daily life. That was such an enormous change in the history of religion-especially in a culture like that in Israel, where the idea of God was so strongly theistic. "

Brother David is a slim man, with a crew cut, angular features, and a close-cropped graying beard. His expression turns serious, almost dour, when he begins to reflect, then softens and brightens with the flow of conversation. Still, Brother David sees a need for tradition and ritual, and warns that many of today's spiritual seekers "get so enamored with the search that there is nothing more than finding."

A rugged simplicity in Brother David's garb speaks of a backwoods hermit. He walks down the long road leading from Immaculate Heart chapel to the coast. It is the first clear day after a long rain, and despite the chill in the air, he is wearing sandals with no socks. A black and well-worn religious vest, tied at the side of his waist, identifies him as a monk.

"When I talk about a shift to 'personal experience,' I don't mean 'private,'" he says. "'Personal' is defined in terms of your relations-it is community-related and community-imbedded. You become a person more deeply through your relations to other persons, your relationship to a community. There is great suffering for people who don't find this community. "

(Cimino Richard & Lattin Don. *Shopping for Faith. American Religion in the New Millennium*, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco 2002, pp. 9 – 17)