

SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT GOD

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Part 1: What Spirituality Is—and What It's Not

Introduction—Defining Spirituality in Non-Religious Ways

It's obvious that if we're even to *entertain* the notion of a humanist spirituality we have to explicitly define it in ways that clearly distinguish it from spirituality as organized religion has historically portrayed it. . For any spirituality that we might see as descriptive of humanism must be devoid of any belief in the supernatural or divine intervention. In addition, we have to remain vigilantly aware that languaging in general is crucial when it comes to communicating accurately about humanism and the various concepts that comprise humanism . And not only do we need to choose our words with great care, but we also have to keep in mind that different forms of a word can carry different connotations.

Consider, for instance, spirituality and spiritualism. Virtually everyone would agree that the word *spiritualism* sounds a good deal more ethereal, mythic, or “woo-woo” than the word *spirituality*. Unquestionably, if asked which term would more likely conjure up images of a medium, crystal ball reader, or voodoo doctor, we'd almost immediately opt for the term *spiritualism*.

We also need to consider that over the centuries the concept of spirituality has evolved, so it's not simply that the word is hopelessly abstract or obscure so much as its meaning has expanded, especially as humans have generally become less religious and more secular. And there's no question but that more and more the word *spiritual* is being used in a non-theological sense.

To provide another instance of needing to be aware of different connotations for related terms, let's also consider the word *materialism*. There's *philosophical* materialism, which humanism is closely aligned with. For humanist philosophy involves looking at (and living in) the physical world of matter and energy, with no illusions and without imposing on it any superstitious beliefs. Then there's *economic* materialism, something else altogether, and which humanism is *not* readily identified with. And this is doubtless a good thing because this latter dimension of materialism is weighed down with negative connotations absent from the former.

All of which is to say that humanists would probably be a lot more comfortable being seen as *philosophical* materialists than they would *economic* materialists. Beyond this distinction, consider that the adjectival form of the word, *materialistic*, is regularly linked to acquisitiveness: the selfish pursuit of material objects, having as one's primary interest everything that money can buy—or the simple *ac-*

cumulation of money, mostly to feed one's ego and enhance one's worldly status.

So, where does the word *spiritual* come from in the first place?—which, for several reasons, is a crucial question here.

In a 1999 post on spirituality on *Psychology Today's* website, David Elkins, author of the book: *Beyond Religion: A Personal Program for Building a Spiritual Life Outside the Walls of Traditional Religion* (1998) makes the point that “the word *spirituality* derives from the Latin root *spiritus*, which means ‘breath’—referring to the breath of life.” To Elkins, “It involves opening our hearts and cultivating our capacity to experience awe, reverence, and gratitude. It is the ability to see the sacred in the ordinary, to feel the poignancy of life, to know the passion of existence and to give ourselves over to that which is greater than ourselves.”

Note that there's really nothing here that's incompatible with humanism—outside, that is, of the religion-associated words *sacred* and *reverence*, both of which also seem to me to cry out for a secular definition. So, for instance, we might understand what's sacred for an individual as simply that which they cherish, or hold dear.

I might add here that to be *inspired* means, if we de-construct the word, “in-spirited”—which is probably something *all* of us (however aware of it we may be) are searching for. In fact, the word *inspire* is employed twice in the Humanist Manifesto III. The religious seek inspiration from the supernatural and the Church, Synagogue, or Mosque; the *non*-religious look for it in mortal love—the love of humans for other humans, not the holy love of God, Christ, or Allah (or any *other* divine, worshipful being). The secular quest for spirituality also includes identifying ourselves as part of a larger community, as well as developing a vital, enthusiastic involvement with nature, the arts, and science. Here spiritual fulfillment equates with feeling fully, energetically, vibrantly alive and connected to others, as well as to the broader environment we live in.

I'd also add that art and nature, “spiritualized” as I've described them, offer secular individuals a *transcendent* experience—just as does great music, art, drama, and literature. Relating to a work of art not as a passive observer but as an active participant, in the sense of somehow getting *inside* the work is a secularly (if not singularly) transcendent experience in its going considerably beyond our ordinary, everyday experience. And immersing ourselves in nature—whether it be up in the mountains, down in the valleys, or by a brook, river, or ocean—offers us a similar experience of “oneness,” of becoming part of something far beyond ourselves. It can, I think, legitimately be seen as an expansion of self, a liberation of our spirit.

When, personally, I listen to, say, a late Anton Bruckner symphony, there's a certain indescribable grandeur and piety in the music that actually gives me a profound sense of what, emotionally, it must feel like to believe in a higher power, though I hold no such belief myself. Still, the music—written by

someone unquestionably devout—conveys a spiritual sense of life that I find peculiarly elevating. Though I don't share Bruckner's particular "brand" of spirituality, I'm yet able to personally *feel* the transcendence in the music. It may simple be the beauty, or gravitas, embedded in Bruckner's compositions, but every time I listen to these symphonies I get goose bumps and what I'd call an "altered state of consciousness." I choose to deem this experience *spiritual* because I don't know of any better word to describe it. My life may be grounded in the real world, but that hardly prevents me from relishing (though hardly worshipping!) experiences that many people would describe as "mystical"—that somehow manage to catapult us into another realm of existence.

Note also how close the word "inspire" is to "aspire"—which, again, takes us directly to the current version of the Humanist Manifesto, actually *subtitled* "Humanism and Its Aspirations." For humanism is very much about our having lofty goals that we strive to achieve because they're so closely related to optimal fulfillment, our greatest happiness. At its core, humanism is hardly about accumulating worldly things or living a self-centered, hedonistic life. It's about fully "owning" our lives and taking responsibility for creating richly meaningful goals for ourselves. And frankly, I think these ideals, subjectively, are much more accurately defined as spiritual than they are materialistic, naturalistic, or (well) secular.

For spirituality may best be seen as depicting the exalted or elated feelings that humans aspire to and, at least potentially, are capable of realizing. Such as the deeply satisfying feelings that come with acting honorably, generously, or altruistically—showing caring and concern for others, or the whole human community.

Here are some other descriptions that modern writers have offered to describe what they have in mind when—non-theistically—they employ the term *spirituality*:

Starting with the online, ever-updating, encyclopedia Wikipedia (which, personally, I've found unusually trustworthy in the area of humanism and spirituality), this comprehensive research tool defines *spirituality*—which, significantly, it equates to "the human spirit"—as having *always* been about the essence of what it means to be human, adding that what it means to be human—and thereby spiritual—"depend[s] upon the world view prevailing at any particular cultural or historical time." Emphasizing that the use of the term has changed through the ages, it notes that in modern times it's often *distinguished* from religion and concludes that there really exists no definitive definition for it. Which certainly suggests that, semantically, we have as much right to employ it secularly as does institutional religion to use it theistically.

More or less echoing Wikipedia's position is Rabbi Sherwin Wine, the author of many books on humanistic Judaism. As quoted by Bonnie Cousins, Wine, speaking at a conference, affirms that rationality is the key to "staying sane in a crazy world" (in fact, the title of one of his books). Still, he's not willing, as he puts it, "to relinquish spirituality to the religious [believing that] we live in a world

where *spirituality* has been redefined. No longer is its focus merely knowledge of God and the pursuit of salvation in the next world. Instead, [it can be seen] as the pursuit of happiness in this world. What many call *spirituality* . . . evolves from experiences of transcendence, beauty, and serenity that empower us. Whereas, in the past, access to God through magic or worship or gift-giving brought empowerment, today it is connection with others and with the natural world that provides empowerment.

Stephen Batchelor, in an article subtitled “Digging into the Humanist Heart of Buddhism” (*The New Humanist*, 2010), takes us in another direction. In this piece he stresses that the spiritual life has always been at once a search for meaning and for answers to the two key existential questions: “‘Who am I?’ and ‘Why am I?’ A search for truth, personal authenticity and reality, a search for ‘what is,’ a search for purpose: these are the foundations of the spiritual world.”

I’d suggest that in our Manifesto we’re essentially talking about the same thing, although we use a determinedly secular vocabulary to avoid defining such a search as spiritual—which, I think, it undeniably is. And it’s a pursuit that’s necessarily both personal and subjective, beyond the province of science. There’s just no single answer for that which is ultimate, or existential. And humanism *is*, after all, closely related to atheistic existentialism, which certainly doesn’t mandate that we *believe* in anything, but rather that we take full ownership for creating what’s personally meaningful to *us*—and then, pro-actively, strive to make it our reality.

In a piece called “The American Experience,” Nancy Frankenberry quotes the famous Spanish philosopher George Santayana as stating, idealistically, that “spirituality . . . direct[s] one toward goals . . . and that “spiritual individuals [are] disposed to a vision of excellence, loveliness, or preeminent goodness, and they [order] their conduct to realize that vision.” And does not this noble characterization of *spirituality* also seem consonant with our Manifesto, descriptive of its venerable humanist ideals?

One of my favorite definitions of spirituality is from Robert C. Fuller’s *Spiritual But Not Religious* (New York, 2001)—one of new fewer than *six* books by that name (!). And note, by the way, how the following quotation is free of any Christian assumptions about faith or the supernatural: “Spirituality exists wherever we struggle with the issues of how our lives fit into the greater scheme of things. This is true when our questions never give way to specific answers or give rise to specific practices such as prayer or meditation. We encounter spiritual issues every time we wonder where the universe comes from, why we are here, or what happens when we die. We also become spiritual when we become moved by values such as beauty, love, or creativity that seem to reveal a meaning or power beyond our visible world. An idea or practice is ‘spiritual’ when it reveals our personal desire to establish a felt-relationship with the deepest meanings or powers governing life.”

Larry Culliford, an English psychiatrist and author of the book *The Psychology of Spirituality*, is also a blogger for *Psychology Today*, his blog pointedly entitled “Spiritual Wisdom for Secular Times.” In 2011 he published a post attempting to distinguish worldly values from spiritual ones, making the

point that the latter set of values can be seen as combining the qualities of compassion, on the one hand, with wisdom, on the other. Such values include “honesty, trust, kindness, generosity, tolerance, patience, perseverance, discernment, humility, courage, beauty, and hope.” And inspecting the Humanist Manifesto clearly indicates that the values humanism extols overlap considerably with those this writer (and many others) identify as spiritual (vs. secular or materialistic).

Note that we’ve got a fairly serious semantic problem here, for various authors actually *define* our professed values as spiritual, not secular. In fact, the main issue with the word *secular* is that even though it rightfully identifies a humanist perspective as non-theistic, because the designation is so world-centered—rather than virtue-centered, or wisdom-centered—it implies that our focus is almost exclusively on earthly things. And not simply temporal pleasures, but also the common, ordinary—even the banal—versus the values most humanists aspire to live by. When our Manifesto explicitly expounds on our aspirations, I doubt that it’s referring to anything that materialist or mundane.

To provide yet another definition of spirituality not directly tied to any faith, I might bring in the psychologist Judith Goren, who in a piece called “Humanism and Spirituality: A Psychological Perspective” (1992) attempts to define humanist spirituality in these words: “Spirituality is a profound experience in which the experiencing person, in the present moment, feels expanded awareness, greater aliveness, deeper love, joy and awe, and senses the interconnectedness of his or her life to other people, events and to nature”—adding that “none of this has anything to do with the supernatural . . . and it is not separate from our daily experiences. It happens in the[se experiences] and through them.”

One of the most *inclusive* characterizations of spirituality is the “all-embracing” one proposed by Robert C. Solomon, a philosophy professor and self-proclaimed existentialist, whose book *Spirituality for the Skeptic* (2002) is well worth quoting:

“At the very minimum, spirituality is the subtle and not easily specifiable awareness that surrounds virtually everything and anything that transcends our petty self-interest. Thus there is spirituality in nature, in art, in the bonds of love and fellow-feeling that hold a community together, in the reverence for life (and not only human life) that is the key to a great many philosophies as well as religions. . . . Spirituality . . . is an expanded form of the self, which is emphatically not to say that it is an expanded form of selfishness. Rather, as many Buddhists have long argued, and Hegel more recently, it is that passionate sense of self-awareness in which the very distinction between selfishness and selflessness disappears.”

The Compatibility of What Might be Called “Humanist Spirituality” with a Variety of Secular Life Orientations

Spirituality of a humanist nature can be viewed as essentially harmonious with a variety of secular life orientations, complementing them by adding a more emotional / idealistic dimension to them. Most of

these orientations humanists are quite comfortable with, though they're too one-dimensional ever to appeal to most people. But adding a spiritual component to them—though non-theistically defined—makes them, I think, more palatable, engaging, and satisfying. And when I employ the term *humanist spirituality*, I'm referring to a spirituality grounded in natural experience *as well as* virtuous ideals and practices—as opposed to a spirituality based on stringent, unchanging religious dogma.

So how, for example, is the scientific orientation to life compatible with a spiritual one? The planetary scientist Carolyn Porco, in an interview in *The Humanist* (2008), talks about the spiritual dimension not in science itself (which must regard objectively everything it investigates), but of the *inner lives* of scientists—who, in awe of their findings, are nonetheless left with questions that their own scientific inquiries aren't equipped to answer.

In Porco's own words, "At the heart of every scientific inquiry is a deep spiritual quest to grasp, to know, to feel connected through an understanding of the secrets of the natural world, to have a sense of one's part in the greater whole. It is this inchoate desire for connection to something greater and immortal, the need for elucidation of the meaning of the 'self,' that motivates the religious to belief in a higher 'intelligence.' But the same spiritual fulfillment and connection can be found in the revelations of science."

And further, Porco states: "I consider myself to be a spiritual person. What does that mean? To me, a spiritual person is someone who seeks the extraordinary in the ordinary; someone who wants to know the underlying meaning of everything; someone who looks around them at everyday life and asks, "Is there a purpose to this? Where is this leading? What lies beyond? And how do I fit into this whole picture?"

Porco's interviewer then questions her about the non-scientific way she's describing her personal perspective, observing: "You don't hesitate to use the word 'spiritual,' which a lot of people who are naturalistic or don't have a god in their belief system really bristle at because it contains the word 'spirit,' and they think of a spirit as some kind of non-physical entity that exists in a supernatural realm." And Porco responds: "I think that the spiritual aspect of us wants to feel a connection, a connection to something much bigger. And I think it is a manifest human need because belief in God—belief in something greater—seems to exist in all cultures."

And Porco is hardly alone in her position. Adelle Banks, in a piece called "The Spiritual Lives of Atheist Scientists" (2011), notes that in a Rice University study over 20 percent of 275 atheist scientists interviewed in-depth regard themselves as spiritual—citing the lead author of this study as stating that what their research demonstrates is that "spirituality is not solely a pursuit of religious people . . . [which] challenges the idea that scientists, and other groups we typically deem secular, are devoid of those big 'Why am I here?' questions." Finally (and similar to Porco's viewpoint), scientists are seen as "view[ing] spirituality as congruent with science but not with religion because a religious commit-

ment requires acceptance of an absolute ‘absence of empirical evidence.’”

Robert Solomon echoes both Porco and Banks by going all the way back to the Greeks. He observes that “science like philosophy, as Aristotle wrote, is born of wonder, and the love of knowledge is as basic to spirituality as it is to science.”

Continuing in this vein, how might a secular spirituality be compared to the related philosophical orientations of materialism and naturalism, both of which focus on the realities of living on planet Earth. Similar to the scientific orientation, these perspectives are secular in nature, placing their trust in positions empirically derived and unwilling to abandon them to any abstract, undemonstrable faith. What’s real to them is what’s material, or natural: energy, matter, and other physical and chemical properties recognized by the scientific community. It’s the unchanging laws of nature operating in the real world—not in some imagined or mythic one—that underlie their beliefs.

But, like science in general, these kindred orientations simply aren’t equipped to deal with values that transcend their object- or energy-oriented focus. Material information, or facts derived from the scientific study of nature, can’t in themselves offer humans the set of values they need to feel assured they’re living lives of meaning and purpose. Nor can it provide them with the (secular) passion or emotional satisfaction that comes from dynamically engaging with life on a more spiritual plane. And this is another reason that these belief systems, if they’re to adequately address our core existential longings, need a spiritual dimension be added to them.

As is true of *all* the various life orientations outside the theistic, adding a spiritual element, secularly defined, doesn’t *compete* with these orientations, it *completes* them (as suggested by Carolyn Porco earlier). For non-mystically-defined spirituality can be seen as intrinsic to our nature—our “human spirit.” It’s only mystical or mysterious in the sense that it’s scientifically immeasurable, as it inhabits a domain eternally beyond science’s purview. Which isn’t to *criticize* science, merely to acknowledge its limits.

At its ethical core and in its aspirations, humanist spirituality probably most closely resembles the perspective of moral, or practical, idealism—even though humanism is much more reality-centered, more focused on what *is* than what could or *ought* to be. Still, humanism substantially overlaps with idealism in its honorable, high-minded concern with moral principles, values, and goals.

So even though humanists, pragmatically, have their feet planted firmly on the ground, they do share common ground with idealists. For humanism, too, has a lot to do with envisioning what does not yet exist: namely, a life on earth that’s more just, more equitable—in sum, one concerned with *everyone’s* well-being, as well as with the welfare of the planet. And in this sense humanism warrants being viewed *both* as a spiritual philosophy and practice (and a *pro-active* practice at that), and a form of idealism. It’s concerned with all that virtuous humans strive for, which transcend the survival-dominated (or merely pleasure-seeking) parts of us. And humanist aspirations don’t simply focus on

personal experiences of joy, passion, excitement, and fulfillment—though they definitely *include* these things. They also emphasize creating a world of fairness, freedom, peace, justice and equal opportunity for *everyone*—and not in some future lifetime but right here, right now.

This frankly idealistic aspiration for something *more* than what currently *is*, or that comes “naturally” to us, is peculiarly human. Other animals don’t have the intellect to conceive it, let alone endeavor to realize it. Only humans can dream of what, in a more evolved world, *might* be—the full potential and realization of our noblest nature, the conscientious protection of different animal species, and safeguarding our environment. In fact, if taking measures to keep our planet healthy—not just for ourselves but for generations to come (when we’ll long be dead)—doesn’t deserve to be called “idealistic”—or “spiritual”—than I really have very little idea what the spiritual—or, better, the *human spirit*—is all about. Nor can I think of a word that might better *capture* our aspiring toward such ideals than spiritual.

I can hardly over-emphasize the implications of the subtitle of our third version of the Humanist Manifesto: namely, “Humanism and Its Aspirations.” For such a description portrays humanists as adopting a set of principles, standards, and values that are indisputably idealistic. That is, the very heart of humanism is—and probably has *always* been—both an idealistic and spiritual philosophy in that it represents a vision of what we have within us to be. Consequently, it seems supremely ironic that because so many of today’s humanists see institutionalized religion as having preempted the term *spiritual*, they’re terribly reluctant to make use of it.

In terms of Eastern thought and spiritual practices, Buddhism in its original, and purest, form is in many respects hardly distinguishable from the spirituality *inherent* in the philosophy and morality of humanism. In my estimation, besides the doctrine of Karma and Reincarnation, the key difference between contemporary humanists and Buddhists (and there’s actually a branch of Buddhism *called* “Humanistic Buddhism”) is simply that our Manifesto shies away from all mention of anything spiritual.

In an article by Krista Kurth (*New Age Journal*, 1998), according to the Buddha we each have a purpose to fulfill in our lives, a purpose held to be sacred. And it’s our destiny to *discover* this purpose. Questions we need to ask to identify it include: “What speaks to me?” “What makes my life feel meaningful?”—not simply on a personal level but on a relational, communal, and *spiritual* level. And, finally, “What would best express my most cherished values and ideals, my highest vision or aspirations?”

And in another article, entitled “Buddhism and Humanism” (*Buddhism Today*, 2000), the comment is made that “with his compassionate purpose of promoting human interest and welfare—material, moral and spiritual—the Buddha . . . recognized human dignity and free choice and never wanted blind followers of his authority, who would accept and carry out his instruction without examining, testing and

trying its value, necessity and reason.”

And also, in a paper called “Buddhism and Secular Humanism” (*The Buddhist Blog*, 2007) the author points out that “Buddhism has a very accepting, positive attitude and view toward science. The Dalai Lama has even stated ... that if science proves an aspect of Buddhism in error then Buddhism must change to reflect the new reality,” and that “Humanism also believes that to better the world we all need to work together through reason, tolerance and an open minded exchange of ideas[,] which is important to Buddhism as well.”

Moreover, in defining the term “Buddhist humanism,” Wikipedia sees it as not *avoiding* the concept of the divine but as locating it within the life of the individual. And it doesn’t attribute to humans a special position above other forms of life (as, of course, does traditional Christianity).

One other life orientation that might be mentioned here which seems linked to humanist spirituality (though in a narrower sense) is political liberalism. A *Psychology Today* post connects the liberal stance (at once democratic and pluralistic) to a secularly-defined spirituality. In a piece called “Are Conservatives More Religious and Liberals More Spiritual?” Matthew Hutson reports on a fascinating distinction between religion and spirituality.

Citing a study in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2012), Hutson discusses how the researchers involved measured respondents’ religiousness (e.g., how important they felt church services were) and their spirituality (e.g., whether they’d ever felt deeply connected with the universe). They found that the more religious a person was, the more conservative they were, and “this relationship [was] strongly mediated by the value placed on tradition—respect for customs and institutions.” Contrariwise, they found that “the more spiritual a person [was] the more liberal [they were]. This relationship [was] mediated by the value placed on universalism—and social tolerance and concern for everyone’s welfare.”

Part 2: Secularizing the Term Spirituality—And Employing the Term “Secular Spirituality”

Up till now, I’ve attempted to show not only how various writers have sought to define spirituality generally (i.e., not in exclusively religious terms), but also to indicate how adding a secularly spiritual dimension to related philosophies and practices might serve to “complete” them. Next I’d like to describe what different authors have said in their efforts to *elaborate* on this “secular spirituality”—to characterize it as discrete and, if anything, purer or more virtuous than the spirituality exemplified by traditional religion. For *that* brand of spirituality has in many ways been corrupted over the course of history—through petty religious politics, prejudices, and power ploys; warmongering; and assorted hypocrisies.

Most writers on this topic feel no need to defend their non-theistic spirituality—either because they see it as every bit as laudable or legitimate as religious spirituality, or because they recognize the term

as a tradition both separate and distinct from Christianity. *And* as having origins going back over five hundred years before Christianity appropriated it as belonging solely to them.

In a piece called “A Humanistic Perspective on Spirituality” (1992), Unitarian Universalist lay preacher and author Doug Muder poses the question: “What if we had an authentically Humanist spiritual vocabulary that didn’t have to be borrowed or transplanted or reinterpreted?” going on to claim that “the people who invented Humanism already had an advanced spiritual practice. The Greek schools of the Hellenistic era—the Cynics, Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics—were the original Humanists, and their spiritual practice was consistent with their Humanism.” Examining each of these schools of thought, Muder concludes that they “represent the birthplace of modern western humanism.” And he sees the ideas of the Stoics in particular as best embodying “the full Humanist complex of ideas.” For example, they were against slavery, believed in the education of women, and envisioned a world community without war.

In a complementary essay titled “Humanist Spirituality: Oxymoron or Authentic Path to Enlightenment?” (2006), Muder questions (having in mind the controversy *within* current-day humanism) whether the terms *humanist* and *spirituality* are as oil and water to one another, or whether they actually can—and should—exist in harmony.

In his own words: “A . . . wall of stereotype stands between Athens and Jerusalem. Many Humanists from Christian families like to disentangle our intellectual roots from Christianity. We chart Humanism’s genealogy from Athens to pagan Rome to the Renaissance to the European Enlightenment. Christianity develops on the other side of the wall: from Jerusalem to Catholic Rome to the Dark Ages and the Protestant Reformation. Science is on our side of the wall, spirituality on their side. Even in Europe, *our* scientists (like Galileo) were persecuted by *their* popes.”

And then: “I don’t think I need to explain this to Jewish Humanists, but this wall doesn’t stand up to scrutiny from either side. The Jewish and Islamic influence on science goes without saying, and Christianity owes as much to Athens as to Jerusalem. Much of the Christian theory of the soul and the afterlife comes from Plato. And some roots of Christian mysticism go back to Greek sources like Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus.”

The contemporary French philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville, in his excellent treatise, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* (2007), has this to say on the matter: “There is nothing contradictory in the notion of a godless spirituality. Westerners are often surprised by this. Since for centuries the only socially observable spirituality in our part of the world has been a religion (Christianity), we have wound up conceiving *religion* and *spirituality* as synonymous. They are not, however! All we need do is take a few steps—either backward in time, particularly toward the traditions of Greek philosophy, or sideways in space, toward the Eastern traditions of Buddhism and Taoism, for instance—to discover that there have always existed, and still do exist, forms of spirituality that were or are not religions—at

least not in the Western sense of the word (a belief in one or more gods), and possibly not even in its broader sense (a belief in the sacred or the supernatural).”

Similarly, Peter H. Van Ness, in a book he edited called *Spirituality and the Secular Quest* (1996), writes in his introduction that “the origins of secular spirituality, like the origins of secularity itself, are assumed to be located primarily in the theoretical and practical rationalism of ancient Greece and Rome.”

In an essay in Van Ness’s book, David E. Aune, citing several sources, observes that “in short, being spiritual does not preclude one’s allegiance to a particular institutionalized religion, nor does it *require* [my emphasis] such an allegiance.”

And, as one final reference here, Mark I. Wallace, in this same collection of essays, notes that “the European Enlightenment is one of the many historic sources for the varieties of secular spirituality practiced today. Sometimes referred to as the Age of Reason or the Cult of Reason, the Enlightenment promoted a program of new thinking centered on the belief that humankind should be freed to exercise its own reason unfettered by the shackles of religious superstition and political tyranny.” And so liberated, “the enlightened person will be empowered to pursue his or her own moral and rational interests.”

What all these explanations add up to is a powerful argument against many Christians today who accuse non-Christians of trying to steal the word *spirituality* out from under them. In a piece written for Wordpress (2012), Al Stefanelli contests this assumption, in part through citing a passage from Wikipedia: “Traditionally, many religions have regarded spirituality as an integral aspect of religious experience. Among other factors, declining membership of organized religions and the growth of secularism in the western world have given rise to a broader view of spirituality. The term *spiritual* is now frequently used in contexts in which the term “religious” was formerly employed.”

Looking at it the other way around, Robert C. Solomon reflects that “spirituality has been kidnapped by religion” and that “more than a few religious sects and cults find spirituality as exclusively particular to themselves, [claiming that] “to be spiritual is to believe in God, *in exactly [their] way!*”

Elsewhere in his book Solomon writes: “Spirituality and religion are not the same. Although one might identify spirituality in terms of what John Dewey once called a “religious attitude,” spirituality is a much broader concept than the rather specialized notion of religion. Despite the glib exclusivity of too many religious demagogues who insist that spirituality is synonymous with their (and only their) religion or sect, there are many meanings as well as modes of spirituality, and no religion has an exclusive or even a special right to consider itself the true path to spirituality. *Spirituality is a human phenomenon [vs. a religious one]. It is part and parcel of human existence, perhaps even of human nature* [emphasis added].”

Earlier, I provided various descriptors of spirituality that were foundational and not tied to any particular religion. Now I want to supply some additional definitions, as they've been specifically linked by their authors to a *secular* spirituality. But before doing this, let me say a few additional words about secularizing words historically connected with religious doctrine.

As a former English professor, I see nothing inherently wrong about adapting words to fit ongoing changes in society and culture. In fact, language usage changes all the time: one of the reasons that dictionaries must regularly release new editions. Moreover, dictionaries don't *dictate* usage, they follow it—even though such shifts frequently take place because of common misunderstandings. Even grammatical forms change over time (and also not for the best of reasons). So, for example, *empathic* becomes *empathetic* simply because so many people mistakenly link the word to *sympathetic*.

If humanists need to secularize a term in order to most effectively communicate their viewpoint, then even though the word—such as *spiritual*—has historically been employed mostly in a religious context, there's no compelling reason *not* to, as long they make clear that they're adapting the term to fit a secular perspective. There simply isn't any realistic alternative when no other term available comes as close to capturing the meaning they wish to convey. Or the word they might *prefer* is now archaic (or so abstruse that no one, except an etymologist, could deduce its import). Also, keep in mind that over time many religious terms have become secularized (like *adore* or *bliss*), or have carried secular meanings, alongside their religious ones, pretty much from the beginning. As often as not, there's no viable modern-day equivalent for a word that's traditionally been employed theistically.

Consider that humanists and laypeople generally have already seen fit to secularize many terms typically used in a theological sense. Many so-called “sacred” words have been adapted for profane, non-religious use. *Meditation* is just one example—and the practice of meditation can be seen as spiritual whether its goal is to get closer to some imagined god, or whether it's meant to free the mind from the trivial and mundane, and achieve a more evolved state of consciousness. And the same might be said of the Buddhist word for *mindfulness*.

Since almost literally there's nothing new under the sun, doubtless humanists—unless they're to resort to neologisms—must extrapolate from other belief systems language that best expresses the particular values it has in common with them. If anything, humanism probably needs to emphasize that many of the highest ideals of western religion are ones that it shares: for example, a general belief in an ethic based on the golden rule, which actually is characteristic of virtually *all* religions. At their uncorrupted best, religions advocate noble principles and values, aspiring to have its members lead a life that transcends the mere gratification of appetites and impulses. And so—in essence—does humanism.

So there's really nothing wrong in humanists embracing assumedly “Christian” terms that reflect these higher ideals, even though humanists typically seek to *achieve* these ideals in a substantially different

manner. And as indicated earlier, humanism isn't really "borrowing" from other belief systems at all, for it's been around longer than they have. The main point is that there are certain philosophical and ethical tenets common to *many* belief systems, and contemporary humanism hardly needs to deny, neglect, or avoid pre-existing terms merely to protect its theoretical purity.

The morality of humanists is based on values they regard as critical to leading virtuous lives. And in freely choosing to abide by these values, I think they're, in effect, *defining* themselves as spiritual beings. They do what they do not because of any blind faith in a supernatural Being, but as a matter of duty to *themselves*—a duty I'd call "secularly sacred" in that it's a personal commandment or imperative. And it's as meaningful to them as the religious dogma literally billions of people follow, without ever questioning how well it actually suits them. (And if asked *why* humanists are so concerned with leading ethical lives, I'd reply that this is how they get their sense of personal dignity.)

So, assuming we're circumspect about it, we can certainly take a religious term and adapt it to a secular context. In other words, we can retain the original concept, which has intrinsic value and which, over time, has likely taken on meanings *not* associated with religion anyway, for our own humanist purposes. And this includes not simply a word like *spirituality*, but also adjectives like *sacred*, *mysterious*, *numinous*, *transcendent*, *glorious*, *exalted*, *revered*, and *venerable*—as well as nouns like *passion*, *rapture*, and *ritual*. Additionally, Harvard University Chaplain Greg Epstein points out that there's no reason not to modify certain religious terms when it's facilitative to do so, offering as an example the term *godparents*, which is easily enough "secularized" to *guideparents*.

Anyhow, here's a sample of some efforts that have been made not only to define non-religious—or secular—spirituality as distinguishable from orthodox theistic spirituality, but also to give it a status which places it, ethically, rather *above* religious spirituality, whose validity can be challenged because of all the human abuses committed, and blood shed, in its name. Or, as Andre Comte-Sponville puts it: "Spirituality is far too important a matter to be left to fundamentalists."

In fact, Robert Solomon talks about how he shares with the humanist philosopher Bertrand Russell "the conviction that the history of Western religion is a horror story, a history of intolerance, persecutions, and massacres—what the philosopher Hegel called 'the slaughter bench of history.'" Believing that there should be "a home for spirituality outside the walls of the world's established religions," Solomon describes his book as a search "for nonreligious, noninstitutional, nontheological, nonscriptural, nonexclusive sense of spirituality, one which is not self-righteous, which is not based on Belief [with a capital "B"], which is not dogmatic, which is not antiscience, which is not other-worldly, [and] which is not uncritical or cultist or kinky."

In a similar vein, Robert C. Fuller, gives us this generally apt description: "Secular spirituality emphasizes humanistic ideas on qualities such as love, compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, responsibility, harmony, and a concern for others, aspects of life and human experience

which go beyond a purely materialist view of the world, without necessarily accepting belief in a supernatural reality or divine being. Spiritual practices such as mindfulness and meditation can be experienced as beneficial or even necessary for human fulfillment without any supernatural interpretation or explanation.” Still, as Peter Van Ness astutely observes: “If a regimen of meditation is undertaken purely for utilitarian reasons, for example, to increase a job performance or lower one’s blood pressure, then . . . it loses its claim to being [regarded as spiritual].”

Al Stefanelli supplements this definition in part by focusing more on the ethical dimension of secular spirituality. In his words: “Spirituality, for the secularist, means being morally guided by ethics and conscience rather than by Scripture or doctrine. We are individual thinkers and our sense of spirituality is not formed from tradition or authority. [And it] shouldn’t have anything to do with what we eat, drink or smoke, and certainly not what we do with our bodies or whom we do it with.”

I’d also like here to bring back Robert Solomon here because he introduces a term that might be much less controversial for humanists to adopt than to rely solely on the word *secular*. Solomon talks not about “secular spirituality” but about “*naturalized* spirituality,” which might be an effective way to get around the many negative connotations that have become attached to *secular*—its routinely getting linked by fundamentalist Christians and right-wing political pundits to the position of being hostile toward God—atheistic in the most intolerant, confrontational, belligerent sense.

Here’s how Solomon employs the term: “Spirituality . . . has a lot to do with thoughtfulness . . . is not at odds with, but rather in cahoots with science, [and is] by no means limited to religion, much less sectarian, authoritarian religion.” Further, “These presumptions in turn prompted my affirmation of what I call naturalized spirituality in my summary Hallmark-card phrase, ‘spirituality as the thoughtful love of life.’” And does that simple phrase not somehow get to the very lifeblood of humanism?

Later in his book, Solomon returns to the idea of “naturalized spirituality” when he talks about both Nietzsche’s and Hegel’s attempt to “‘revalue’ and revise our concept of spirituality . . . to *naturalize* [it], to get away from ‘other worldly’ religions and philosophies, and to re-appreciate or ‘reenchant’ everyday life. The idea is to recombine spirituality with science and nature rather than play them off against each other. Thus, for Hegel, nature is spiritual and spirituality is nothing less than nature fully developed in us. For Nietzsche, spirituality is as much a matter of ‘physiology’ as it is a function of the (necessarily embodied) soul.”

And finally, Solomon makes the point that “spirituality naturalized is not just for the chosen few. It is nothing less than the realization of what is best in all of us . . . [and that] it is spirituality and not always religion that calls on us to embrace others and love our neighbors as ourselves.” Solomon also takes care to add: “Naturalized spirituality is not opposed to but embraces the material world, the appetites, sex and sensuality, the body, and possibly even fast cars, money and luxury, all in their proper place. One need not live in a sackcloth to be spiritual, as the Buddha finally discovered in his explora-

tions.”

Perhaps the simplest *working* definition of secular spirituality is to be found in Wikipedia, which describes it as “the pursuit of spirituality without a formal affiliation with a church, or other religious organization, or the pursuit of spirituality specifically in the context of temporal affairs.” And it also notes that secular spirituality go[es] beyond a purely materialist view of the world, [but] without . . . accepting [a] belief in a supernatural reality or divine being.”

To offer one final definition of secular spirituality, consider Van Ness’s pithy definition in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*: “Secular spirituality reflects an attempt to locate optimal human experience within a nonreligious context of existential and cosmic meaning.” And note how the phrase “optimal human experience” suggests something other than that which is material or naturalistic, but rather something more ideal, maybe even visionary.

Part 3: Secular Humanists’ Arguments Against Using the Term *Spirituality*—and Why It Still Warrants Inclusion in Our Lexicon

So what, exactly, is the case that’s been made *against* incorporating the whole notion of spirituality, however secularly defined, into the humanist lexicon? For, needless to say, the term is frequently frowned upon by members of the American Humanist Association (AHA).

Tom Flynn, an author and Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism, is probably one of the most vocal spokespeople against humanists’ using the word “spiritual.” So I’ll start with him. From a piece entitled “Taken in the Wrong Spirit” (2012), he remarks, “Whenever I hear the word *spiritual*, I reach for my revolver.” He does then go on to qualify his annoyance with the term by adding: “Well, not really. But I’ve learned the hard way that on hearing [the word], it’s good practice to reach for the question, ‘What precisely do you mean by that?’”

My initial response to this is, “Well, fair enough. Spirituality as a concept *is* awfully abstract, its meaning (or *meanings*) elusive to the point that it’s only reasonable a scientifically oriented humanist would feel uncomfortable with it. So, unquestionably, when we use the term we ought to make it perfectly clear that we’re employing it in a naturalistic—or “naturalized”—sense.

And in fact this is a point I’ve been making all along. Indisputably, the word can be as misused, *has* been misused—and overused—like many other abstract terms. The word *love* immediately comes to mind, which has been employed, unqualified, to allude to almost everything imaginable. And I should also add that, personally, I’ve found that regardless of how clearly I communicate an idea, if the other person isn’t ready to hear me—or if they can’t help projecting their own viewpoint onto mine—I’ll be misconstrued. But that hardly means that humanists, because of such a fear, should flee from terms like *spirituality* altogether.

Even beyond this, the word *spiritual* is difficult to manage because it can be used in three totally different contexts. We can talk of *values* as spiritual (such as generosity, forgiveness, compassion, and selflessness), we can speak of intensely personal *experiences* as spiritual (such as reaching the top of a mountain, or caring for a dying loved one), or we can describe a *practice, rite, or ritual* as spiritual (such as meditation, a pilgrimage, holy communion, or bar mitzvah—or *anything* that’s in some way celebratory, ceremonious, or communal).

So with the designation *spiritual*, as with the variously defined word *love*, it’s imperative that in whatever context we introduce the term, we take pains to define it humanistically. The main problem is that if secular humanists feel the need to ignore the word completely, what most people will conclude is that humanists actually decry the whole *notion* of spirituality—even though it can be demonstrated that most of the ideals, experiences, and lifestyle choices humanists advocate have traditionally been viewed as spiritual. Why, then, would we want to abandon a term that has so many positive—even *noble*—meanings associated with it?

Getting back to Tom Flynn, he also claims that the word *spiritual* is used to refer “to a class of entities [such as looking at a sunset] that are wholly imaginary.” For the emotions they elicit “are ultimately rooted in brain or endocrine function.” So, “if there’s nothing immaterial about them, they’re not spiritual.” Notice here how Flynn categorically denies spirituality the right to any legitimate existence in a distinct realm of experience, defining it in a purely physical way. By doing so, Flynn (for his particular purposes) essentially *redefines* spirituality in such a de-limiting, even degrading, fashion that he can then glibly dismiss the whole concept as “imaginary.” He doesn’t *need* to get out his revolver: he’s *already* annihilated—as unscientific—its essential viability.

Fred Edwords—for 15 years the Executive Director of AHA, a past editor of *The Humanist*, and currently the director of The United Coalition of Reason—wrote in an e-mail to me that “perhaps the single greatest detriment to the wider use of ‘spiritual’ in our community is the word’s imprecision. It’s an easy word to say but not to control, as it conjures up vastly different things in different minds. Thus it frequently fails to communicate clearly, both to those inside and outside our movement.” But as I’ve already argued at some length, humanists need to take special care when they employ the term that they’re communicating—as lucidly as possible—how *they* understand the term. What’s critical here is to get non-humanists—or not *yet* humanists—to grasp just what humanists mean when they’re using (or better, *adapting*) the word, so that these “outsiders” can appreciate that if they’re “spiritual but not religious,” well, in their own secular way, so are *humanists*.

Edwards himself suggests that to avoid being misunderstood, if “you’re talking about a sense of awe and wonder at the universe, just say, ‘It gave me a sense of awe.’” But I’d contend that generally it’s *not* just some passive sense of awe we’re experiencing. It’s a larger-than-life sense of *connection* to something outside ourselves—a transcendent engagement or participation—and whether it’s with the

universe or, for that matter, other humans (or even with ourselves). And this, typically, is *felt* by the individual as something spiritual. Which is to say that the word (as most people, I think, interpret it) can capture something of the complex, ineffable *core* of such an experience more acutely, more poignantly, than can the simpler, more compact word *awe*. It's just more capable of suggesting the extra-ordinary, holistic experience of "surpassing" our everyday consciousness and sensing ourselves as felicitously *merging* with something much greater and more meaningful than ourselves.

Eschewing the word *spiritual*, as numerous humanists do, unfortunately implies to many people that humanism isn't only atheistic but also *anti-spiritual*—and maybe even *nihilistic*. That it believes only in material reality (and perhaps, too, a hedonistic lifestyle). And *do* humanists want to risk giving that impression to the so-called Nones—as in "none of the above" (i.e., those individuals who've become disenchanted with their religion and may well be searching for a more secular "community" to affiliate with). Obviously, we *don't* want to give them the impression that our ideals or practices must be sharply distinguished from that which is spiritual—especially since to most people today spiritual values *aren't* exclusively linked to religion, superstition, or the supernatural.

Roy Speckhardt, the present Executive Director of AHA, also e-mailed me his position on the matter, stating: "While I try to keep an open mind about possibilities related to using our brains to perceive that which is beyond our known senses, I remain highly skeptical for a couple of reasons." And here Speckhardt talks about experiences that are "unpredictable" and "unreplicable," that can't be reproduced in "laboratory-like settings" and might possibly be given "inaccurate meanings" by the person experiencing them—as though *personal, subjective* meanings ascribed to an experience can't be seen as valid unless they can be *scientifically* validated.

But accepting such a standard of verification would impose on one's personal experiences—and the principles, values, and ideals they symbolize—a set of criteria belonging to an entirely different realm of knowing. To me, it's not logical to take a person's unique experience, which is *felt* (subjectively) to be spiritual, and hold it to some presumably *objective*, scientific standard. And in using the word *spiritual* here, I mean that whatever the stimulus might have been, the individual *experienced* it as reverential, extraordinary, revelatory . . . even mystical.

Speckhardt seems to be questioning whether we ought to be accepting something as true if it can't be subject to some sort *objectification* or *quantification*. But an individual's experience *can't* be validated or (for that matter) *invalidated* through such empirical means. Spirituality, secularly (as opposed to dogmatically) defined, is grounded solely in the person's particular experience, so it can't be replicated. Nor can such experiences be "contrived" in laboratory settings because they're unwilling and spontaneous.

And would an experience *reacted* to as spiritual—as impassioned, compelling, deeply moving, and profound—be any less so because it failed to meet certain scientific standards? And who would decide on these standards anyway? Science can disconfirm the accuracy, or legitimacy, of certain established

beliefs (such as the Earth being flat. or otherwise we'd all fall off). But it's hardly designed to evaluate the individual meaning—or authenticity—of personal experience. What, finally, I think we're confronted with is a confusion between two eternally distinct ways of understanding. And we can no more deduce what's spiritual from science than we can determine what's scientific from the spiritual.

Almost literally echoing my conclusion here is Larry Culliford who, in a *Psychology Today* post called “What Is Spirituality?” states that “spirituality cannot be explored using scientific methods because it involves deeply personal, subjective experiences, and in this it differs from the over-riding ambition of science: to be objective. *Both* are necessary and appropriate, complementary formulas for discovering ourselves, each other, our environment, the universe . . . and especially an enduring sense of purpose and meaning.”

Seen in this light, how many of us *haven't* had an experience of this nature—what at the time you may have felt to be a “peak experience” (to use Abraham Maslow's term), or an “altered state of consciousness”: an experience that gave you a heightened sense of existence, a singular feeling of aliveness as special and dramatically engaging as it was unexpected? Something that made you feel a mind-expanding joy, an unprecedented intimacy with another, or a sense of connection to the whole human community, or the vastness of our planet. And, assuming that you *did* at some point, can you think of a better word to describe it than *spiritual*?

So far, to support my viewpoint, I've taken the liberty of quoting various authors. Consequently, I think it's overdue that I quote myself (!). And the one pretext for my doing so is located in a 2012 issue of *The Humanist* where I was myself interviewed—specifically as a humanist psychologist. And that's when I first went on record advocating that secular humanists take a more benign stance toward the use of the term *spirituality*. To the question posed to me: “What is the role of religion in your clinical practice?” I responded: “Rarely is humanism considered a religion, and in describing their beliefs many humanists prefer to avoid the term *spirituality* altogether. Still, I've always regarded humanist *ideals* as quite spiritual in that they celebrate non-materialistic values I personally cherish—values that are (ahem) ‘secularly sacred’ to me.”

At that point I went on to enumerate these values, taking my talking points almost directly from the Humanist Manifesto in saying that “humanism extols such virtues and ideals as courage, fortitude, innovation and creativity, generosity, empathy and compassion. And—perhaps more broadly—it reveres altruism and a deep sense of community, justice and equal opportunity, and living in harmony with nature. Beyond that, humanism affirms the inherent value and dignity of *all* humans, independent of their religion or socio-economic status.”

In short, although humanists do not share the kind of authoritarian belief system that characterizes virtually all institutionalized religions. the particular *values* and *virtues* they extol are every bit as spiritual (which is to say, laudatory, lofty, or visionary) as do traditional faiths. One simple example of this would be humanists' endeavoring to live by the golden rule, alluded to at least twice in the Bible and promoted by almost all religions. No doubt a great many humanists would prefer simply to de-

scribe their values as, well, “humanistic.” But the question yet remains: which of these three descriptors—materialistic, naturalistic, or spiritual—would they think most accurately portrays these values to *non*-humanists?

It’s curious that later in the year 2012, Gloria Steinem was also interviewed by *The Humanist*. And her viewpoint closely complements my own. When she is asked by *Humanist* editor Jennifer Bardi whether she considers herself a humanist, she replies: “Yes, a humanist except that humanism sometimes is not seen as inclusive of spirituality. To me, spirituality is the opposite of religion. It’s the belief that all living things share some value. So I would include the word *spiritual* just because it feels more inclusive to me. Native Americans do this when they offer thanks to Mother Earth and praise the interconnectedness of the two-legged and the four, the feathered and the clawed, and so on.”

As should be obvious by now, I think Steinem’s caveat is well-taken. *Does* AHA, which seems to emphasize its link to *secular* humanism (rather than *all* of humanism—including, to some degree, the religious humanism of Unitarian Universalists) really want to hazard being perceived as *exclusive*? in some way *elitist*? Has the term *spirituality* come to seem like just another word for *superstitious*? or *vague*? or *mystical*?

And recall that it’s not even a matter of taking the word away from the religionists, or becoming more like them. It’s about taking the word *back* from them since, as suggested earlier, the first humanist movement originated with Greeks living literally over five hundred years before Christianity came into being. Moreover, in taking the concept *back*—in scrupulously “re-owning” it—we can unload some of the encumbrances it’s taken on from the supernatural, faith-based baggage that’s become attached to it. And with all the hypocrisies demonstrated, and horrors perpetrated, by traditional religions in the name of some almighty, the very term *spiritual* cries out for a virtuous humanist definition.

Here I’d like to bring in Sarah Sentilles, author of the book *Breaking Up with God*, who in an article in *The New Humanism* (2011) cites the theologian Ludwig Feuerbach, who wrote a classic book on humanism (all the way back in 1841!) called *The Essence of Christianity*. In this book, as described by Sentilles, “Feuerbach argues that Christianity has taken everything good about humanity and projected it onto God. All of the good things that belong to us—love, generosity, strength, beauty, justice—we’ve given to God. God and humans have been mistakenly constructed as opposites, but the good news, at least according to Feuerbach, is that this situation can be easily fixed: All we need to recognize is that the qualities we’ve assigned to God actually belong to humanity.” As Sentilles (who was once almost an Episcopal priest but now can’t even call herself a Christian) puts it: “I have taken the faith I used to have in God, and I have invested it in human beings. I am convinced that humanity has everything we need to make the world a more just and life-giving place for everyone—though whether or not we will choose to do so is a different question altogether.

In other words, the same spiritual qualities ascribed to (or projected onto) God need to be reconceptualized as attainable human ideals. That which we see as spiritual in the supernatural needs to be

brought back down to earth, to the human level. For humans aspiring to move beyond their self-centered wants and needs represent humans at their spiritually striving best, conscientiously endeavoring to realize ideals that—as humans, not gods—they have the capacity to reach.

Part 4: Why We Need to Start Using the Term Spiritual in Promoting Ourselves to the Undecided

I think it's useful to note that the Humanist Manifesto III doesn't only omit the words *spirit*, *spiritual*, and *spirituality*. It also leaves out all forms of the words *emotion* and *passion*. It may be that in the effort to stress that humanism doesn't represent some kind of star-gazing, New Age, airy-fairy movement—and that our philosophical tenets are solidly grounded in rationality and science—we may inadvertently have created a false dichotomy between reason and emotion. In our idealism, we may inadvertently have portrayed humanism as overly *cerebral*—a little too detached from what, I think, most people would agree constitutes the most vital, joyful aspects of being alive.

Rick Heller, in an article called “More Than Logical: A Place for the Emotions in Humanism,” reflects that “feelings are essential to human flourishing and optimal decision-making.” I'd add that though our core principles must always stand up to critical scrutiny, if our current movement is to proliferate, AHA probably needs to assign a more prominent role to feelings and emotions. And that, I think, would substantially increase its appeal to those who, disenchanted with their religion, are either in the process of leaving it or have *already* left it.

Let me quote a few passages from Robert Solomon's *Spirituality for the Skeptic* that should further clarify where I stand on the interrelationship between reason, emotions, and spirituality. As Solomon puts it: “Spirituality . . . embraces both emotion *and* rationality, both philosophy *and* religion. While religions . . . seem to me to be overly parochial and exclusive . . . spirituality, while admitting of any number of local variations, remains truly nonsectarian and international. I now think that it is what philosophy [which literally can be defined as] the love of wisdom, is all about.”

And further expanding on this idea, Solomon adds: “Spirituality means to me the grand and thoughtful passions of life, and a life lived in accordance with those grand thoughts and passions. Spirituality embraces love, trust, reverence, and wisdom, as well as the most terrifying aspects of life, tragedy, and death.” Attempting to elucidate his terms more specifically, Solomon later adds that “what I am calling the passionate life is . . . a life defined by emotions, by impassioned engagements, and quests, by embracing affections”—emphasizing that “a life without passion would be a life barely worth living, the life of a zombie, an automaton”

Speaking not about humanism but about contemporary philosophy generally, he notes that “as philosophy has become increasingly and self-consciously scientific, it has become divorced from the anguish and wonder that is the soul of human life and once provided the soul of philosophy too . . . [and also that the phrase] ‘be rational,’ in many circles, is tantamount to simply dismissing spirituality from the discussion.”

To Solomon, although “spirituality is first of all a matter of emotion, we . . . need to develop a conception of spirituality that is rational as well,” going on to suggest [perhaps somewhat hyperbolically] that reason and the passions are not only complementary but ultimately one and the same. And here he quotes Friedrich Nietzsche as theorizing: “. . . as if every passion does not contain its quantum of reason and ‘reason [itself] is . . . a state of the relations between different passions and desires.’ To contrast reason and the passions, to juxtapose the rationality of reason against the irrationality of the emotions, is to talk as if reason and emotion occupied two distinct realms of human existence But the passionate life, the spiritual life, it is not irrational, without reasons or against reason. [And] it is a poor excuse for spirituality that eschews reason in favor of an uncritical and indiscriminate emotionality.” Finally, to this author, “not only do our passions and emotions provide us with reasons but . . . the passionate life may itself be the rational way to live.”

Solomon also notes that “one of the themes . . . in [his] book is . . . that spirituality is neither rational nor emotional but both at once, both Apollonian and Dionysian, as Nietzsche would say. Spirituality is living beyond one’s self, discovering a larger self or, what amounts to almost the same thing, achieving what the Buddhists and Taoists refer to as ‘no self.’ . . . [And] what opposes spirituality is not naturalism, or secularism, or even materialism, but petty egoism, vanity, and vulgarity.”

Obviously, the author’s argument is one I’m happy to quote at length, for what I’ve been emphasizing all along is that spirituality needn’t be seen as contrary to these three philosophies or lifestyles, but as depicting a dimension of existence *complementing* these related approaches—which, in themselves, are too limited to adequately address the perennial human yearning to identify the self with something larger and loftier—something more compelling, meaningful, and personally fulfilling.

So, let’s now consider the “nones” and the “sbnrs”—the nones referring to those who no longer identify with any religion, and the acronym *sbnrs* designating those who regard themselves as spiritual but lacking any religious affiliation (“sbnr” being shorthand for “spiritual but not religious”). This latter classification no doubt also includes a good many nones—as well as, according to Wikipedia, the “un-churched, spiritual atheists, spiritually eclectic, unaffiliated, freethinkers, or spiritual seekers.” The term *sbnr* has been employed internationally but seems most common in America. And Wikipedia cites one recent survey as reporting that as many as 33 percent of the population identify themselves as *sbnr*, though other studies have come up with lower percentages. One of the most interesting statistics here is from *USA Today*, which in 2010 claimed that no fewer than 72 percent of Generation Y identify themselves as “more spiritual than religious.”

My own take on all of this is that when individuals declare themselves to be spiritual but not religious, what most of them have in mind is that they’re trying to live their lives by principles that are basically humanistic. I think a lot of people out there don’t realize that while they’re not self-proclaimed humanists they’re *de facto* humanists.

By now, many writers have tried to suggest just *what* these seekers are looking for. And I’ll offer just a small sampling of their views.

In an excerpt in *The Humanist* (2009) from Greg Epstein's book *Good Without God*, the author cites *Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt (derided by the right wing as the magazine's "Atheist in Chief") as making the point that "atheism alone, as the rejection of gods and the supernatural, cannot meet our deepest human needs for connection and inspiration." Epstein then quotes writer Jonathan Haidt's words that "even atheists have intimations of sacredness, particularly when in love or in nature. [They] just don't infer that God caused those feelings."

I'd add myself that what, after all, is the essence of making, or even *appreciating*, art—and in an enormous variety of forms—if not our taking what we find in the world and transforming it into something illuminating, and maybe revelatory—something that affords us uncommon insight into our lives, or life itself, and which we also take aesthetic pleasure from? Surely, we might refer to the whole creative process as a spiritual endeavor.

Beyond pleasure-seeking, I think we all need to feel part of something bigger than ourselves, need to transcend the trivialities of daily life and get in touch with something that will inspire, or "in-spirit," us. And I don't think that *any* of this is inextricably tied to religion. Rather, it's biologically *embedded* in us—in our "human spirit." And this desire to go *beyond* the ordinary, or commonplace, is about experiencing a certain "immortality" in our mortality—as though we're embarked on a dynamic venture that can, at least symbolically, liberate us from inevitable lifespan limitations.

William Wordsworth revealed an intimation of this in one of his most famous poems, observing that "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in Nature that is ours; . . ." And this passage is complemented, I think, by Andre Comte-Sponville who, in *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, remarks: "Sensing nature in all its immensity is a spiritual experience—because it helps the spirit break free, at least partially, of the tiny prison of the self."

And elsewhere in this book Comte-Sponville ponders that "people can do without religion . . . but they cannot do without . . . spirituality. . . . [And] the human spirit is far too important a matter to be left up to priests, mullahs, or spiritualists. It is our noblest part, or rather our highest function. . . . 'Man is a metaphysical animal,' said Schopenhauer—and therefore, I would add, a spiritual animal as well. . . . What could be better, loftier or more fascinating than the spirit? Not believing in God is no reason to amputate a part of our humanity, especially not *that* part! Renouncing religion by no means implies renouncing spiritual life."

I'd like to note here that Comte-Sponville, similar to Robert Solomon, doesn't denigrate rationality but views it as secondary to that which he deems spiritual. Ironically, though our Manifesto *appears* to imply that rationality is our best and highest faculty, a closer reading shows it to be almost completely in accord with the spiritual dimension of life both Solomon and Comte-Sponville so warmly commend.

In his article "A Humanist Perspective on Spirituality," Doug Muder talks of our being "engaged in a

spiritual undertaking whenever we yearn for an integrated view of self and of human destiny within some larger picture: a picture capable of ordering and making sense out of our daily experience.” And I’d ask whether the peculiarly human pursuit of enlightenment is not itself best understood as a “spiritual quest” (regardless of how neuroscientists might prefer to conceptualize it in terms of the brain structures involved)? After all, humanists can rightfully be understood to be seeking wisdom as an essential part of living a good life.

David Elkins, in a post published in *Psychology Today* (1999), comments that “studies show that Americans want spirituality, but perhaps not in *religious* form. Alluding specifically to a study done at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he notes that researchers found that in the 60’s and 70’s “baby boomers dropped out of organized religion in large numbers: 84% of Jews, 69% of mainline Protestants, 61% of conservative Protestants and 67% of Catholics.” And in general many of these members left because their churches or synagogues weren’t sufficiently meeting their spiritual needs.

Elkins then points out that by the 90’s a good percentage of these disaffiliates had found alternatives for meeting these needs—turning, for example, to “Eastern practices, new age philosophies, 12-step programs, Greek mythology, Jungian psychology, shamanic practices, massage, yoga and a host of other traditions and practices,” adding that many others have found spiritual fulfillment in music poetry, literature, art, nature and intimate relationships.”

In another piece, titled “In Search of the Sacred,” appearing in *Newsweek* (1994), Barbara Kantrowitz writes that “millions of Americans are embarking on a search for the sacred in their lives” and that though these seekers don’t fit any particular profile, “no matter what path they take, [they’re] united by a sincere desire to find answers to profound questions, to understand their place in the cosmos.” As Kantrowitz sees it, “Now it’s suddenly OK, even chic, to use the S words—soul, sacred, spiritual, [and] sin”—though, as a psychologist, I think this last word we could well do without. And in a *Newsweek* Poll, 58 percent of Americans professed that “they [felt] the need to experience spiritual growth.”

Similarly, Lama Surya Das, the well-known American Buddhist, wrote a book called *Awakening the Buddha Within*, excerpted in a 1997 issue of *New Age Journal*. And in this excerpt he states, in secular fashion: “The Spiritual life has always been a search for meaning . . . a search for truth, personal authenticity and reality, a search for ‘what is,’ a search for purpose: these are the foundations of the spiritual world.” And today (as yesterday, months, years . . . and millennia ago), I’d argue that we humans, because it’s *ingrained* in us, maintain this need to understand just where we fit in the universe.

To give one final example of this eternal longing, I’ll mention an article aptly subtitled “The Spiritual Perspective and Social Work Practice” (*Social Work* 1994) in which the author, Patricia Sermabeikian, talks about the spiritual dimension of life as expounded by such humanistic and existential theorists as Viktor Frankl, Eric Fromm, and Abraham Maslow. Her quotation from Maslow is particularly instructive: “The human being needs a framework of values, a philosophy of life, a religion or religion-surrogate to live by and understand by, in about the same sense he needs sunlight, calcium, or love.”

So, how *is* AHA doing in reaching out to all those searching for something spiritual they can't find through conventional religion? I can't speak with any great authority here—but given the relatively modest size of AHA's membership and the large number of people presumably looking to affiliate themselves with something *both* secular and spiritual, I've pretty much concluded not nearly as well as, potentially, we might. And there are many writers who seem to agree with this assessment.

Once again, I suspect that what may well be the sticking point is AHA's felt need to distance itself from whatever might give others the impression of our believing in something spiritual. Bonnie Cousens, in a piece *called* "Secular Spirituality" (International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, 2011) notes that "for many, the idea that secular humanists can be spiritual is inconceivable. . . . Yet people living very secular lives, driven by rational thought, logic, and science, say that they are seeking spirituality. although they have difficulty describing what they anticipate."

Chaplain Binyamin Biber, whose article "Spiritual But Not Religious" (2012) was cited earlier, observes that despite our frustrations with "the vagueness and confusion" relating to the term *spiritual*, it would be beneficial to reach out to those searching for community, connection, purpose, and meaning by letting them know they might well find a suitable place for themselves among us—if, that is, "we are gracious enough to be inviting and welcoming, rather than judgmental and dismissive."

And I'd like to go farther by emphasizing that whether the term *spiritual* is used in a religious *or* secular context, I think it typically connotes something extraordinarily powerful. That's why I see it as so important that we humanists do what we can to convince spiritual seekers that what we have to offer them *isn't* some sort of dry, passionless, strictly scientific (and certainly not *nihilistic!*) life path. We need to keep in mind that for most people pursuing that which they view as spiritual is synonymous with their quest for a feeling of wholeness *within* themselves and a vital connection to others. And this self- and societal integration and alignment may be what gives rise to the state of happiness *all* of us aspire to.

In his essay "Humanism and Spirituality" (*Humanism Today*, 1992), Joseph Chuman reasons that although "the very nature of humanism is committed to honoring the dictates of rational consciousness . . . at some point that mode . . . must run interference with the part of us which yearns for wholeness and which the symbolic and imaginative faculties push ahead." Which is why Chuman doubts that humanism will ever have the broad appeal carried by traditional religion, and even New Age thought and practices. Still, he contends that we can do a better job of reaching out to those many people who are "put together as we are, but whom we have not yet reached."

In brief, contemporary humanism—or better, what's referred to as "secular humanism"—may have an image problem. Supporting this notion is Lisa Miller, who in 2008 wrote an article for *Newsweek* titled "In Defense of Secularism." Talking about how the term has become "code in conservative Christian circles for 'atheist' or even 'God hating,'" she gives examples of how such right-wing political pundits as Bill O'Reilly, Ann Coulter, Newt Gingrich, and John Bolton have sought to link the word to everything that would vilify it—also noting that the Republican party routinely employs the word in efforts

to unite their base against what they now see as a common enemy.

That many humanists themselves disparage the term *spiritual* as, well, mumbo-jumbo—as little more than outdated pre-scientific superstition—doesn't much help the matter either. For it inflicts the word with negative meanings similar to what Christian conservatives have done to the tag “secular.” Politically, strategically—and *ethically*—I think we'd want to be claiming all the positive, *non-supernatural* aspects of spirituality, and to leave the heavily biased, parochial derision of the term *secular* to those too narrow-minded, or prejudiced, to *appreciate* how we're using it. But, however unwittingly, to be playing “tit for tat” with conservatives in no way assists us in gaining the widespread acceptance and respect I believe our ideals and practices warrant. Conservatives demean the designation *secular*; and (by our distaste for it) we demean the term *spiritual*. Not a very good idea—or a fight we can win. But if we're willing to *embrace* the whole concept of spirituality—even as we take pains to secularly redefine it—I think we're likely to gain the ethical high ground in this debate.

Lisa Miller, too, argues that so-named secularists have hardly been helping their case. For aware that, as she puts it, “no group is more reviled in America than atheists”—and, of course, a great many humanists do so identify themselves—they've chosen *secularist* as a safer label. But, unfortunately, to theists that word (as Greg Epstein is quoted as putting it) is “red meat for the pundits,” for it also labels them as non-believers.

As Doug Muder reflects: “Regrettably, for many laypeople, the term *secular* implies hostility to both organized religion and God, [regrettable because] a core humanist tenet is to be tolerant and accepting of other beliefs systems as [not objectively] but *subjectively* valid for those that adhere to them.” And this, to me, “live-and-let-live” tolerance is something that positively *distinguishes* us from most other ideologies—and that I (and Muder) think warrants being seen as spiritual. Which is one reason I believe that generally humanists would do well to drop the prefix *secular* altogether, even as they reconsider their reluctance (in describing their philosophy and practices) to employ the word *spiritual*.

Jeff Nall is another writer who sees us as having an “image problem.” In a piece subtitled: “Overcoming Antagonistic Atheism to Recast the Image of Humanism” (*The Humanist*, 2006), he stresses the importance of our not defining ourselves as totally opposed to believers, thereby making them feel disparaged and prompting them to react to us more negatively than otherwise. His main point is that religionists will never be sympathetic to humanists, or in any way open to their alternate perspective, so long as humanists continue to convey an antagonistic stance toward them. To this author, if we're to get more favorable attention from the American public, we need to communicate “a positive, uplifting message” and develop “the highest quality of public relations” we can afford. And he adds, “The last thing the movement needs is more bad publicity, which it unfortunately never ceases to elicit.”

And yet again, current-day voices of atheism have frequently revealed an almost aggressively hostile attitude that has served to turn off people who potentially might end up in our camp. Nall himself reasons that “many outsiders—both nonbelievers and believers—who might otherwise find a naturalistic, secular perspective or philosophy of life worth exploring, see the fanciful crusade of many atheists to

‘save’ humanity from the ‘scourge’ of religion in the same light [as] they view religious fanatics who zealously seek converts.”

And I should add that more effectively appealing to the so-called “Nones” is all the more imperative in that increasingly they’re becoming a political force. As Kimberly Winston notes in an article in religionnews.com, exit polls during the 2012 election showed that nones comprised 12 percent of all voters—“more than the combined number of voters who are Jewish, Muslim or members of other non-Christian faiths . . . and only slightly smaller than the combined number of Hispanic Catholics and Black Protestants. . . . The nones also skewed heavily Democratic, 70 to 26 percent. Additionally, “according to a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life study, nones . . . are the fastest-growing faith group in America, at 20 percent of the population [which amounts to] 48 million adults.”

Which brings us back to the point of how many of these nones—whose non-theistic orientation clearly *links* them to humanists—would *self-identify* as such if they knew that core humanist values could in fact be seen—though in a secular sense—as “spiritual but not religious.”

To this point, I haven’t said much about the *pragmatic* aspects of spirituality. But John T. Chirban, in a *Psychology Today* post (“What is the Spirit?” 2013), writes about how a person’s active involvement with institutional religion, *or* with non-religious spirituality, has been demonstrated to contribute to enhanced health in a variety of areas. Citing eight studies to support his argument, the areas of improved health include substance abuse, heart disease, and clinical depression—as well as *generally* reduced physical and psychological illness. As a result of such outcome studies, he reports that more and more medical schools are beginning to incorporate the topics of spirituality and religion in their curriculum. And this, I should add, is also true of graduate programs in mental health.

The challenge, then, for AHA (and some additional humanist organizations as well) is whether, regardless of its many historically religious associations, we can get over our longstanding impatience or irritation with the term *spirituality*. Up till now, I believe, we’ve been guilty of “throwing out the baby with the bathwater.” For our efforts to eliminate *all* theistic language from our lexicon has also led us to avoid using such terms as, say, *sacred* and *transcendent*—which in many ways *do* characterize our deepest values as well as carry the most respected, even noblest, of connotations. And I think it’s also safe to make the claim that for many people today having what they’d call “a spiritual experience” is *not* generally related to connecting with some heavenly deity.

As humanist psychologist Judith Goren puts it: “Humanism, to be a viable movement [in] the 21st century, needs to expand its parameters to explore, address and include [the spiritual] dimension of human experience.” And returning one last time to our Manifesto, I think that according to all the secular definitions of spirituality I’ve reviewed—our ideology, our code of ethics, our principles and practices— humanism *is* (and has *always* been) a spiritual movement. So I’m hoping that in the near future we can fully recognize this and reclaim a word that actually reflects the very heart of what we’re all about. Which is to say our aspiration to lead virtuous, morally responsible lives that are at once rational and—emotionally—passionate, exciting . . . and deeply fulfilling.

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