

Several years ago, I started using Facebook, began accepting Facebook friends, many of them people I had never met, posted the occasional question to stir the pot, and before long was addicted to it. Some people say Facebook is wonderful for making new friends, but I like Facebook because it allows me to unfriend people, something I never had the courage to do before Facebook came along. Before Facebook, if someone irritated me, I just smiled and put up with it. But with Facebook I'm unfriending people right and left and never hear from them again. It's wonderful.

There's a guy I've known since we were in Mrs. Mann's first-grade class. I was in school with him for twelve years and didn't care for him that whole time because he was a bully. Last year, he asked to be my Facebook friend and I agreed just so I could unfriend him, something I've wanted to do since 1967. He's still a bully. A few years ago he got religion. I had hoped it would make him nicer, but it only made things worse. Now he's a bully for God.

Isn't it interesting that when we say someone has "gotten religion" we usually mean that in a negative way? But when we say someone is spiritual, as in "She's a deeply spiritual person." that usually has a positive connotation.

In the next several weeks, I'll be asking us to think about the differences between religion and spirituality. But first, let me explain the connection between the two. Every religion ever created began with a spiritual experience. A man or woman had a mystical experience, began telling others about it, some of whom believed it and began following the person. As the number of followers grew, organization became necessary, so before long there were priests and imans and rabbis and Quaker pastors and bishops and eventually popes. In our own tradition, George Fox had a mystical experience on Pendle Hill in England, told others about it, and the next thing you know Quaker meetings were formed, then yearly meetings, and people were organizing spaghetti dinners for Ukrainian children. It's a full blown religion. Spiritual experiences inevitably lead to fundraiser dinners. Every religion is the offspring, the result, of a spiritual experience. Religion is what happens when people get hold of a spiritual experience, are enlivened and energized by it, so try to keep it alive by codifying and organizing it.

Are religions helpful? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Religions are helpful when they help us remember the original spiritual experience and equip us to have positive spiritual experiences of our own. Religions aren't helpful when our zeal for that original spiritual experience causes us to forget its message and turns us into religious bullies, or worse. Which brings me back to the man I recently unfriended on Facebook.

He belongs to a religion that emphasizes purity. There are many religions that do this. If you were to ask religious leaders what the goal of their religion was, they would probably start talking about the importance of moral and spiritual purity. Most religions encourage its members to achieve a state of moral perfection and have developed a set of rules or doctrines for their members to follow which, if scrupulously followed, will make them pure. Every religion does this, to one degree or another. Of course, there's nothing wrong with purity, in and of itself, just so long as we remember that purity is impossible. Because purity is insisted upon, but still not possible, it gives birth to two destructive tendencies: guilt and self-righteousness.

If I am told to be pure, but aren't able to pull it off, if I'm only able to be pure 75% of the time, I will feel tremendous guilt, thinking I have disappointed God and let down my fellow believers. Every time I am impure, I will feel terrible, because my religion has told me I must be pure. So my feelings of guilt will increase and before long I'll be miserable, because my religion has demanded the impossible from me—purity. They might as well have asked me to run a three-minute mile, then made me feel guilty for not doing it. So religion has the potential to give birth to great guilt when we inevitably fail to be pure.

When religions insist on purity, it can also give rise to self-righteousness. This happens when, unable to admit my moral and spiritual lapses, I will deny them and become self-righteous. I will act as if I alone have attained moral and spiritual perfection, that I alone am pure, and better than everyone else. We've all known people like that and when we see them, we run the other direction. Unfortunately, because these people tend to live and breathe religion, they often make it their livelihood, rise in the ranks, and lord it over others. Not always, of course, but it happens often enough for us to notice the tendency. Sometimes when we say someone has gotten religion, this is what we mean. They have internalized the worst religion has to offer not the best.

Now I want to contrast religion with spirituality. If religion is about striving for moral and spiritual purity, which is impossible, then spirituality is about permitting our mystical experiences, our joyous, beautiful, transcendent moments with God, to enliven, energize, and positively transform us. This is our deepest hope for you here. Not that you will become perfect little Quakers, but that you will become fully alive and engaged human beings, growing and maturing.

So this is one difference between religion and spirituality. The goal of religion, spoken or unspoken, is often purity, which is impossible to attain, and usually leads to guilt or self-righteousness, but of which are destructive.

But the goal of spirituality is maturity. Purity vs. maturity. We will never achieve purity. Early Quakers believed it was a possibility. They were mistaken. But maturity is a real possibility. It is our decision each day to grow, to evolve, to learn, to love, to include, to care. Will there be moments, or even long periods, of regression, when we fail to grow, fail to evolve, fail to learn? Yes, of course. And when we become aware of our immaturity, of our failure to grow and evolve, we say, "Today is a new day. I will commit myself anew to my moral and spiritual evolution."

Religions prize purity. But the effort to be pure will make you miserable or arrogant, for purity is impossible. You cannot run a three-minute mile.

Spirituality prizes maturity. The effort to be mature will make you hopeful, for maturity is possible. It begins when we commit ourselves, throughout our lives, to our spiritual and moral growth, to the work of love, to the joy of learning, to the dream of each day expanding our hearts, minds, and souls.