

Rolheiser: Spirituality and spiritualities

What is spirituality and what makes for different spiritualities?

The word spirituality is relatively new within the English-speaking world, at least in terms of how it is being used today. Prior to the 1960s you would have found very few books in English with the word “spirituality” in their title, though that wasn’t true for the French-speaking world. A half-century ago spiritual writers within Roman Catholicism wrote about spirituality but mostly under titles such as “The Spiritual Life” and “Ascetical Theology”, or under the guise of devotional treatises. Protestants and Evangelicals, for the most part, identified spirituality with Roman Catholic devotions and steered clear of the word.

What is spirituality, as generally understood within church circles today? Definitions abound within spiritual writings of every sort, each of which defines spirituality with a particular end-goal in mind. Many of these definitions are helpful within academic discussions but are less so outside those circles. So, let me risk simplifying things with a definition that’s wide, interreligious, ecumenical, and hopefully simple enough to be helpful.

Spirituality is the attempt by an individual or a group to meet and undergo the presence of God, other persons, and the cosmic world so as to come into a community of life and celebration with them. The *generic* and *specific* disciplines and habits that develop from this become the basis for various *spiritualities*.

Stripped to its root, spirituality can be spoken of as a “discipline” to which someone submits. For example, in Christianity we call ourselves “disciples” of Jesus Christ. The word “discipleship” takes its root in the word “discipline”. A disciple is someone who puts herself under a discipline. Hinduism and Buddhism call this a “yoga”. To be a practicing Hindu or Buddhist you need be practicing a certain spiritual “discipline”, which they term a yoga. And that’s what constitutes any religious practice.

All religious practice is a question of putting oneself under a certain “discipline” (which makes you a “disciple”). But we can distinguish among various religious “disciplines”.

Aristotle gave us a distinction which can be helpful here. He distinguished between a “genus” and a “species”; e.g., bird is a genus, robin is a species. Thus looking at various spiritualities we can distinguish between “generic” disciplines and “specific” disciplines: *Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism*, and various *Native Religions* are “generic” spiritualities.

But within each of these you will then find a wide range of “specific” spiritualities. For example within the wide category of Christianity, you will find *Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Protestants, Evangelicals, Mormons, and Congregationalists*. Each of these is a species.

Then we can distinguish still further: Within each of those you will find a wide range of “sub-species”, that is, particular Christian “disciplines”. For instance, within Roman Catholicism, we can speak of persons who have *Charismatic* spirituality or a *Jesuit, Franciscan, Carmelite, or Salesian* spirituality, to offer just a few examples. Notice the pattern here – from genus to species to sub-species. As a spirituality, Christianity is a genus, Roman Catholicism is a species, and being a Jesuit or a Franciscan (or, in my case, being an Oblate of Mary Immaculate) is a sub-species.

I apologize if this seems a bit irreverent, that is, to speak so clinically of genus, species, and sub-species in reference to cherished faith traditions wherein martyrs’ blood has been shed. But the hope is that this can help us understand more clearly a complex issue and its roots.

No one serves one’s God fully, just as no one lives out one’s God-given dignity fully. We need guidance. We need trusted, God-blessed patterns of behavior and disciplines that ultimately come from divine revelation itself. We call these religions.

Then, inside of these religions, we can be further helped by models of behavior lived out by certain saints and wisdom figures. Thus, inside of Christianity, we have the time-tested example and wisdom of 2000 years of faithful women and men who have carved out various “disciplines” which can be helpful for us to better live out our own discipleship. *Jesuit, Franciscan, Carmelite, Salesian, Mazonodian, Charismatic, Opus Dei, Focolare, Catholic Worker, Sant’Egidio, Cursillo, Acts-Missions, and Catholic Christian Outreach*, among others, are spiritualities, and just as the exercise and diet regiments of health experts can help us keep our bodies more healthy, so too can the discipleship practices of particular saints, spiritual giants, and wisdom figures help make our following of Jesus more faithful and generative.

Which one of these spiritualities is best for you? That depends upon your individual temperament, your particular vocation and call, and your circumstance within life. One size doesn’t fit all. Just as each snowflake is different from every other snowflake, so too with us. God gives us different gifts and different callings and life puts us in different situations.

They say the book you need to read finds you and finds you at the exact time that you need to read it. That’s true too for spiritualities. The one you need will find you, and will find you at the exact time when you need it.