



## Religion: A Context for Spirituality

An issue that weaves its way into many conversations these days is the ‘*religion vs. spirituality*’ one. You know the line: “I can worship God without going to church. I hike at Sabino Canyon, watch sunsets at Gates Pass, and ski in Colorado every winter. Communing with nature is my *spiritual* practice.” We also might know, however, that some who boast *religion* lack the depth of *spirit* to make it attractive enough to draw others into the more systematic practice of faith.

I would never deny that one can experience well-being, peace, wholeness, and yes, even the exhilaration of spiritual joy, when encountering nature. It’s happened to me on inland lakes in WI, in the Austrian Alps, and when taking in sunsets at Gates Pass. Somehow we’re transported out of ourselves, feel fully alive, and are drawn into a beauty we did not originate, one that’s beyond us yet gets inside us.

I won’t forget the afternoon of my mother’s funeral. In the morning we communally re-membered both Mom and Jesus’ lives and deaths at a rich, moving liturgy (the *religion* side of it, bolstered by *spirited* music and Word). When relatives had dispersed, I spent a couple of reflective hours with a few friends on the shore of Lake Michigan. It seemed the crashing waves took my pained *spirit* out into the deep with them. This was a *spiritual* experience, fed by the *religious* inspiration of the morning.

Lately I found some wonderful insights about this religion/spirituality “dichotomy- that- need- not- be- a- dichotomy” in Fr. James Martin, SJ’s *THE JESUIT GUIDE TO (ALMOST) EVERYTHING: A SPIRITUALITY FOR REAL LIFE*. He observes that it seems it’s fashionable to be *spiritual* but not *religious* today, and uses the acronym SBNR for those who claim *spirituality* but avoid *religion*. (I know some wonderful SBNR’s; they’re good, honest, and spend themselves serving God’s poor.) Martin says folks today often have the idea that *religion* oppresses and stifles the *spiritual*. He readily admits the ills and evils throughout history caused by misled *religion*, the Inquisition and fanaticism that leads to terrorism among them. But he points to the vast contributions religious tradition has brought, too: love, forgiveness, and faith-based organizations that care for the poor. The moral voice of true *religion* has often successfully challenged a sinful status quo. And I would add the best of *religious* practice (true worship and a sacramental life that leads to just action) grounds and feeds a life of service.

Martin finds that the *worst of spirituality* today is self-indulgent with no room for critique, while the *best of religion* introduces humility into life. Neither *spirituality* nor *religion* can be fully realized without the other, he concludes. I am left wondering: How can *religion* better provide a context of welcome for the expansion of soul that *spirituality* offers, and how can *spirituality* bring a more communal enthusiasm to the table of *religion*?

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