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The \"spiritual but not religious\" debate

Heidi Schlumpf | Sep. 8, 2011 NCR Today

We all know folks who identify as ?spiritual but not religious.? Do you have compassion, tolerance and understanding for their spiritual journeys? Or do you find them immature, shallow and a little bit boring?

A few weeks ago, a United Church of Christ minister, the Rev. Lillian Daniel of Glen Ellyn, Illinois, wrote a blog post entitled ?Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me.? [1] In it, she vents about a recent flight during which a ?spiritual but not religious? person tried to enlighten her about how he can find God in sunsets.

> ?Like people who go to church don't see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building. How lucky we are to have these geniuses inform us that God is in nature. As if we don?t hear that in the psalms, the creation stories and throughout our deep tradition.?

As you can tell, her tone is a bit snide and snarky:

> ?Thank you for sharing, spiritual but not religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.?

She apparently hit a nerve, to judge from the reactions online, but not necessarily from ?spiritual but not religious? (SBNR) people. Instead, it was the ?religious *and* spiritual? contingent that has been debating whether Daniel?s comments are appropriate.

Some unabashedly agree with Daniel, especially other ministers and church employees who often find themselves on the receiving end of a dumping of grievances not aimed at any sort of reconciliation or even true conversation. Writes the Rev. Dr. Victoria Weinstein [2], a Unitarian Universalist:

> ?I love that she dares to express her frustration with people who buttonhole her as a clergywoman and proceed to unload their grievances against the church ?and to declare their emancipation from it ? as a bold and original move that they presume will rock her little Christian world.?

But others felt Daniel?s comments unfairly paint SBNRs with too broad of a brush and that her tone was not worthy of the community she so strongly defends. Another Unitarian Universalist ministe [3]r writes:

> ?I recognize that popular culture and our media thrive on division and bring up ratings using conflict. I think as a religious people we are called to be counter-cultural with regard to the divisive tone that is tearing our culture and our world apart. . . Snarky, derisive behavior and eye-rolling may sell better, but it does not represent our best selves and it does not represent either community or religion at its best.?

Not only do many of us know ?spiritual but not religious? folks, but we may have even been one. There are good reasons to be frustrated with religious communities and to decide to leave them. On the other hand, broad disdain and intolerance for all religion is ironic coming from people who left religion in part because of its

intolerance. (It?s why Bill Maher drives me so crazy.)

I believe in being open to all, but sometimes it?s best to just leave an angry SBNR person alone. I can handle boring, but I won?t allow myself to be emotionally drained and abused. But many who start a conversation with ?I?m spiritual but not religious? are really seeking healing and are truly open to real conversation about faith. Perhaps they are even hoping, deep down, that you will prove them wrong.

A longer version of the Daniel?s reflections ran in *Christian Century* here [4].

What do you all think?

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Links:
[1] http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/spiritual-but-not-religious.html
[2] http://www.peacebang.com/2011/09/04/spiritual-but-not-religious-the-controversy-around-lillian-daniels-column/
[3] http://growinginplace.wordpress.com/2011/09/01/spiritual-but-not-religious-2/
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