

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Insights from Religious Studies and Humanistic Psychology

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As presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Pacific Northwest Division

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a secular and universal definition of “spirituality” derived from the Comparative Study of Religion. That definition is: *Spirituality is the practice of or the experience of reconnecting with something outside of and larger than the self; something that is social, natural and/ or supernatural.* The meaning of these terms is explored in detail. The paper goes on to offer arguments in support of this definition and then explores its coherence with other views on human psychology and religious experience, especially Existential views. It concludes with a discussion of Erich Fromm’s views on an “objective” content for a modern (even secular) spirituality. Particular attention is given to how Fromm’s insights move the understanding forward both in terms of theory and psychological practice, especially if interpreted via the lens of Existentialism.

MAIN TEXT

The fundamental difference between the two primary words comes to light in the spiritual history of primitive man. Already in the original relational event he [the individual] speaks the primary word *I-Thou* in a natural way that precedes what may be termed visualization of forms—that is, before he has recognized himself as *I*. The primary word *I-It*, on the other hand, is made possible at all only by means of this recognition—by means, that is, of the separation of the *I*.
– Martin Buber (*I and Thou*, 2nd edition, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958, 24.)

When I am with bonobos I feel like I have something that I shared with them long ago but forgot. As we have clothed ourselves and separated ourselves we have gained a wonderful society but we have lost the sort of soul to soul connection that they maintain. And it sometimes seems to me that we are both a kind of disadvantaged species....I feel like if I could maintain my abilities and have theirs I would be whole.

– Dr. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh (a senior primatologist, on the show RadioLab, <http://www.radiolab.org/2010/feb/19/kanzi/>)

The Definition

Spirituality is the practice of or the experience of reconnecting with something outside of and larger than the self; something that is social, natural and/ or supernatural.

This is the basic understanding of spirituality I have come to as a scholar who has studied religion and its formal constructions (theology) for the last quarter century. I offer this definition here as a generic, intended to reflect the functional meaning of the word as used in the early 21st Century across the globe. That may sound like a grand claim but is intended more modestly and scholarly. This word is used in highly structured religious contexts and completely unstructured contexts; by the most devout believers and by people who claim no specific religious or metaphysical beliefs.¹ We use this word in all these different contexts and that raises the question of meaning.

One might ask here if anyone has already defined “spirituality,” after all the comparative study of religion is over a century old now. Surely this word has a scholarly definition already! Well, no. Interestingly, neither of the major reference texts in Religious Studies defines “spirituality.” *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (edited by Mircea Eliade, the Father of the Study of the History of Religion) and *The Dictionary of Religion* (edited by Jonathon Z. Smith, the leading religion scholar in the world today) do not have entries for “spirituality.” This is because it is not a term religion scholars generally use outside of specific contexts. It was in the Christian context that the term arose, so the technical treatments often assume Christian Spirituality, and both have entries for that. That usage comes from the Catholic Church and refers to a person’s (often a saint’s) “religious sensibilities.”² The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “spiritual” as: “of, relating to, or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.”³ The terms, “religious sensibilities” or “related to spirit” capture much of what ordinary people seem to mean when they use the word “spirituality.” But that is not the only usage common in

¹ The usage is so broad that, for example, the library research tool ProQuest finds six (6) different scholarly journals that start with the letter A with the word “spirituality” in the title (January 2013). That is just the letter A!

² Jonathan Z. Smith (ed.), *Harper-Collins Dictionary of Religion* (New York: Harper One, 1995), 1023.

³ http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_us1293221#m_en_us1293221.009

the world today. In the west one often hears talk about “spirituality” outside of a religion, some even say they are “spiritual but not religious.” Existential theorist Emmy van Deurzen wrote, “...the spiritual world refers to a person’s connection to the abstract and metaphysical aspects of living.”⁴ It is all of these usages that a definition must include, and so that is the goal here.

In as much as human beings tend to think of ourselves as beings that have a body and a mind (some include soul or spirit) then the dictionary definition really is useful because it refers to some whole sense of what is human.⁵ Spirituality is not just about our physical being (that is medicine) and it is not just our mind or brain (that is psychology) but a wellness of the totality (a notion common to things like yoga or Tai Chi, which are often described as spiritual, as well as some psychology, in particular Erich Fromm and Abraham Maslow for my purposes). A more fruitful approach might be to see what spirituality is not, to set it against a good contrasting term.

Love

In the relevant Philosophical and Psychological literature there is a related concept that provides that vital contrast. That concept is “love.” I will have more to say about this but would like to suggest first that: *Love is interpersonal; Spirituality is transpersonal*. I hold that we need both to have full lives. Abraham Maslow commented decades ago: “We need something ‘bigger than we are’ to be awed by and to commit ourselves to in a new, naturalistic, empirical, non-churchly sense, perhaps as Thoreau and Whitman, William James and John Dewey did.”⁶ He was clearly advocating a non-theistic position, where I am defining spirituality in a way that fits that view and more traditional theistic or metaphysical (in the colloquial sense) views. Let us

⁴ Emmy van Deurzen, *Existential Counseling and Psychotherapy in Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2002), 86.

⁵ I, personally, hold that we not only do not have a soul, we do not even have a self. Self is an experience not a thing. I would agree with the notion that mind is a significant organizing concept but would deny that it is ontologically distinct from brain. More below.

⁶ Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1968), iv

note though that what he said is that human beings need spirituality, as it is here defined (I think that is fair to say). It is also important to note here that both love and spirituality have to do with feelings of connection, either to another or to something beyond the individual. Even when people turn inward (as in some mystical experience) they still refer to something external (something beyond the individual) that is being connected with via this inward turn. By “transpersonal” I have in mind something like what Abraham Maslow seems to have had in mind with the term: states of consciousness beyond the self.⁷ By “love” I have in mind what the Greeks called *agape* (as opposed to *philos* or *eros*; intellectual or erotic love respectively).

Love applies to someone who can love you back. Many mystics talk of love when they speak of the divine, and this usage applies here because that belief holds that the divine does love them back. This shows that individuals may not discriminate in their usage between these terms but I would suggest this difference is a useful way to understand these terms and their relationship. This usage also fits with talk of “god loving humanity” as humans can love their god back. Eric Fromm said, “Love is possible only if two persons communicate with each other from the center of their existence....”⁸ What I want to insist is most useful to notice about all this is that the word “love” is used to indicate the reciprocal nature of the feeling of connection, where “spiritual” is used to indicate a non-reciprocal feeling of connection, or reconnection. Again from Fromm, “The religious form of love, that which is called the love of God, is, psychologically speaking, no different.”⁹ I am separating these things for analytic purposes but in experience they may not be separable. For example, nature cannot “love” us back, but we can

⁷ Maslow used the term in his 1969 article, “Theory Z”. It can be found in: *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), see page 28 for definition. He also founded the Association for Transpersonal Psychology in 1969.

⁸ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Bantam Books, 1956), 86.

⁹ Fromm, 1956, 53.

have “spiritual” experiences in nature. Further this feeling, to be called spiritual, includes a component of awe, as Maslow suggested. This is something Rudolf Otto (a pivotal figure in the history of the study of comparative religion, and one of Eliade’s teachers) also held was vital to all religious experience.¹⁰ Here I am suggesting that spirituality is the experiential level at which Otto’s talk of the *numinous* or the holy should be understood.

One might next ask about the relationship between “Spirituality” and “Religion.” Spirituality is context specific and relates to ultimate meaning, so is important to religion. In that sense the two are intimately connected since religion provides definitions of ultimate reality. Spirituality is an experience word (it is about feelings) used to discuss ultimate reality and connections to it or some vital part of it. I hold that both religion and spirituality are universal (as scholarly understood in both cases). We find what the social sciences call religion throughout human history and across all human cultures. Keep in mind here that the social sciences do not mean “belief in things that can’t be proven” as the definition of religion. The most famous definition of religion in the social sciences is from an Anthropologist named Clifford Geertz:

. . . a religion is: a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.¹¹

Note that Geertz uses the phrase “conceptions of a general order of existence.” I have shown in an earlier work that this conception – this worldview – is three fold: emotional, existential and social.¹² We all need this sort of basic understanding of the world to function,¹³ and it is a

¹⁰ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958)

¹¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

¹² I first argued a version of this point in: Richard Curtis, “The Essence of Religion: Homo Religiosus in a Dialectical Material World,” **Nature, Society, and Thought**, 11, no. 3 (1998): 311-330.

¹³ van Deurzen wrote: “Every person has an implicit worldview” (87).

curious lesson from history that we need not believe only things that are true. Humans have believed all sorts of things that we later discover are not true, and often they got along fine. The trick is for the beliefs to be functional in context, and that leaves a lot of room for variation.

Put more specifically, Ira Zepp (who was an important teacher in the field and former student of Eliade) described the scholarly view this way:

This [analysis] of religion transcends the normal understanding. I am concerned with the religious person—*homo religiosus*—the tendency of human beings to re-link, re-bind, re-connect, and re-concile themselves with each other and nature. This is precisely what the Latin “re-ligare” (from which the English word “religion” is derived) means. Whenever people are in the process of restoring life to wholeness, integration and unity, they are engaging in religious activity.¹⁴

While not disputing Zepp’s usage it does seem that many people have come to see this reconnection as an aspect of spirituality (I am claiming spirituality is an aspect of religion, in the generic, but can be understood on its own terms as I am doing here). In Zepp’s understanding this is the core activity of all religion. I am here suggesting that the word “spirituality” be used to refer to the emotional sphere of religion, to this “reconnecting” and “restoring” rather than religion itself (given the confusion with religion colloquially thought of as “believing things one can’t prove”). This does not mean I am trying to say that religion and spirituality are not connected, only that differentiating the terms is analytically useful. Spirituality is a core interest of the religions around the world (now that the word has wide usage). In psychology the view is:

When people recover their inner connectedness to something greater than themselves, to some ideal which will lift them beyond their everyday struggles, a new motivation flows inside of them, which can carry them through difficulties with unerring purposefulness.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *The New Religious Image of Urban America: The Shopping Mall as Ceremonial Center*, 2nd ed. (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 14.

¹⁵ van Deurzen, 87.

I also don't mean to claim here that "reconnecting with something larger" is the core activity of every religion, or should be seen as definitive. Rather I mean to say it is something modern people would seem to agree is useful and something we have come to see as part of the activity of various religions around us as they act in the world. Of course some people are very critical of what organized religion does, and with good reason. I mean to point to positive aspects and potentials. This reconnecting is something that religion facilitates ideally, and something many people have come to see as vital regardless of religion. I think it is vital for all people just as I think all people have key aspects of religion in common with religious people – we all need a reasonably coherent worldview to get by.

In some sense the formal job description of the clergy is to facilitate reconnections. Theology provides content for an understanding of self, world and society, but the clergy actualize those ideas in the lives of people. In the modern world we also have the development of chaplains as reconnection specialists, and most interestingly the formalization of this as a professional quasi-freelance role (freelance in that patients, for a Hospital Chaplain, come and go where a congregation stays). Chaplains are like social workers for spirituality.

Reconnecting

There is, I think, a sense of self that we experience and seek to nurture and protect. I don't believe it is a thing, but rather it is an experience of consciousness encountering the world.¹⁶ It would seem that higher orders of intelligence and consciousness required mediating structures and so evolution had to develop those for intelligence to proceed. The result is that we each have a sense of self. Again, this sense is not of a thing but it is organized to seem like a thing. "I am a self!" No, actually "I" am an experience a particular embodied brain is having.

¹⁶ See: Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1991).

Producing this experience is a core activity of that brain. Consciousness actually is the monitoring and reporting of brain activity not the mediation or control of brain activity.¹⁷ It is vital to how we live, as human beings. We protect it. We nurture it, when we can, but usually not enough. This nurturing is what I mean by an experience of reconnecting to something larger. It needs to be done personally and socially, since we are social creatures of a particularly complex sort.¹⁸

Reconnection is accomplished through experiences of felt intimacy between the self and other, a something other that is worthy – vital as judged by the individual or the tradition. I have this sense of myself and you have it of yourself, and how we have it is culturally as well as genetically conditioned. We are genes interacting with a culture, organized to have a sense of individuality in community (some cultures emphasize one more than the other but both are vital). We feel most connected (in a way, most in touch with that self) in what Abraham Maslow called “Peak Experiences.”¹⁹ Peak Experiences are those in which time seems to stand still, thus Maslow describes them in terms of “being” rather than our usual mode of “becoming”.²⁰ We are “in the moment” and that moment is felt timeless. These are moments when we feel connected to a larger reality, or are that reality, or enveloped by that reality (the experience may be framed religiously by believers and called god). Often in these moments the sense of isolated self can drop away and we seem to experience reality more purely – a directly felt connection or participation. Dr. Savage-Rumbaugh, quoted at the top, referred to “soul to soul connection.” The “I” becomes a “we” and in that experience the self has ceased being the central focus of

¹⁷ I would like to thank William Harms, PhD (a brilliant contemporary philosopher of science) for that terminology.

¹⁸ See: Daniel Siegel, *The Developing Mind*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford, 2010). His work focuses on the neurobiology of relationships, how our brains naturally are wired to be in community.

¹⁹ See: Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*.

²⁰ Maslow, 26.

experience. In love the meaning of the experience is the other; where in spirituality the meaning is the felt reconnection – both involve an “I” becoming more aware of a “we” (which can be the “I” being enveloped in a larger totality or the “I” connecting with another “I”). The “we” that often matters to us is not a social “we” but a cosmic one (the “we” is “me” participating in the divine or ultimate reality).

In spiritual experiences we often seek out experiences of losing the self, even though that self is vital to ordinary functioning. All manner of mystics, seekers and chemical experimenters work hard at losing something nature worked out over many eons, and they seem to be doing something good for themselves and for us in doing it (as an example of what is possible, when the motive is spiritual and not selfish, of course). Humans simply value that felt connection or envelopment, especially if it results in a felt disappearance or dissolving of the self (ego) into an experience that people might describe as “pure being” or “god.” In some Eastern thought this description sounds like a discussion of losing the ego. It is a curious irony that by being in touch with that experience of self in relationship to a larger reality, the sense of the self can drop away. I think what is happening is that the lens of self through which we generally experience reality has actually dropped away and we are aware of what seems to be a more pure perception. The problem is a difficulty in communicating the experience. I would suggest this is because what is called “me” is actually an organizing principle that is experienced, as mentioned above. To communicate the experience would require a vocabulary to describe how this experience affects “me” but that “me” has been enveloped in the experience. These moments are therefore difficult to communicate, by their nature.

Some Complicating Factors

I often comment to my wife about a feeling I have that the universe wants us to be together. Our history is a bit rocky and so that phrase has special meaning and captures a profound feeling that I have about her and the place she occupies in my life. Does the universe want us to be together? No. It doesn't care – about anything. I feel as if certain things are just true. We all do. That sounds crass and believers will want to interject that their feeling is something more, but I would here refer them to Friedrich Schleiermacher (the Father of Modern Protestant Theology) and his feeling language.²¹ The believer takes some of those feelings to be more than feelings. I do not. But feelings still matter, if not to the universe then to us. This is the deep emotional life that is referred to in the concept spirituality. It is problematic when we are not careful about what we take to be important to us versus true about the world.

This is not a new observation on my part.²² Nor are replies to it.²³ The most common reply is an appeal to the importance certain feelings have for us. This is sensible on the face of it, but cannot be taken as license to accept any feeling as true just because it feels important. My colleague Bill Harms shows his students the Heaven's Gate web site to make this point when he teaches the issue. Heaven's Gate was a cult the members of which all committed suicide together in the late 1990's. They believed they would not die, but they are dead. The feelings were, in William James' language, "live, forced and momentous." And the people having those feelings were wrong to accept them as more than feelings – dead wrong.

²¹ Schleiermacher focused on the term "Utter Dependence" in his book *The Christian Faith* (London: T & T Clark, 1928).

²² W.K. Clifford's "Ethics of Belief" for example. Available at:
http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/w_k_clifford/ethics_of_belief.html

²³ William James's "Will to Believe" for example. Available at:
<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~omearawm/ph101willtobelieve.html>

We must balance the importance of our feelings with a healthy dose of skepticism about the often spurious nature of their obvious interpretation. Do I feel that the universe wants my wife and me together or is that just a verbal expression of a feeling, an emotional experience? Obviously the latter. What is the real feeling, unclouded by language? At times this has been a big debate in the study of mysticism but I think it is obvious from neuroscience that by the time a thought is conscious it has been through memory and language centers and does not exist for us absent language. So what is the feeling really? Hard to say, but I am pretty sure my linguistic framing of it is culturally bound and poetic, not veridical. But it is still very, very important. This is the point. True and important do not go together necessarily. What do I learn from my feelings? How do I interpret them in a productive way? Those questions can be more important than “are they true?” However the balance is vital. My feelings want to run wild in a world that has real risks, so they cannot just run wild. That said, I don’t have a formula to offer here, just this suggestion to be “epistemologically humble.” This is advice I give my students in all sorts of contexts. We feel certain things are vital but if those things cannot be proven then we must be humble about the power of the feeling.

A few years ago there was a film adaptation done of the book, “Into the Wild.” The central character leaves modernity behind to spend a summer alone in the wilds of Alaska. The story ends badly, but at a vital moment in the film this character writes in his journal, “Happiness requires others” (or something to that extent). It is a stirring moment in the film, and a very important insight. Sigmund Freud famously observed that people need love and work to be happy (something to do and people to care for and be cared by). Erich Fromm wrote a great deal about love.²⁴ In modern psychology a new idiom from the neurosciences is in the ascendancy

²⁴ Fromm, *Art of Loving*, especially.

and so the talk shifts. Daniel Siegel (mentioned above) talks about this in neurobiological terms. In his work there is a triad between body, brain and relationships. Freud and Fromm could not have known how deep this need for connection goes, this being formed in relationships is for human beings. We know now that it is vital and “soul to soul connection” or “love” are both good ways of describing it.

There is a long standing view – especially in religion – that there is something broken about human beings. In *The Symposium* Plato has Aristophanes say:

And the reason is that human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love. There was a time, I say, when we were one, but now because of the wickedness of mankind God has dispersed us, as the Arcadians were dispersed into villages by the Lacedaemonians. And if we are not obedient to the gods, there is a danger that we shall be split up again and go about in basso-relievo, like the profile figures showing only one half the nose which are sculptured on monuments, and that we shall be like tallies. Wherefore let us exhort all men to piety in all things, that we may avoid evil and obtain the good, taking Love for our leader and commander.²⁵

What most scholars seem to think he was explaining is sexuality but a more general insight seems to resonate across the ages. Christians call this “The Fall,” but there are versions of it in all or almost all religions. This is not a logical necessity for religion so its universality is a curious feature (my guess is that having an intrinsic particular problem to solve makes any specific religion seem relevant and so it is perpetuated). For most, fixing this brokenness is their core activity; and what is left unresolved is whether this feeling of brokenness is itself innate or a curiously common cultural phenomenon – but either way it calls out to be resolved or at least managed. Buddhists want to teach people to give up their attachment to the experienced self. Jews want to make peace between that self and society. Muslims see the solution in devotion, or submission to guidance (literally submission to the will of Allah). Each is, arguably, solving a

²⁵ Plato, *The Symposium*, <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/sym.htm>, (this URL links to Aristophanes’ speech, the quote is the fourth paragraph from the bottom).

version of the same problem.²⁶ Martin Buber (above) discussed this problem in a way that seemed to have been popular in his time. From his work, and others, we get the sense that this problem is largely to do with the individuation of the human self, presumably as a result of the complexities of consciousness, or culture, or both combined. Fromm claimed that this sense of separation causes anxiety and the felt need to love arises in response.²⁷ We come from nature and imagine (perhaps correctly) that there was a time when our ancestor creatures felt connected to each other and to their world (social and natural, to the degree they had social worlds). G.W.F. Hegel makes this problem cosmic in arguing that even God needs a partner to actualize God's self-consciousness.²⁸ Judaism talks of YHWH and Shekinah, Islam talks about Allah and Sharia, Trinitarian thought in Christianity has the Trinity and Creation forming the same polar pair (which is where Hegel presumably got the idea). Relationships are vital not just to our being but to our sacred stories as well.

My full view would be as follows: In evolutionary terms the emergence of the advanced trait we call self-consciousness is the history of this self becoming aware that it is different from and other than the world and its fellow creatures. At some point we felt connected or at least did not feel unconnected, but with full self-consciousness we feel unconnected. We feel a sense of isolation that spirituality lessens. In Buber's terms this happens with the development of I-It relations. The "It" here is the other, the external world and people who are not me. When I am aware of that separation, that existential distance, then a need develops from a sense of brokenness or existential isolation. We want to reconnect and so are spiritually inclined.

Religions then develop as the specific cultural forms for this inclination (and others) to be

²⁶ See Robert Bellah, "All Religions are Cousins" in *Reasonable Perspectives on Religion*, Richard Curtis, ed. (New York: Lexington Books, 2010).

²⁷ See Fromm, 1956, 53.

²⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1995).

followed, or a path to repair or lessen the sense of brokenness. Ultimately, spirituality is a compensation for a need that arises out of the development of complex intelligence, out of self-consciousness. Various spiritualities, then, are the various cultural forms a search for a solution to the felt brokenness takes.²⁹ It appears to need a solution or management regardless of whether it is a problem rooted in the evolution of consciousness or the evolution of culture. Our expectations for the future might change but the present issues and struggles remain unchanged regardless.

Buber and some psychologists in his time (especially Fromm) also came to see “love” as a vital part of this issue. My suggestion is that we see love and spirituality as intimately connected. As mentioned above, “love” applies to that which can (seem to) care for me in some reciprocal fashion and “spirituality” applies to that which is too abstract to care for me in a reciprocal fashion. Again, some believers might object that love is experienced from the divine, love in the relationship with the divine. I think that language works in context. To the believer, at least certain sorts of believers, the divine is the sort of thing that can care for me in a reciprocal fashion, of some sort. So the believer, especially the mystic, will talk about love of god as the experience. A more abstract form of belief, say deism, would not think of the divine that way. The abstract god of deism does not care reciprocally, but nonetheless is important and for the deist believer that connection is vitally important – a deistic spirituality is still a felt reconnecting to a larger reality. The point here is that this view of spirituality fits all sorts of religious views as well as no religious view.

²⁹ It is not clear if this is a human problem or a culture problem. Would a different and radically healthier culture not have this problem? If so then the problem is actually the one Marx identified as the problem of early accumulation that he saw being finally resolved after a very long history in what he called Communism. I am not sure we can know the answer to this question without trying, without constructing that society to see how different we become.

Going from Theory to Practice

In a Postscript Buber wrote: "...if the *I-Thou* relationship requires a mutual action, which in fact embraces both the *I* and the *Thou*, how may the relation to something in nature be understood as such a relationship?"³⁰ He answers that we have to think of these things separately. I think his approach mirrors the one I am advocating here. I have called this reciprocal. Nature cannot be reciprocal that way, but we still feel powerful connections in and to nature. Nature spirituality is a powerful and useful thing. But it is different from love, is what I want to make clear. We cannot love nature in this literal sense.

The Greeks distinguished between *eros* (erotic love), *philia* (intellectual love) and *agape* (true love, real caring for another). Here I have been interested in *agape*, the love we have for our mates and friends. *Eros* heightens and strengthens *agape* amongst romantic partners, but it is not the same as *agape*. *Agape is the deep connection we have with other humans. Spirituality is the deep felt connection with non-humans (god, nature, etc.).* I think these might usefully be seen as deeply interconnected concepts. We feel both spirituality and love very deeply. Both are very important to human well being. Both are involved in living well. So in that sense spirituality can encompass love, but love cannot encompass spirituality. Spirituality is the larger category.

In 1963 Bishop John A. T. Robinson (then the Anglican Bishop of Woolrich, England) wrote, "Suppose the atheists are right – but that this is no more the end or denial of Christianity than the discrediting of the God ‘up there,’ which must in its time have seemed the contradiction of all that the Bible said?"³¹ What Robinson was arguing is that the notion of a God “up there” was discredited by the Copernican Revolution. It just didn’t make any sense after we knew

³⁰ Buber, 125.

³¹ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 16.

more. Similarly, he concludes, the notion that God is “out there” (the metaphysical response to the end of God “up there”) is equally unsupportable. To him, and indeed to many others, Christianity is more than empty and indefensible metaphysical claims. He goes on, “Have we seriously faced the possibility that to abandon such an idol [God ‘out there’] may in the future be the only way of making Christianity meaningful, except to the few remaining equivalents of flat-earthers....”³² His answer is existential and he explicitly embraces the work of Paul Tillich (as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Rudolph Bultmann, who we might note was deeply influenced by Martin Heidegger – this was a source of disagreement between these two).

Robinson goes so far as to say, “True religion (if that is not a contradiction in terms, as it would be for the Marxists³³) consists in harmonizing oneself with the evolutionary process as it develops ever higher forms of self-consciousness.”³⁴ What is true? Or perhaps a better question might be “What is authentic?” And what then is authentic spirituality? Bishop Robinson concluded, “All true awareness of God is an experience at one and the same time of ultimacy *and* intimacy, of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.”³⁵ Fromm said the authentic is the natural: “The thesis of this paper is that values are rooted in the very conditions of human existence, hence that our knowledge of the conditions – that is, of the ‘human situation’ – leads us to establish values which have objective validity.”³⁶

For Fromm the starting point is the same observation that has woven its way through this entire discussion. “Man is torn away from the primary union with nature, which characterizes

³² Robinson, 16.

³³ I don’t think he understood Marx’s critique of religion but that is not important here.

³⁴ Robinson, 32.

³⁵ Robinson, 131. I should mention that the phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is Rudolph Otto’s (discussed above).

³⁶ Fromm, 1981, 1.

animal existence.”³⁷ In a more practical vein, van Deurzen (inspired by Victor Frankl) wrote, “Rising to the challenge of one’s own ideals can instill a whole new meaning to life and with this sense of purpose comes a vital aliveness and passion which are commonly considered unattainable.”³⁸ Her suggestion is that people benefit from having something that is important to them, important enough they would die for it.³⁹ She and Irvin Yalom maintain that the goal of therapy is to make these ideals or values explicit as self-knowledge.⁴⁰ But that seems completely relative to the individual and Fromm tells us these ideals are or can be objectively determined, and interestingly Bishop Robinson did too. What does one do with these conflicting points of emphasis?

Fromm’s view looks to social theory and suggests engagement with the world; Robinson looks to science and suggests engagement with it. Van Deurzen and Yalom would not disagree with that but seem to disagree with the strength of their claim. From my vantage point studying religion a solution emerges. “The thing for which one is willing to die,” which is needed for healthy functioning, is not and cannot be one thing for all people. Even when Fromm speaks of this as being objective I think he does not mean to suggest that there is one path for all people (he would suggest there are ethical limits, as the social world demands justice). What he seems to be telling us is that the path chosen, the ideals pursued and defended need to be values that are conducive of living. We need to walk a path that fits life’s needs, as those strike us in their particularity in our time and place. We also have different interests and talents and these too must change how the path is seen. Freud held that psychosis was at bottom confusing symbol for reality. In theology this is called idolatry. These are the real limits.

³⁷ Fromm, 1981, 1.

³⁸ van Deurzen, 88.

³⁹ van Deurzen, 87.

⁴⁰ Irvin Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 421. And van Deurzen, 87.

A healthy and functional spirituality is, therefore, one that is conducive of living in the individual's time and place, while fitting the individual's talents and interests. It cannot be idolatrous, and so can be evaluated objectively. Does the representation or symbolic understanding of these ideals fit the individual's real needs? Are they conducive for living? If so then they are most likely the sort that is needed. The Spiritual Realm is the realm of values, ideals and meaning. These vary by individual and there are many valid constructions, but not all possible constructions are valid (which is to say, functional). If a particular construction is idolatrous or psychotic it won't work and must be challenged and abandoned. The goal is to get at what really matters to the individual and to help them know this deeply and live it fully. Here I have tried to focus on the experiential side of all this. These values are not simply deduced from first principles; they are derived from lived experience. If that experience is engaged authentically and the symbolic representation of it can be achieved without appeals to idols then true self knowledge and vital aliveness can be achieved.

Postscript (or, Can We Construct Productive versus Unproductive Spiritualities?)

One reading of the discussion above is: "spirituality is good." That does not seem to be saying much. Indeed, I have tried to soft-peddle one of the most obvious conclusions. That conclusion is that Fundamentalist forms of religion and therefore spirituality are not authentic and therefore not healthy. The reason this conclusion is obvious, at least with a little knowledge of what Fundamentalism is, is that on Freud's definition Fundamentalism is psychotic. Fundamentalism is, theologically, the confusion of symbols of the divine for ultimate reality itself (or the divine itself). The Fundamentalist treats sacred texts as reality and fails to understand that texts are symbols too. The history of Theology is the history of reevaluating the symbols used to understand ultimate reality and the human relationship with that reality.

Fundamentalism is an early 20th Century and originally Christian phenomenon that rejects that history in favor of a psychotic relationship to religious symbols.⁴¹ This is true today regardless of what religion is in question. It is the common feature of all forms of Fundamentalism – confusing symbol for reality.

More theoretically, the reader may be aware that I have combined two schools of thought in Psychology that do not understand themselves to be in agreement. But that is the details. I think there is significant overlap in the approaches that derive from Fromm's Analysis and Frankl's Existentialism. Both are part of what is called Humanistic Psychology (along with the work of Maslow and Rogers). I would suggest that the overlap can usefully be understood via the concept of "Facticity" as discussed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Facticity is that which cannot change. The goal, according to Sartre, is distinguishing between the two (what is a choice and what is real Facticity). When and where I was born is part of my facticity, as is the gender of my birth, my parents, and my ethnic background. The prevailing views of society also have an element of Facticity but are not real Facticity as they can change, albeit with difficulty. Existential therapy emphasizes individual decision making and self-responsibility outside the realm of Facticity; and Analysis emphasizes the patterns and features that went into personality formation, which is to say the Facticity of personality formation. The two benefit from a healthy dialogue, I maintain.

More practically a model for thinking about all this exists in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, the Dutch founder of what Sartre called "Religious Existentialism." In his

⁴¹ The guiding texts of Christian Fundamentalism is a collection of work published by a wealthy oilman named Lyman Stewart in the early 20th Century. Lyman is, I think, essentially a fascistic thinker who sought grounding for his particular form of Calvinist social control in a particular and particularly narrow reading of scripture that is essentially a rationalization for Stewart's wealth. Given that the obvious reading of the Gospels is social justice one who is interested in domination needs a different reading, and benefits from claiming that reading is the only authentic reading possible. His wealth made it possible for him to propagandize the country with these pernicious and idolatrous ideas with astounding success.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard argued for a faith based approach to religion. This, generally, is seen as a reaction to the hyper-rational approaches of Immanuel Kant earlier, and G.W.F. Hegel more immediately (Hegel was the dominant voice in philosophy when Kierkegaard was alive, and he even studied for a time in Berlin and took at least one class from Hegel). Those systems emphasized reason as the core of religious thought, as the truth of religious thought. Kierkegaard's model is famously different. He embraces the risk that faith can be wrong, but nonetheless sees faith as vital to human existence. He claimed that "theology is idolatry." And this language seems to have much in common with my approach here. The fundamental point of both is that reality is larger than our symbols for it, and life requires an act - demands that we do things. Humans, Neil Armstrong famously observed from the moon, just explore, it is what we do. There are other things we to do too, and needs which must be met.

In this sense a proper spirituality is one that understands the feeling of connection to be deep, but not always rationally explicable. There is no shortage of observations about the nature of love in this regard. Here I am simply extending those observations about the inscrutable character of love and suggesting that the same can be said about spirituality. Humans need these felt connections but why and how they form is effervescent to us. But we know they must be functional to be ideal, to maximize their potential. Indeed, for someone like Fromm they must be functional to the point of revolution. Fromm's view seems to have been that we are an interaction between a fixed nature (facticity) and the effort to transcend that nature by strengthening the social. Lawrence Wilde put it this way in summarizing Fromm's view:

Only by recognizing that the only meaning to life is that which is given by humans through productive living can the possibility develop of achieving

happiness through the full realization of the faculties which are peculiarly human – reason, love and productive work.⁴²

What Wilde concludes is that Fromm's views on productive work are vital and often underappreciated. Fromm was well known for his socialist views and so what we find then is a sustained defense of the struggle for and the achievement of right relationships to work and nature. For Fromm, and indeed many others, that is the definition of socialism.

In the final analysis Fromm clearly thought that healthy human functioning required a socialist reorganization of society. And many have suggested that truly healthy functioning is not possible in a society organized around exploitation. More lately it has become common for people to notice that capitalism (with its demand for eternal growth) is logically, not just practically, incompatible with maintaining a functioning ecosystem. What is not entirely clear is the degree to which authenticity can be found in the struggle for that new society itself, or whether it requires that new society. In *The Sane Society* Fromm is pessimistic.

... instead of rational and irrational but overt authority we find anonymous authority – the authority of public opinion and the market; instead of the individual conscience, the need to adjust and be approved of; instead of the sense of pride and mastery, an every-increasing though mainly unconscious sense of powerlessness.⁴³

Someone like Che Guevara would have argued that the struggle is meaning, and that seems plausible for some, like Che himself, in spite of Fromm's diagnosis of our condition. It seems unlikely that this is possible for all people. It may be all we have though! A dysfunctional social context (capitalism) cannot be expected to produce healthy human beings. For now we have the struggle, and it gives us meaning by being the most objectively productive work one can do. But of course there is no clear consensus on how to achieve any socialist vision for society. I will

⁴² Lawrence Wilde, "In Search of Solidarity: The Ethical Politics of Erich Fromm," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 6, # 1, 2000: 37. Wilde was paraphrasing from Fromm's *Man For Himself*, page 40.

⁴³ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Henry Holt, 1955), 99.

end by suggesting that the struggle, at least a minimally informed struggle, goes a long way toward helping the individual confront the banality of human existence in the early 21st Century and thereby find solidarity with others and a deeply felt connection to the social world. Struggles for social justice can be spiritually meaningful, but perhaps not ultimately fulfilling (which requires a radically different social context). We engage the world by changing it. It is not necessary to have The Right Path, but a reasonably informed path, a struggle for justice to engage life to make it meaningful grounded in some concrete analysis of society. The sectarian thinking of the past was unproductive then and less than useless today. And of course, in our time that struggle has become not just a struggle to organize society in humane and functional ways, but we must also engage in much more vigorous struggles to protect our planet from environmental collapse, as well as to limit suffering as that collapse may be inevitable at this point.

Kierkegaard had pointed to a mystical path as the alternative. He sought to disrupt those complex rationalistic constructions and to replace it with experience. Life is to be experienced after all. The mystical path seems unproductive for most 21st Century humans, but what cannot be denied is the element that is felt as choice – the choice to engage reality, to experience it, or to deny it. We take his leap when we engage the world in a spirit of optimistic patience for the fact that change takes time, and that in the process of living an authentic life in service of social justice one has meaning, one has definition, one has life, real human life.