

Individual Consumers versus Sacrificial Community

Dr. Rodger Nishioka
Assistant Professor of Christian Education

“Oh, I’m spiritual. I’m just not religious.” After hearing this same phrase word for word all over the country in a variety of settings from very different persons, I began to wonder if someone had surreptitiously handed out a script to these “20 and 30 somethings” and they had collectively memorized it for my benefit. Over four years, I interviewed nearly 400 of them, almost all of whom were baptized and confirmed in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The vast majority of them were no longer active in any worshipping community, and I was trying to find out why. No matter where I was in the country, Des Moines or Denver, San Jose or Sarasota, Birmingham or Buffalo, after a few minutes of conversation, I would hear it. “I’m spiritual. I’m just not very religious.” When I asked them to explain what this meant, they tended to say things like: “Oh, I believe in God. I just don’t go to church.” Or “I am a Christian. I just don’t do organized religion anymore.” One young adult put it more glibly and sarcastically when he smirked: “I still love Jesus. It’s his followers that I can’t really stand.” (I think he actually got that from a bumper sticker.) This “spiritual not religious” was the most popular phrase.

Would you like to hear the second most popular phrase? Here goes. When I asked more specifically why these young adults were no longer active in a congregation, I heard some iteration of: “It just doesn’t meet my needs.” Sometimes it sounded more like: “I just don’t get anything out of it.” Or “I feel like it’s all a waste of my time.” Or the even more crass response: “I just find I have better things to do.”

So as I read through my colleague Steve Hayner's fine lead article on "A New Church for a New Generation," those were the phrases and voices that were resonant in my soul. I think I get it. I really do. Surely Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. But even as we affirm Christ's unchanging faithfulness, we must not assume that the worship of Jesus Christ is to be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The church, after all, is always reforming and consequently our expressions of praise and worship, thanksgiving and adoration, petition and intercession must reform in this fragmented, postmodern, technology-driven American culture with a myriad of choices. I understand all that and Steve clearly and convincingly maps out this new landscape in which we find ourselves.

But here is what worries me. As I read Steve's article, I kept hearing those two phrases in my head, and I tried to locate them in the same landscape. I worry about two major tensions that these phrases represent respectively.

Individual vs. Communal

As I asked persons to explain what it meant to be "spiritual, just not religious," I heard thinly veiled explanations of an individualist orientation over a communal orientation. I heard young adults saying that the world in essence revolves around me. Jesus is MY savior after all and died for MY sins, and I just do not have time for all of these other people and their problems and why should I share God anyway since faith and spirituality are really about a one-on-one relationship with God.

In his book titled aptly, *Spiritual but not Religious*, Robert C. Fuller explains it this way.

The word *spiritual* gradually came to be associated with the private realm of thought and experience while the world *religious* came to be connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal rituals, and adherence to official denominational doctrines.¹

Fuller believes that when persons parse “spiritual” vs. “religious,” they are describing a metaphysical orientation that is less narcissistic and more grounded in philosophies handed down to us from the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was Emerson, after all, who argued that spirituality had nothing to do with church attendance or blind faith in biblical dogmas, including the divinity of Jesus Christ, but rather with the cultivation of an inner connection with “the currents of Universal being.” It was this inner connection that led to his famous principle of “self-reliance.” The self-reliant individual was not at the mercy of others’ opinions or any external condition of any kind.² In other words, one does not need others to be spiritual. Emerson even went so far as to complain that others often deterred him the instreaming presence of “the divinity that flows through all things.”³

Fuller believes Emerson’s vision of self-reliance has influenced greatly our American culture of individualism and this individualism has inserted itself into our ecclesiology. Further, I wonder if some of these new expressions of worship are thinly veiled means for individuals to continue in the Emersonian thought of choosing for one’s self a way of encountering the transcendent without the trappings of a community that

¹ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious. Understanding Unchurched America.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5. Fuller goes on to argue that one in five Americans make some claim similar to this statement.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols., (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 1:73.

³ *Ibid.*, 1:130.

places demands on us, shapes us, and even enables us to be more connected to Jesus Christ and to each other. To be sure, a number of these new worship communities work hard at developing community, but many seem more focused on delivering a spiritual experience that focuses on the individual's needs rather than developing one's full relationship with others in a community of believers. Wait, did I mention "needs"? That's my second worry.

Consumerist vs. Sacrificial

In his description of the cultural context, Steve reminds us that "in our more recent information and entertainment age, churches have become more like theaters in style and consumerists in attitudes." Further, he indicts the tendency of some congregations to "produce worship and other programs which are attractive to an increasingly consumerist population who want comfort food worship..." He is right to critique the consumer culture rampant in too many of our congregations and among our members. But I am not as hopeful as he is that these new forms of worship are motivated any less by this consumerism.

When I hear young adults explain that they do not participate in a congregation because it does not "meet my needs," I hear consumerism. Inherent in this statement is the assumption that the church exists to meet our needs. The problem, of course, is that this assumption locates ourselves as the focus of worship rather than God. We do not worship so that we can get something out of it. We worship because the God who created us, redeemed us, and sustains us is so great we can do nothing else but worship God. To be honest, our greatest concern should be not whether our worship is meeting our needs

but whether our worship is meeting God's needs. To say it again, I am not so sure that the motivation for these new worship styles is as pure as my colleague suggests. I have participated in several of these worship experiences hosted by a number of communities and all of them focus on God. But all too few of them call me to sacrifice, to discipleship, to a "costly grace" as martyred theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us. Too many offer a multi-sensory experience that is easy to enter and easy to leave. I get my fix of the transcendent and then head out. It is all too convenient and that, it seems to me, is the essence of consumerism. No demands are made upon me. I do not have to give anything except my time out of a busy week. More than once I found myself relieved to have a moment of contemplation and silence. More than once I was engaged by great music and a thoughtful reflection on the scripture reading for the day. But then I got up and left. I did feel better about myself. And I felt closer to Jesus. But at what cost?

In my work in Christian education, I am reminded again and again that disruption and dissonance are not bad things. Indeed, it is a key understanding in education that without dissonance, without disruption, we do not grow. Why would we? If we were comfortable, wouldn't we just stay as we are sitting on our ecclesial couches not even having to get up because we have our liturgical remotes in our hands?

In my moments of optimism which thankfully outnumber my moments of skepticism, I am excited by these new communities. I believe in my heart of hearts that the Holy Spirit is doing something new in our midst. But in my more skeptical moments, I wonder and I worry. Is individualism winning out over community? Is consumerism winning out over sacrifice? Steve exhorts us to pay attention not just to the new

expressions but to the strong currents that are shaping these expressions and indeed we must. Perhaps these new currents are leading us all to a moment when being *spiritual* means being *religious* and when the focus of worship is not on *our* needs being met but only on the praise and worship of the one who is the maker of the whole universe. For our sake and the for the sake of the Gospel, I hope so.

1. Do you need others to be spiritual? Do you need others to be religious? Do you need others to be faithful to Christ?
2. Why do you go to worship?
3. How is going to church like and unlike going to the movies?
4. Do you think worship should be easy?