

# **“I Am Not Religious, But I Am Spiritual.” What Does This Mean?**

Aiden Duggal

Mission San Jose High School, USA

## **ABSTRACT**

Religiousness and spirituality have been integral to human experience throughout history, and their definitions are constantly evolving. While traditional religious practices seem to be on the decline, spirituality has become more popular as a non-traditional way for people to express their "search for the sacred." These two concepts share similarities and differences. This essay will examine these aspects through the perspective of an individual who identifies as "not religious but spiritual."

## **Introduction**

“I am not religious, but I am spiritual.” This statement, which I have heard several times before, had piqued my curiosity. It sparked a personal journey of understanding. What was this person trying to convey? The questions in my mind were: What exactly defines religiousness and spirituality, and if they are separate entities, how do they differ? Being raised as a Sikh and getting my elementary education in a Catholic school, I am familiar with different religious beliefs and practices, but spirituality is something that is not exactly a high school curriculum subject, and people are even wary about discussing these topics as they may evoke strong opinions. I embarked on a research journey to gain insights into spirituality, its varying definitions, and the seemingly mundane pathways people use to experience spirituality. It was fascinating to discover how one can be spiritual without being religious or how both religiousness and spirituality can thrive together. This was an enlightening experience, no pun intended!

## **Definitions of Religiousness and Spirituality**

Over the years, philosophers and scientists have been engaged in a lively debate about the terms “religious” and “spiritual.” Like other popular psychological constructs, this debate involves “lumpers” and “splitters.” Lumpers see religion as a 'broad-based' concept encompassing spirituality and includes traditional institutions, beliefs, practices, and individual expressions within the larger context of an organized faith tradition. In contrast, splitters view religion and spirituality as distinct, even incompatible, and propose that spirituality focuses mostly on individual expressions and may involve non-traditional pathways (Pargament, 1999). A person who claims to be spiritual but not religious would fall into the latter category. Let's delve deeper into this ongoing and complex discussion, a discussion that continues to evolve and challenge our understanding of these profound concepts, and that never fails to intrigue.

In a time when traditional religious practices are declining, spirituality has gained popularity as a more widely accepted term for the non-traditional, subjective expression of faith. This leads us to the definition of spirituality as a "search for the sacred" (Pargament & Mahoney, 2009). The concise definition carries significant meaning with the use of two powerful words - "search" and "sacred." The use of the verb "search" implies that spirituality is an ongoing process rather than a static and ritualized belief system, as portrayed by traditional religious practices. When someone discovers something sacred, they hold on to it and use it to transform their lives. The concept of the sacred is shared by both religiousness and spirituality. It refers to ideas of God or a higher power and things one believes are larger

than oneself – self-transcendence. Spiritual individuals may “sanctify” non-traditional objects as sacred. The pathways to spirituality are diverse, reflecting everyone’s unique cultural experiences and beliefs. These pathways include searching for existential meaning, pursuing value-based goals, being with nature, meditation, finding self-transcendence through creative pursuits in the arts or sciences, focusing on one’s health or roles (relationships or work), and being part of a community or cult. An individual may even sanctify everyday experiences in relationships, work, and personal strivings to gain a spiritual experience (Wong & Pargament, 2017). Thus, there is more to spirituality than being touched by the Holy Spirit, getting to heaven, or achieving moksha or nirvana.

## Evolution of Religion and Spirituality

Since the beginning of time, religiousness and spirituality have been a part of human experience, and humans have worshipped stones, rocks, trees, animals, and deities for ages. Where does this need to relate to something bigger than oneself come from? The shared human experiences of avoiding suffering, the unrelenting pursuit of happiness, attempting to find meaning, and the knowledge that death is unavoidable create an existential vacuum. What comes in handy to fill this vacuum? Religion.

Religious beliefs and practices provide individuals grappling with fundamental existential issues with an anchor and a sense that a benevolent higher power protects and loves them unconditionally. Religious experiences through prayer, ceremonies, and other practices of worship or rituals allow one to experience momentary transcendence beyond the apparent boundaries of the self. These spiritual “awakenings” or “enlightenment” are the experiences that keep faith followers loyal. However, as world religions evolved, the institutions professing these faith-based doctrines became more dogmatic. The notion is that if someone questions divine authority, they will be punished, and this, along with the rise of infamous cults, has forced people to explore non-religious ways to be spiritual (Harris, 2014). In addition, the problem of pursuing “small gods,” a metaphor describing people with a parochial view of their religion, has led to prejudice against minorities (Pargament & Mahoney, 2009, p. 619).

Unsurprisingly, dissatisfaction stemming from negative perceptions of “uncool” religion has led people, particularly in the Western world, to seek out “cool” spirituality. As cultures worldwide became more open, Eastern religions such as Buddhism offered a spiritual alternative to faith-based worship through meditation and other mindfulness practices. Some of these practices have become mainstream. However, like traditional religious practices, pursuing spirituality also has its drawbacks. Those who seek spirituality due to guilt or external pressure are less likely to benefit from such practices. Meditation has been promoted from a daily stress buster to a spiritual tool, but not everyone is cut out for it, especially those seeking instant returns. A quest for meaning in life as a spiritual endeavor is fraught with disappointments, especially if one pursues goals not in sync with one’s values. And there is no dearth of individuals who become a victim of disgraced so-called spiritual cults.

So, what does it mean when someone says they are not religious but spiritual? Well, for starters, these individuals are in the minority. According to a large-scale study, 63% of people identify as both religious and spiritual, 22% identify as spiritual but not religious, and 4% label themselves as religious but not spiritual (Corrigan et al., 2003). Other studies have shown that most people are both religious and spiritual. Interestingly, research also shows that people who consider themselves as ‘spiritual and not religious’ hold polarized opinions of religiousness and spirituality (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Does research support their latter view? Let’s find out.

## Similarities Between Religion and Spirituality

Research in religion and spirituality is challenging because God cannot be measured, and the sacred cannot be quantified. Nevertheless, insights have been gained regarding the impact of religious beliefs and practices. Research indicates that religious individuals tend to enjoy better health, greater happiness, longer lifespans, and improved recovery from trauma compared to their non-religious counterparts (Pargament & Mahoney, 2009). For those facing serious

medical conditions, religious beliefs and practices can help reduce stress, provide a sense of control, and foster feelings of hope, meaning, and purpose in life (Koenig et al., 2001). Spirituality offers similar benefits to religiousness, including increased happiness, better mental health, improved stress management, and longer life expectancy.

Religiousness and spirituality share other similarities. At their core, both involve the *search for the sacred*. Religion is not static; it evolves, just as spirituality does. Individuals who identify as religious or spiritual take different paths, both personally and within society, to pursue this search. Furthermore, religiousness and spirituality can lead to positive or negative outcomes, dispelling the notion of a simple "good guy/bad guy" debate.

## Conclusion

In summary, religiousness and spirituality share more similarities than differences; most people incorporate both aspects into their lives. When someone says, "I am not religious, but I am spiritual," they may choose non-religious ways to seek the sacred and transcendent. Despite the tempting dichotomies, many people embrace both religious and spiritual elements. Through the ages, religiousness and spirituality have been part of human experience and involve an individual's quest to find the sacred, with differences existing only in the context, the paths taken, and the ultimate destination.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

## References

- Corrigan, P., McCorkle, B., Schell, B., & Kidder, K. (2003). Religion and spirituality in the lives of people with serious mental illness. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 39(6), 487–499.  
<https://doi.org/10.1023/b:comh.0000003010.44413.37>
- Harris, S. (2014). *Waking Up: A guide to spirituality without religion*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.
- Koenig, H. G., Larson, D. B., & Larson, S. S. (2001). Religion and coping with serious medical illness. *Annals of Pharmacotherapy*, 35(3), 352-359.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *The how of happiness*. Penguin Books.
- Pargament, K. I. (1999). The psychology of religion and spirituality? Yes and no. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 9(1), 3-16.
- Pargament, K. I. & Mahoney, A. (2009). Spirituality: The search for the sacred. In J. Lopes & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 611-619). Oxford University Press.
- Wong, S., & Pargament, K. I. (2017). Seeing the sacred: Fostering spiritual vision in counseling. *Journal of Counseling and Spirituality*, 36(1-2), 51-69.
- Zinnbauer, B. J., & Pargament, K. I. (2005). Religiousness and spirituality. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 21-42). The Guilford Press.