

The phrase “I am not religious, but I am spiritual” attempts to distinguish the essence of spirituality from religion. In doing so, the speaker implicitly adopts a modernist perspective on religion. Many thinkers throughout history can be understood as expressing the ‘spiritual but not religious’ worldview exemplified, for instance, in the writings of Meister Eckhart and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Yet, often their perspectives were considered heretical from the standpoint of traditional religious thinkers. This worldview, however, has exploded over the last century and has become a defining feature of modern attitude towards spirituality. This essay argues that the stated phrase reflects a complex interplay between modern and historical views on religion and spirituality, highlighting the intertwined nature of both concepts despite attempts to separate them, and revealing how cultural, social, and historical factors shape our understanding and experiences of spirituality and religion.

Before being able to define what the speaker means by ‘spirituality’, we must define religion. General perspectives on religion, such as the ‘spiritual but not religious’ worldview, tend to characterise religion as a set of beliefs and doctrines centred around a ‘divine,’ externally existing entity and traditional ritualistic practices. Often, religious beliefs and practices are passed down in the form of doctrine and ideology. Some scholars of religion, for instance, Robert Sharf, calls religion a ‘cultural product,’ and historian Yuval Noah Harari says it is based on a ‘belief in superhuman laws’ (Kramer & David, 2018).

The reductive perspective that the speaker seems to adopt is distinguished by a focus on those aspects of religion that are seen to be adaptable to a secular society. These include meditative practices, which can take a variety of forms, ranging from yoga, breathwork, to prayer and fasting. Mindfulness, for example, removed from its original Buddhist context, is a common association with modern forms of so-called ‘spirituality.’ In modern culture, it has become a ‘purified’ psychologised form of Buddhist meditation, fit for consumer culture. So called ‘spiritual’ practices entail a psychologization of practices which had traditionally been understood in a religious worldview. Some scholars of religion have argued that spirituality has now replaced religion primarily because former loyalties and social individuality have been ‘transformed by modernity’ (Carrete, 2004, p. 1).

The ‘spiritual but not religious’ worldview has become the defining characteristic of what has become known as ‘New Age’ spirituality, which has its roots in the 1970s and 1980s, has been propagated by social media (Melton, 1992, pp.15-30). Proponents of this view, further assert that those who are ‘disillusioned by traditional institutional religions’ often observe a spiritual path characterised by oneness, ‘healing and inner transformation’ (Melton, 1992, pp. 2) Spirituality, for the masses, a source of salvation and comfort in an incoherent world. More

importantly, 'spirituality is taken to denote the positive aspects of ancient religious traditions' (Melton, 1992, pp. 3). The speaker, like New Age thinkers, assumes a perennialist perspective on religious discourse. They presuppose a particular interpretation of religion, namely that there is one absolute, experiential or metaphysical truth at the heart of all religions. While some scholars have argued that there are different kinds of perennialism, perennialism as a general hermeneutic can be characterised as different religions, towards an inner and contemplative level, point towards the same absolute truth.

William James, for example, argues a 'mystical experience' entails a oneness with the infinite and reaching "depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James, 1901, p. 287). He defined mystical experience in terms of four qualities, namely ineffability, noetic quality, transience and passivity. First, ineffability wherein qualities "must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others." Second, noetic quality, which are "illuminations" and "revelations" resulting in a feeling of oneness; transience, causing these experiences to "fade" because "mystical states cannot be sustained for long" and passivity. Passivity, namely entails that a fraction of recollection of mystical experiences always remains. Under this perspective James states that a mystic feels as if they "were grasped and held by a superior power." For him, a mystic's psychological experience is at the forefront of religion. These experiences are at the origin of religion which are then concretised into doctrine. The 'objective' existence of God or of the truth of religion becomes secondary in nature. What is important is the mystic's psychological experience. This view connects mystical experiences to a "secondary or alternative personality" (James, 1901, p. 288) wherein traditionally, 'God' becomes discoverable within and is relativized to the human psyche, in other words, psychologised.

An important example of the 'Spiritual but not religious' worldview can be seen in Frederic Spiegelberg and Alan Watts' view of 'The religion of no religion,' which asserts illumination can be attained through a secular world. Perennialists assert that; because all religions convey the same central message, one can take inspiration and even spiritual inspiration from various different religions. This is the fundamental view of scholars who identify themselves as 'pluralists.' To better illustrate this concept, I will now provide an example from my own observation. If one asks, "What if we didn't choose just one superhero to follow?" Instead of picking one set of rules or stories to live by, we look at all the different superheroes and learn something from each of them. We don't stick to one story but explore many, finding useful ideas everywhere. Each superhero has fundamental commonalities or something 'superhero like' about each one of them where none are exclusively right/wrong. However, scholars such as Alan Watts, who too believes in the 'Religion of no religion' worldview fails to account for the various distinctions that each religion has, that has been influenced by various social, economic and historic events and experiences. Perennialism, and invertedly, the speaker's conception of

‘spirituality’ fails to account for the socio-cultural factors that influence individual experiences. While the speaker may assume that it is possible to separate spirituality from religion, their definitions of the same remain constricted to a false understanding that religion and spirituality exist as separate entities.

Perennialists argue for the notion of universal truth whereas a branch of thought called constructionists argue that there is no such thing as universal truth to begin with. My argument rests on what some scholars have called the ‘constructionist’ framework. That is to say that “the individual constructs the surrounding world through his or her understanding, explaining experience and perception with mental constructs” (Tyson, 2012, pp. 80). To return to my earlier example of a perennialist viewpoint, this means, there is no universal, transcendent reality that a mystic can engage with or become one with and secondly, there are no natural experiences that exist outside of mental and cultural influences. I think the constructivist belief identifies a logical fallacy in the perennialist argument of absolute reality/truth because reality itself is relative. Hence, constructivism can be defined as, “the particular religious or cultural system that determines what “reality” is as well as how to achieve mystical union with it” (Tyson, 2012, pp. 81). Constructivists argue that spirituality and religion are not mutually exclusive because there are no un-mediated experiences. Let us consider different religious understandings of meditation, for instance, to illustrate this point. Many adherents of the 'spiritual but not religious' worldview would argue that meditation, in all religions, seeks one and the same essential truth or experience. I argue, however, that no such singular experience or truth exists. In fact, different religious traditions, by virtue of their different ontologies and soteriologies, construct particular experiences for the meditation practitioner. It occurs first on an individual level and second, more importantly, on a cultural level. It entails interpreting every “perception and experience,” which helps to form mental constructs that are interpreted using language and concepts influenced by culture and religious systems. An additional example to substantiate this claim can be seen through 'anatta' in Buddhism (no-self) vs 'soul' in Christianity, vs Brahman (Vedanta): all have different ontologies and soteriological principles which produce different kinds of experiences.

Our culture, the language we speak and most importantly, the conceptions we form about ourselves and the world; thus become very important in shaping our spiritual and religious experiences wherein each discipline influences the other. As constructivists argue, there is no absolute reality and the tools each belief system to become, what they think spiritual entails.

The fundamental fallacy observed is that James and Eckhart do not acknowledge that we are all prone to viewing the world under the influence of both cultural practices as well as implicit and explicit ontologies and our perceptions of the world. We, as writers, possess “pre-mystical

experiences.” The way in which we understand and report mysticism is limited not only to “experiential events” (James, 1901) but also to the “concepts” that define the mystics experience. While James is able to characterise religion and spirituality, he runs into certain crossroads such as “What does a pure experience mean? How do you know if you have had a genuine religious experience and it's not a dream or you're part of massive hysteria?” James too, assumes that there is one common and absolute truth due to which we can achieve these experiences. Additionally, he also forms a faint, yet distinct relationship between religion and spirituality thereby substantiating the belief that these two entities cannot be isolated. He says, the

“mystic feels their own soul is in abeyance and held by a supernatural/superior power. This connects mystical states with certain definite phenomena of secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance.” (James, 1901, p. 287)

Many 'spiritual but not religious' individuals might point towards the notion of a 'Higher Self,' 'Nirvana' or 'Moksha' that seems to be common to many, if not all, religions. However, these ideas are varied and shaped by distinct ideas of the world. For instance in philosophies such as Vedanta philosophy it is characterised as the Atman or the Brahman. Yet the Brahman is also referred “though one, takes new forms in all things that live. He is within all, and is also outside” (Swami, 2023, pp.54). On the other hand, Sufism is centred around the idea of uniting the soul with its infinite divine origin, Allah. For instance, different religions will have different ontologies and soteriologies and therefore cultivate different experiences. That is to say our concepts construct our experiences. Let us illustrate this through the example of ‘no-self.’ In Buddhist ideology, ‘no-self’ or anatta refers to the idea that humans are within, empty and there is no substance called the soul (Nicholson, 2012). The Sufi interpretation of the same argues that a sufi must be liberated from an “illusion of the self” (Hood, 2012) to experience real truth. Therefore, a mystic’s experience, influenced by a “historic socio-religious context” are the “only evidence” we have of this experience. Religion constructs different ontologies that shape each narration cannot be reduced, as perennialists may argue, to a single absolute truth. Every religion has a different soteriology, and there is nothing ‘universal’ because we are all shaped by different ontologies. An example will serve to illustrate my point. Suppose I hold bread, vegetables and cheese in my hand, in Spain one might make an empanada, in America, a pizza and in India, a samosa. Each different ingredient leads to different food which represents different ontologies. Similarly, while, like mystical experiences, one might use the same ingredients, these ingredients are influenced by one’s culture to produce different end products.

In conclusion, the phrase “I am not religious, but I am spiritual” reflects a complex interplay that has become embedded in modernist views on religion and spirituality. While the speaker may implicitly believe that a distinction is theoretically and practically possible for a separation

between the two, it is evident that religion and spirituality are deeply intertwined, with cultural, social, and historical factors shaping the various ontologies and experiences of different spiritual-religious traditions. My argument is deeply influenced by the constructionist perspective which highlights the influence of context on our spiritual experiences, challenging the notion of an absolute, universal truth.

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