

Spirituality Includes Many Concepts Beyond Religion

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Acceptance of each other is an easy phrase to embrace in our minds, if not in our daily practices. When we believe that others share our ideas, philosophy, politics or our religion, it is easy to accept them. Conversely, acceptance is more difficult when others do not share our way of thinking and acting. In spite of this, many conscientious people respect the religious choices, political views, occupational choices, ethnicity and culture of those who differ from them and they try hard to be pluralistic and accepting without abandoning their own moral values.

As a secular person who holds humanist views, I suppose to some of my religious acquaintances, humanism and spirituality seem to be opposites. It is true that humanists sometimes feel uncomfortable about the term spirituality. We think the term “spirituality” ought to be expanded to include concepts beyond strictly religious terms. Humanists choose words like awe, wonder, fulfillment, inner peace, enrichment and acceptance. Spirituality is also about human connections with animals, nature and with our fellow human beings.

A common perception of some of my religious friends is their belief that humanists lack feelings of joy, compassion and wonder. For religious believers, spiritual experiences are expressed in traditional religious terms as though one could not be spiritual without being a believer in God. Although this reasoning is inaccurate, it is a matter of concern since it can become a barrier between humanists and non-humanists in understanding each other.

Humanists use the term “wonder” in referring to the natural world which offers experiences of awe, excitement and joy in the present. Humanists hope that thoughtful people will use good judgment and good moral values to use their ability to be rational in order to make positive things happen in this world, here and now. Religious friends ask me how I can be hopeful about human beings when there is so much around us that is not right. To be sure, it is easy to find examples of poverty, pollution, disease, war, starvation and crime. But these unfortunate conditions

come about over the years, not by accident, nor by lack of prayer, but by poor decisions made by humans. If such problems are to be solved in the future, it will be by humans applying their best efforts. We need to have confidence that human beings are capable of recognizing and implementing good solutions to problems many of which are caused by previous poor human actions or thoughtless decisions. We need to apply rational and caring solutions whether we do so within or without religion.

Spirituality for both humanist and non-humanists alike remains. I am convinced I share the joys and concerns of the world as readily as my religious friends. I share with humanists and non-humanists alike, joy at the birth of a baby, happiness at the sound of children playing, satisfaction in helping those in need and gratefulness in receiving unexpected help from a stranger. I shed tears at the bedside of a dying friend. I marvel at the metamorphosis of a caterpillar turning into a beautiful butterfly. I am thrilled by the music of Mozart, the nature paintings of Robert Bateman, the beauty of the Taj Mahal, and I am delighted by the goldfinches at our bird feeder. I am emotionally enriched by the gift of human love. I am optimistic when I hear political leaders talk of peace rather than war. A scientific discovery promising a cure for a medical problem or a new and better vision of looking at the world gives me a spiritual lift.

Some of my enthusiastically religious friends attribute spirituality to God dwelling beyond nature. I sometimes question whether their beliefs about the supernatural may encourage them too readily to hand over the task of improving our world to a powerful supernatural entity.

Humanists share the emotions of joy and wonder with both religious and non-religious acquaintances. We share these spiritual emotions, not because they flow from heaven, but because they are part of being fully human.