"SPIRITUAL? YES.   RELIGIOUS? NO."

1   A couple of years ago our local Lutheran Seminary, as a graduate school of Wilfrid Laurier University, invited one of Canada's premier political commentators to address the entire University community.

2   He began his address with a kind of bewildered confession. He was uncertain, he said, why he should have been asked to address an audience he took to be largely Christian. "I don't have a spiritual bone in my body," he confessed, in a mood of self-deprecation I found at once endearing and off-putting. I liked the man for his honesty, and for his courage in "coming out" to us in this way. But those same qualities also somehow annoyed me.

3   His remark gives me the introduction I need for this month's posting. You've heard it often enough by now, I am certain: Many people today, in these early years of the Twenty-First Century, in Western Europe and in North America, do not think of themselves any longer as religious. They may describe themselves as "spiritual" – however they may define that term. But "religious," subscribing to a specific church or set of beliefs or practices? No. Not so much.

4   So, faithful reader: Do you think of yourself as religious? Or as broadly spiritual? The question poses major problems for those of us committed to a specific faith tradition. It poses major, *major* problems for those of us in positions of leadership within an institutional expression of a faith tradition: pastors, bishops, teachers, church executives.

5   One solution sometimes spoken of is to abandon denominational distinctiveness. This solution regards the problem as more than a matter of mere marketing, although it is surely that. Significant changes in both style and substance of worship and teaching are also involved, if not in counselling. If people today seek the broadly "spiritual" rather than the narrowly "religious," then we should ignore or actively retire, for example, that "Lutheran" designation – or "Anglican" or whatever – in our churches and church institutions.

6   We are in the business as a church of serving people's needs, after all. We are a church "In Mission for Others," as our current Lutheran church-wide theme describes it.

Our church institutions – places of worship, schools – are to be public institutions, surely not secular, but not "religious" either. It's where we nurture the spiritual needs of contemporary people. We're not selling a religious product; we're meeting the real needs of real people. We design our worship, our teaching, and our outreach accordingly.

7   That's the argument, as I understand it. "Spiritual," yes. "Religious," no.

8   Funniest thing: Since my late adolescence I've been uncomfortable with that term "spiritual." It was maybe five years later, a full sixty years ago, in my own Seminary days, that I was able to put words to my discomfort. "Spiritual" sounded to me somehow dangerously disembodied, ghostly. It sounded vaguely Buddhist, or Unitarian. In a word, anti-incarnational, anti-sacramental. Not sufficiently kataphatic. See Essay 24 above.

> 9   Aside: In those same formative years I discovered H.L.Mencken, whose essays convulsed me for his lacerating wit, his somewhat cynical view of human nature, and his magisterial command of the English language. Studies in divinity he described as "ghostly science" – "ghostly" in its antique sense of "spiritual," and "science" in its sense of "studies." My older brother Bob took delight in pointing out to me that as a Seminary student, I was committing to "ghostly science."

10   Conversely: Faithful readers of these postings will recall my own actual fondness for that much maligned term "religion." Read Essays 9 and 15. I sometimes even like to tweak the noses of those who call themselves spiritual but not religious. Just to shock their popular expectations, I'll describe myself as religious but not spiritual.

11   "Religion" I take to refer to what I call the Four Cs: creed, code, cult and even constitution. Spoken less cryptically, Creed is my shorthand for your doctrines, your beliefs or set of values. Code, for me, refers to your moral or ethical posture: How you live out your beliefs or values. Cult is my all-purpose reference to how you ritualize those beliefs and values. And even Constitution: whatever institutional form all this may take. (You've heard the old saw: "I don't belong to an organized religion. I'm an Anglican." Or Lutheran. Or whatever...)

12   It was my argument in Essays 9 and 15 that, organized or not, all people find ways to include those Four Cs in their daily lives. It's simply part of the human package – part of our *humanum* – to need at least the first three of those Four Cs. Hence: We are all "religious," like it or not. There is no "spirituality" apart from its embodiment in some form of "religion." Those who claim there can be a naked "spirituality" are simply unaware of the "religious" forms their "spirituality" is taking. Essay 24 again.

13   That's not necessarily good news, either, in my view. Many - most? – religious forms are idolatrous, as the Hebrew prophets warned us long ago. Norma Jean Baker is almost always being murdered by Marilyn Monroe. (I *told* you to read Essay 15!)

14   Well. These are some personal musings on our contemporary search for "spirituality" apart from "religion." As for me, I'm quite happy to identify myself as a religionist. Hey, I'm quite happy to identify myself as a Lutheran.

15   That instinct may very well mean I'm outside the loop culturally, and something of a dinosaur. It may even mean the entire Lutheran enterprise, the entire Christian enterprise, is doomed to marginality and even derision, culturally speaking.

16   The era of Christendom is long since over. But I won't shed any tears. See Essay 73.

+ + +