

"I'm spiritual but not religious"

Rich Heffern | Jul. 24, 2009 NCR Today

St. Francis of Assisi was wont to pray for nights on end, "Who are you, God, and who am I?" He was unable to find satisfying answers to these questions in the culture and institutions of his times.

One Sunday he was listening to a sermon in which the preacher quoted Jesus telling his followers to take nothing for their journey, to rely upon the kindness of strangers — in short, to embrace poverty as a spiritual way. Francis was galvanized. He left Mass overjoyed and committed the passages to memory, saying: "This is what I want. This is what I long for."

Francis had noticed that whenever and wherever he encountered poverty and simplicity in his life, then his heart would warmly glow, his insides would light up with smiles. The scripture passage validated this important inner experience. His enthusiasm enkindled and his creative energies given direction, he went on to create a band of brothers who lived simply and in solidarity with the poor.

Francis took his direction in life from this inner navigation, following his deepest enthusiasm wherever it led him. He created a new way of living and working with others. His enthusiasm was the key that opened up his inner life and creativity, and then joined that life to the service of his community.

Due to the split in our religious sensibility that has plagued us for centuries, we tend to experience our spiritual traditions turned upside down. In our religion there has long been a tendency to discount our own living, our own experiences and our inner searching and questioning in favor of a top-down system of formation, direction, and organization. Ordinarily we were offered scripture, ready-made and digested theology, together with the lives of heroic individuals who lived in the past as models to emulate, and then given a creed of beliefs to memorize.

Thus armed, we were expected to venture forth "into the world" to do the best we could to cope with its slings and arrows, to meet the hard challenges of living by copying the behavior of others. Frequently the mere possession of this body of creed and knowledge was offered to us as our "passport" to salvation.

The suggestion that we might be able to directly experience the divine mystery in the midst of our lives, both in our enthusiasms and struggles, that in fact our daily living is the central arena where the encounter with the divine takes place, such notions were available only to a chosen few, usually those who chose religious life or ministry as a vocation. We were, in effect, cut off from our most fundamental spiritual nourishment and from the mystical experience that is at the roots of all religions.

In Christianity, for example, surely the New Testament's accounts of Jesus' birth are telling us, among other things, that the great Mystery does not visit only the elite, that the divine is found in the most unexpected and unlikely places.

The reversal of this upside-down religious view is summed up well in the commonly heard phrase: "I'm spiritual but not religious."

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