

On Religion & Spirituality—What's In A Word?

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Few words are as potent as the word religion. It describes institutions that comfort and reassure people in their suffering, communities that accompany and support us through the stages of life, as well as doctrines that inspire both wonderful and dreadful deeds.

And few words are as loosely employed as spirituality, meaning anything from a rigid, fundamentalist's particular theistic view, to a New Age flavoring difficult to grasp.

I want to touch on several other words this morning, more to make a point than anything else, but I want to keep the focus on religion and spirituality as they are the most often misunderstood, their meanings sometimes twisted by those who use them toward their own ends.

Our thoughts, our understandings, our philosophy, indeed our ethics, are conveyed by language. We express our emotions, to the extent we are able, with words. Much of relationship is conducted verbally.

Words are important, but what's in a word, really? Well, if the word happens to be religion or spirituality, a lot.

But what's in a word depends not only on the word itself. It relies also on the speaker, the circumstances in which it is used, and last, but certainly not least, who's listening. In other words, how it's said and how it's heard.

Religion and spirituality are but two in a long list of words of interest to Ethical Culturists—slippery, contextual words that undulate with the terrain, holding different meanings to different people. Nuanced words that can be digested whole or sliced thin. Words that change hue when seen in a different light.

There are words with hazy characteristics, like sacred and, faith, holy and soul. And highly charged words that evoke strong passions, like atheist, good and evil, god. Each of these carries many interpretations, and those interpretations shift as our cultural shifts.

I cite these only to say that the words I want to focus on, religion and spirituality, are not the only ones in our sphere that are less distinct than they might appear, or than we might like them to be. But those two are of special interest to us because Ethical Culture is defined as religious and most of us consider ourselves spiritual in one way or another. So these words strike close to home.

Religion and spirituality are words that make us uncomfortable due in no small part to their lack of precision and to their general understanding or misunderstanding in our culture. So, should we use them? That's the really big question, should we as Ethical Culturists use them? Should we apply them to ourselves?

Ethical Culture founder Felix Adler maintained there are certain words, religion and spirituality among them, that we have no viable alternatives for. Sometimes language and our own creativity fail us and there's no recourse but to fall back on familiar words, even when they're not up to the task. I'll be going into that a bit deeper later on.

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

The meaning of words changes as their usage changes. Religion and spirituality have been broadened somewhat in current usage, but they are still not quite flexibly enough to accommodate our Ethical Culture understanding of them. But with just a bit of limbering up, they can be. That stretching is part of my intent this morning, a bit of linguistic calisthenics.

But the same elasticity cannot be attributed to many other, more precise and universally understood words in the religious lexicon. Words like god and theism among them, even if some do use them loosely and attempt new meanings for them.

I was once asked, “How would you respond to a minister who says she or he is a, quote, ‘theistic humanist,’ but then goes on to say, “but by theistic I don’t mean anything supernatural.” Questions like that are often loaded with hidden intent, so I answered carefully: “I’d respond with great compassion.”

I am fortunate to lead within a movement that sets aside matters of origin and destiny in favor of an ethical concentration on life as we know it. Anyone who ventures into a Unitarian pulpit must be aware that, while the majority in attendance self-identify as Humanist, there are those there who have strongly held theistic views.

So you’re called on to perform a sort of philosophic high-wire act searching for language that resonates with both the natural- and super-naturally inclined without offending either. Those that have the courage to do that week after week deserve our understanding and our compassion.

But their plight is no excuse for the misuse of language. Language is intended to communicate and words do have meaning—some broad, others specific, some static others advancing. And while it is reasonable to assign specialized meanings to some, emphasis on some, common words within confined circumstances, they still retain their generally accepted meanings. And even that freedom of definition should be limited to words that habitually draw their precise meaning from context and should not be applied to words that mean the same thing most all the time.

Theism is one of those words we do not have the freedom to redefine. Look it up. It means a theistic belief. “Belief in the existence of a god or gods, especially belief in a personal God as creator and ruler of the world.” You can’t forge that into naturalism no matter how hard you try. It’s just not a malleable word. You can talk all you want about process theology and a shifting concept of god, but you can’t redefine theism.

It’s a far more definite word than its antithesis, atheism, which has been burdened with unwarranted meaning by those who seek to demonize any who are unlike themselves. I would lobby for a strict constructionist—or deconstructionist as the case may be—view of the word atheism. A-theism—without theism—without further attribution as there is none inherent in that stance. But I digress.

I went through all this to make a point: To use words in peculiar ways—like trying to employ theism in a naturalistic sense—to redefine a declarative word that has a universal meaning, is deceptive. When you know those you are addressing are hearing your words differently than you intend and yet you persist, thus taking advantage of the misperception—that’s more than deceptive, that’s unethical.

We have an ethical responsibility to communicate our meanings clearly and with respect to those to whom we are speaking. So this consideration of words, especially of religious language, is serious business.

Let's take a look at the words religion and spirituality as they stand today and how they might apply to us.

That end-all of dictionary sources, Microsoft, lists no less than four definitions for religion, the first coming in two parts for a total of five.

1. Belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator and governor of the universe.

That, I have to admit, is the general but not the only understanding of religion.

2. A personal or institutionalized system grounded in such belief and worship.

Not much help there for us. Close, except for that supernatural belief part.

3. The life or condition of a person in a religious order.

Nope.

4. A set of beliefs, values, and practices based on the teachings of a spiritual leader.

Now we're beginning to get somewhere, depending on your definition of spiritual, which we'll get to next.

5. A cause, a principle, or an activity pursued with zeal or conscientious devotion.

Now that we can really work with. We certainly are devoted to the principles of ethical living, and we pursue that ideal with a tireless and passionate diligence.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, has this to say about religion: "Religion is commonly defined as a group of beliefs concerning the supernatural, sacred, or divine, and the moral codes, practices, values, institutions and rituals associated with such belief." Now that's interesting as Ethical Culture, while free of the supernatural, does recognize a natural sacredness and a divine ideal, that of moral perfection.

Wikipedia goes on to say, that the word religion "... is sometimes used interchangeably with "faith" or "belief system." In the course of the development of religion, it has taken many forms in various cultures and individuals." [It has taken many forms in various cultures and individuals.]

That's the kind of broadened use, of expanded understanding, that we seek.

Let's move on to spirituality for a moment, again starting with Microsoft, which again offers five alternatives, and moving on to Wikipedia. Spiritual:

1. Of, relating to, consisting of, or having the nature of spirit; not tangible or material. See synonyms at immaterial.

Well, that's not really very useful for our purposes.

2. Of, concerned with, or affecting the soul.

Which brings us smack up against another of those fuzzy words.

3. Of, from, or relating to God; deific.

Clearly not us.

4. Of or belonging to a church or religion; sacred.

Well, if you consider us a religion as I do, and if you equate sacred with holy, as in the motto hung behind me—"The place where people meet to seek the highest is holy ground"—then this applies.

5. Relating to or having the nature of spirits or a spirit; supernatural.

No.

A word from Wikipedia and then I'll return to that earlier reference from Felix Adler.

"Spirituality is, in a narrow sense, a concern with matters of the spirit. The spiritual, concerning as it does eternal verities regarding Man's ultimate nature, is often contrasted with the temporal or the worldly. It may include belief in supernatural powers, as in religion, but," and here it becomes of interest to us, "the emphasis is on personal experience. It may be an expression for life perceived as higher, more complex or more integrated with one's worldview, as contrasted with the merely sensual." That's pretty much on point.

Even by dictionary and encyclopedic standards, there's a growing elasticity to these words. An accommodation that suits Ethical Culture.

I referred earlier to Adler's stand on this. Here's what he had to say in his 1905 lecture, *The Essentials of Spirituality*. "The word spiritual becomes a synonym of muddy thought and misty emotionalism." Remember, this is over a century ago and already muddy thinking and vagueness had confused the meaning of spirituality.

After reducing the word, Adler went on to say, "If there were another word in the language to take its place, it would be well to use it." Even before the recent reemergence of religious fundamentalism in our country and world, indeed in an age of religious liberalism and progressiveness, the word spirituality had been tarnished to the point that progressive thinkers wished to abandon it.

"If there were another word in the language to take its place, it would be well to use it." Adler concluded, "But there is not. We must use the word spiritual despite its associations and abuse."

Much has changed in the past century, but this has not. Religious language, having been further co-opted by various factions, has been further misted and muddied.

A couple of decades later, in 1923, Adler made what I think is one of his greatest contributions to ethical living. He delivered a series of lectures at the University of Oxford, the Hibbert Lectures, that were later published under the title, *The Reconstructon of the Spiritual Ideal*. That concept is germinal to Ethical Culture.

His message was that there's something good in religion, in the spiritual ideal, so let's not throw out the baby with the bath water. Rather let's dig and discard till all that's unnecessary is disposed of and all that remains is essential. It was really a statement of all the work he had done in this regard over the past half century.

The fundamentalism that is rampant in our world today seeks ownership of religious language and demands that it means only what they say it means. This stridency found its origin in the late nineteenth century largely in reaction to the advancement of science.

Not advancements, plural, of scientific hypothesis, theories, and tenets, but the advancement of science itself and particularly its attendant naturalistic worldview that was being embraced as favorable to mythological explanations of existence.

The general acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection and the inadequacy of any rational theological refutation served as a cultural flash point that ignited a fire that still blazes today.

At the very center of traditional religious thought is the principle of divine creation that bestows upon humanity a god-like status by virtue of having been created in the image of our maker. Those who cling to that concept were and are troubled beyond description by science.

Try as they might, there is simply no accommodation between naturalism and supernaturalism. To embrace the one was to release the other. Hold onto both and it tears you apart. That's what's happened to our culture that continues to advance through the benefits of things at odds with the ancient views so many cling to.

Science shook up religion. A body of it settled down and remains quietly in much the same groove as before, having become more culturally than theologically religious. A segment embraced science enthusiastically and incorporated it into religious thought and spiritual practice, and willingly let go of those concepts at odds with new understandings. And a faction turned backward, tightening its grip on ancient mythologies and clinging to them with a tenacity that would be hard to exaggerate.

Over the past century and a half or so, fundamentalism has erected around itself a wall of separation between reason and irrationality. From within its confines, they attempt to refute science by louder and more frequent recitations of that which science and reason have demolished. That would be harmless enough, except for their zealotry, their branding of those outside their confines as unworthy of equal consideration and treatment, and maintaining that they should consequently be viewed with derision, held in contempt, excluded from society, and mistreated if not brutalized.

Adler wanted to retain and expand the good and embraced the new in religion. The fundamentalists have amplified the opposite, and in so doing have lost sight of the essence of religion and the spiritual ideal.

Adler maintained that the spiritual life is serene, unperturbed, calm, and benevolent, and has a certain inward orientation; that the spiritually minded person always keeps in view the supreme end of moral perfection. "Spirituality, in this conception of it" Adler said, "is nothing but morality raised to its highest power." One might call spirituality thus conceived ethics squared, or exponential ethics.

But lest we get carried away in the attainment of perfection, which I describe as a North Star ambition—an aim that provides direction and guidance, one you head toward but without intention of attaining—Adler cautioned, "The spiritual attitude does not consist in turning one's back on things mundane and fixing one's gaze on some supernal blaze of glory," the North Star, "but rather in seeing things mundane in their relation to things ultimate, perfect."

That's a theme you've heard from me in the past and will hear from me again and again, that the approximation of perfection lies not in measurable advancement toward an ideal on a linear scale, but in how you view and lead your life—how you behave in the simple, ordinary, everyday interactions with others, how that ideal of perfection shines on your relationships with others.

In Adler-speak, we should not make a moral idol of a moral ideal, but rather, in an inner, spiritual sense, should strive for goodness rather than any particular good.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said such a narrow-minded virtue as the pursuit of a specific good painfully resembles vice. “Realize the unity that subsists between you and your fellow [human beings],” he said, “and then your life will be spiritual indeed.” This unity is reflected in Adler’s construct of the Ethical Manifold in which he maintains that the universe would be incomplete without any one of us, and uses this notion to substantiate the worth of every individual.

Spirituality thus conceived can be seen as an appreciation of a meaning to existence larger than one’s own individual life—a purpose that transcends, in a very natural way, our own life. While there is a natural transcendent quality to Adler’s thinking on spirituality, there is no leap of faith involved. It is well and reasonably grounded philosophically.

And the practice of a spirituality thus reconstructed, can legitimately be seen as a religious practice.

The meaning of words does change and we must meet that change on its own terms. The words religion and spirituality have assumed nearly enough elasticity for our usage. With our support they can easily stretch the rest of the way.

Use the words despite their associations and abuse, and, like we did with the concepts they represent, we can rid them of their excess baggage, rid them of the imprint of others, and set them free of outmoded interpretations.

Religion and spirituality are concepts directly related to our understanding of the world, words whose meaning expands as our understandings expand. Ours is a lifestance, a religion of ethical relationships that grew out of older, indeed ancient traditions by expanding them and reconstructing them to better fit our better understandings. I think it is not only proper and prudent to work toward expanding the words as well as the ideals, but I consider it our ethical responsibility to do so.

Use them. Use them prudently, be mindful of general perceptions, be clear in your intent, be careful with context, but use them. The words religion and spirituality, and the fields they represent, should not be denied us but rather should be reclaimed by us. No one owns religious language and we are not out to redefine or deny, but rather to reconstruct, to expand.

In our religious practice of Ethical Culture, we are not constrained by ancient concepts. Nor should we feel constrained by those concepts in the use of religious language.

Ethical Culturists seek a higher experience in life through the pursuit of an ethical ideal. Ours is a religion of ethical relationships, and bettering those relationships—eliciting the best in each other—is our spiritual practice.



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