Spirituality



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This semester I taught a new course as part of the revised core curriculum at my academic institution. It was one of a range of first-year seminars, which each incoming student takes during their first semester of college. These seminars are taught by faculty across the university, ranging from humanities professors in philosophy, theology and history, to the natural sciences like chemistry and biology, to the professional programs such as nursing and business.

The goal is that each professor would teach a seminar on a theme of interest to them from within their area of expertise, and students would have an array of options from which to select something that appeals to them. Many of these seminars are built around an engaging question designed to both pique the interest of new college students and invite them to engage in constructive and respectful dialogue across differences while forming a community of belonging around intellectual inquiry.

The course I developed is titled "Can you be spiritual without being religious?" This question has been a long-standing academic and pastoral preoccupation of mine and, given the shifting data about young adults and their relationship to religious institutions and spiritual seeking, I was eager to see how first-year college students would respond.

I'm happy to share that they responded very positively.



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The course structure was simple. After an initial unit where I introduced my students to the field of spirituality studies, as well as academic definitions and methodologies for thinking about and studying spirituality, we had four substantive units where we explored understandings and approaches to spirituality in Christianity, Judaism, Islam and "secular" traditions.

Obviously, none of these units could be fully comprehensive, but in looking at approaches to thinking about spirituality and its relationship to religion — both institutionally and doctrinally — across the three Abrahamic traditions and exploring examples of spiritual practices among them, we covered a lot of ground. Our last unit considered arguments from writers like Mirabai Starr's in her 2024 book *Ordinary Mysticism: Your Life as Sacred Ground*, which seeks to draw from a range of traditions — religious and otherwise — to help those uninterested or disenchanted with capital "R" religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, etc.) find meaning in a world still recognized as transcendent.

As one might expect, the students in this course entered with a range of expectations, experiences and perspectives. Some identified strongly with a religious tradition, usually some form of Christianity (many shared that they had been raised in a church context or attended a Catholic high school, but not all continue to actively participate in a faith community), while others expressed skepticism about any institutional religious belonging.

One thing that was especially striking throughout the semester was the generosity and respect the students showed one another. When there were disagreements (in a class of this sort that is to be expected), my students did not mirror the disrespectful behavior or deploy the vilifying rhetoric displayed in our increasingly polarized times.

Instead, over the course of the semester, they engaged one another with thoughtfulness and curiosity. Often, they would acknowledge the points of agreement between them but generously explain their different views or raise considerate questions for their peers.

> "What if, rather than starting with what we disagree with or find incompatible among religious traditions, we started with a shared conviction that all people are inherently spiritual?" —Daniel P. Horan
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Returning to the major question of the semester, whether it was in daily discussions or the periodic structured dialogues, a recurring theme would surface: the students generally believed that all people are inherently spiritual — or at least have the capacity for spiritual experience — and that this was something shared across the three world religions we examined, as well as found in the secular perspectives we explored.

This is not a matter of "watering down" distinct and at times incompatible doctrinal or theological positions among different religions to arrive at some facile lowest common denominator. Such a deductive and reductive approach clearly did not appeal to this group. Instead, there was an appreciation for the foundational truth that to be human means to be spiritual, whether or not one consciously reflects on it, takes a cursory interest in it, or seeks frameworks for understanding it within or

outside traditional religions.

In fact, the capacity for transcendence, an openness to encounter with the divine and the faculty to engage in religious practices — including prayer — could be seen as a starting point for dialogue across an array of traditions and perspectives.

It is no secret that this is a view I also share. I've written about it here in the pages of NCR, as well as in other scholarly and general-audience publications. I think the late theologian and Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner was exactly right when he asserted that all human beings have an inherent *capax Dei* or "capacity for God," that we are literally made for God. That this intrinsic dimension of human existence he called the "supernatural existential" accurately reflects the divine intention for relationship not just with humanity or creation in general, but with each and every human creature in particular.

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Rahner also recognized that not everyone would be interested in or capable of exploring this universal capacity in their own lives. But such willful dismissal or limited capacity for reflection or expression did not diminish the truth of our inherent openness to the transcendent and therefore to God.

Isn't this the condition of the possibility for religion in the first place? A fundamental, necessary belief that each person has the capacity to encounter the sacred, the numinous, the divine?

Without this belief the idea of divine revelation is meaningless and, therefore, so would any positive claims about God or God's relationship to the world. Spirituality, at the most fundamental and universal level, is simply a term to describe the phenomenon that we each experience the "more than" of life. Exploring spirituality orients us towards mystery and transcendence and our quest to make sense, understand and express what we encounter and experience along the way.

What if, rather than starting with what we disagree with or find incompatible among religious traditions, we started with a shared conviction that all people are inherently spiritual and seeking to understand more fully the meaning of that capacity in this time and place?

Perhaps, like my first-year students, we could better see all that we share with one another even as we acknowledge and respect the differences in our contexts, experiences, perspectives and traditions. Perhaps this fundamental belief and recognition of a shared capacity for the divine could instill in us a renewed reverence for the dignity of all life and our glorious diversity, which might inform not only dialogue across differences in religion but also differences in political views, cultural values and social locations. Spirituality and the study of it as a universal phenomenon is not a solution for everything, but it may be a good starting point for all kinds of dialogue.