SEEKING RELIGIOUS LITERACY

MODULE 5 – LECTURE 5.1

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

TITLE: SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AND THE "NONES"

In our religious literacy journey so far, we have learned that "religion" is a richly inclusive term that is widely used and at the same time contested. It also indicates a modern concept – an entire category of human phenomena around how we make sense of the world and relate ourselves to the sacred, as we've discussed. Let's take a further look at how "religion" has been changing recently and what this might mean for the future. One aspect of change is increasing disaffiliation from "organized religion." Another is a strong reaffiliation with one's spirituality. "Spirituality" is a much newer term in English, in its present sense, than "religion." It is coming more and more into everyday use and, at the same time, the word "spirituality" is vague and elastic – like "the sacred," as we were saying in module two. "Spirituality" is very bound up with "religion," but in ways that are not always clear and may be misconstrued. In what follows we will try to sort out the meaning of spirituality and its relation to religion, as the growing currency of the term points to the importance it has in people's lives.

It is well known that today there is a pronounced trend of disaffiliation from formally organized religion. About one in three adults in the U. S. is now unaffiliated with institutionalized religion, according to a December 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center.[1] The unaffiliated are often referred to as the "nones," as they mark "none" on forms that ask for religious affiliation. We often hear too that many people identify as "spiritual but not religious," what is sometimes referred to by the acronym "SBNR." What then, is "spirituality" and why should it be considered as distinct from "religion"? From the very beginning of this course, we have been exploring religion as a worldview, with features or ligaments such as ethics, practices, rituals, and stories. So, we can ask ourselves: Is "spirituality" different from the sense of worldview we've described so far?

If we pay attention to how the word "spirituality" is commonly used by people we know or read about, it seems to have two main overlapping characteristics. First, "spirituality" is experiential and interior – that is to say, it is more a matter of feeling than of intellectual belief or external observance – although these latter two can certainly be parts of spirituality. Second, "spirituality" is often almost a synonym for the life of prayer, meditation, and awareness; for contemplative practice. "Spirituality" has to do with "inner" or even "the innermost" experiences, those felt in a different, more concrete ways than mental "belief." Our contemporary use of the term "spirituality" seems to have emerged in the twentieth century. Before this time, "spirituality" was not opposed to "religion," but was in fact deeply related to religious life. It meant living in a way that was not "worldly," focused instead on contemplation and an ever-deepening relationship with the divine. Today "spirituality" is a popular term and has no precise or technical definition apart from what we've said above.

Robert Fuller in his book Spiritual but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America, refers to philosopher William James' statement that "spirituality consists of attitudes, ideas, lifestyles and specific practices based upon a conviction, first, that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance, and, second, that union or harmonious relation with this "spiritual more" is our true end" or purpose."[2] Philip Sheldrake in Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction, says that "spirituality" is concerned with the numinous – the depths of existence and mysteries of the cosmos that integrate life as a whole.[3] Rudolf Otto, in his classic work The Idea of the Holy, famously described "the numinous" as the sacred quality that attracts us with a sense of mystery and awe.[4]

For the last thirty years there has been considerable social science research on being "religious" and being "spiritual." Researchers, to conduct these studies, must derive from their subjects, specific definitions of "spirituality" and, as you might guess, these definitions have been inconsistent. This inconsistency in defining spirituality has been lamented by scholars, and yet despite its vagueness, there may be an implicit bias by social scientists who may have made too much of this difference between "spiritual" and "religious."[5] In other words, the notion that "spirituality" and "religion" are somehow separate or even opposed may be less true than formerly thought. This much we can say:

First: It is important to be clear that to be a "none" or unaffiliated is not at all the same as being "spiritual" – or vice versa. Belonging to organized religion can and does embrace all kinds and degrees of individual and communal spirituality. Second: All religions contain spirituality and even popular forms of spirituality can be found within religion, as studies show that 80 percent of the world's population are adherents of some religion. Third: "Spirituality" is one element within the larger group of concerns that is a source of hunger for millions. In fact, a 2016 study by the Pew Research Center says that spirituality – a sense of "deep peace," and "wonder" – is robustly on the rise among both the religious and the "nones," including agnostics and atheists.[6]

Fourth: Not only prayer and meditation, but participation in ritual, reflection on the truths of a religious worldview, and the cultivation of virtue are all part of spirituality as inner experience. Some people are more concerned with the inner and subjective dimension than others, and more inclined to search for it, whether they are religiously affiliated or not. The expression "spiritual hunger" refers to this longing for concrete, felt experiences of the Sacred.

Fifth: Robert Fuller points out that in America many people have always been not formally religiously affiliated. More recently, the rise of secularity and also of religious pluralism in the sense of consciously engaging with the many-ness of religions, have both contributed to a decline in formal religious affiliation. According to Pew and the Public Religion Research Institute, over 50% of people who had left a religion responded that they "stopped believing," "were unsure of what to believe," or "were not that religious to begin with." A much smaller percentage, 20 percent, said they left because they disliked organized religion.[7]

At the same time, as we noted before, we are seeing a rise in "spirituality" and in the search for inner or felt experiences. The unaffiliated and so-called "spiritual but not religious" do not necessarily reject "religion" as such, though this may be a common misperception. While eschewing formal membership, they may retain some sense of identification with their tradition of origin as they explore different practices, teachings, and cultural settings. They are not "anti-religious" but are instead involved in an eclectic spirituality partaking of various religions.

As we conclude our time together, we may flip the terms, wondering if the growing importance of "spirituality" may lead to change in the meaning of "religion" itself. In the contexts of religious plurality and interfaith encounters, the decline of "religion" understood as belief in one religion (known as exclusive belonging) and the quest for personal experiences of the divine through many religions (referred to as multiple belonging).

Analogous to ongoing work in comparative theology and global ethics is an inquiry into whether the forms of spirituality in different religions may have features in common. The idea that spirituality is a universal truth across humanity (or pan-human), while religion divides, has longstanding ethical appeal. It also has pragmatic value in settings such as health care, psychotherapy, counseling, and education, where spirituality is affirmed as relevant and useful for people of different religions or none. A pan-human approach also gives rise to "interspirituality" as a movement which draws on the spiritualities of diverse traditions and has even established several interfaith seminaries ordaining Interfaith Ministers – speaking to a need for organized community with a universalist, inclusive perspective.

Continue through the other offerings provided, and then take time to reflect on the questions offered to you in the Reflection Section. Afterwards, continue through the rest of this module. Thank you.