

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** We are very pleased to publish this article in honor of Fr. Lawrence Dunklee, who died of esophageal cancer on January 7 at Sacred Heart Hospital, Eau Claire, Wis. He had worked there since 2005, most recently as director of mission integration, following a nine-year stint as vicar for priests in the Diocese of La Crosse. A frequent contributor to *Health Progress*, Fr. Dunklee prepared this article from a talk he delivered to a local Kiwanis Club in 2007. We are printing it with the kind permission of his sister, Donna M. Schultz of Waukesha, Wis.

# Religion, Spirituality and the Search for Common Ground

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BY FR. LAWRENCE G. DUNKLEE, M.Div., M.A.

**B**ack in the 1960's, John Steinbeck wrote a beautiful book entitled *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*. It was a travelogue which recounted tales of a 1960 road trip he took around the United States with his French standard poodle, Charley. In the book, Steinbeck draws the distinction between a trip and a journey. A trip has a destination: we begin at Point A and end at Point B. However, Steinbeck stated a journey often times takes us places that we hadn't planned on going. Often times, we don't take a journey, the journey takes us.

We can look at this distinction as metaphor for our lives, and realize that the lives that we lead take us from one moment to another, from one experience to another, from one personal encounter to another.

For us as human beings, there is almost a need, however, to somehow connect those moments, to say, "Where is this journey taking me, and to what end? What is the meaning and the purpose which underlies it?"

In many respects, that is what spirituality, properly understood, is all about. Too often, spirituality is viewed by people as being synonymous with religion. But the fact of the matter is that spirituality is much broader than religion.

Human spirituality can be defined in any number of ways. One of the best definitions I've heard is one offered by Dean Ornish, a cardiologist from San Francisco. He captures it very well when he says, "When I use the word spirituality, I don't necessarily mean religion; I mean whatever it is that helps you feel connected to something that is larger than yourself."

So spirituality, then, is to be viewed as the characteristics and qualities of our relationship with the transcendent. Therefore, there is a universal quality to spirituality. Everyone, regardless of their religious background, may be said to have a spirituality. Some may call that transcendent reality with whom one seeks contact, "God," or as is the case with many who are in 12-step programs such as AA, will speak simply of a "higher power," or they will sometimes say, "God, as we understand Him."

Even if one claims to be an atheist, rejecting any belief in God or religion, that person somehow feels the need to search for and discover the meaning and value of his or her life. As the great philosopher Socrates once said, "An unexamined life is one not worth living."

By contrast, religion is a very specific set of beliefs about this transcendent reality that many would call God. It is a set of beliefs which is usually expressed in some form of a creed. It's interesting, someone once asked me, "How can you define religion?" And I said, "I don't know if I

can define it or not, but the IRS can define it.” In order to qualify for a tax-exempt status, there are very specific requirements before a group can be called a religion or a church. One is that there has to be a creed which is shared by some kind of a community, big or small, a community of persons who pledge adherence to that creed, who profess a belief to it. Usually there is also a particular language or vocabulary used to describe these spiritual experiences or beliefs. Certain texts or writings, then, are also adhered to. These may be the Bible, or Sacred Scripture or the Koran. There also will be various rituals carried out to somehow give symbolic expression to those beliefs, the Mass, if one is Catholic, the Seder, if one is Jewish, going to Mecca for the *hajj*, if one is Muslim, are all various religious rituals.

It’s interesting, by the way, that human beings are very ritualistic people by nature. If you don’t think we are, then try having a birthday without the party, cake and singing. As a nation, we don’t get much more ritualistic than the Super Bowl. In fact some people are willing to spend much more time at that ritual than they are the ones I oversee on Sunday.

While everyone has a spirituality, and thus this can be seen as a universal experience, not everyone has a religion, or at least practices it. It is interesting within the Catholic community to listen as people describe themselves at various points in time as practicing Catholic, Orthodox Catholic, liberal Catholic, fallen-away Catholic, or, my favorite, a recovering Catholic. I haven’t figured out that one yet. Sometimes I feel that we

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are a chautauqua revival tent, as we try to fulfill John Keats’ description of the Catholic Church as, “Y’all come.”

It is very common, though, for people to differentiate themselves as being spiritual, but not religious. Or they will differ about how much their religious beliefs impact upon their daily lives. As one example, in a recent survey conducted by the University of Chicago of about 1,200 doc-

tors around the country, they took a look at how physician’s religious or moral beliefs might affect patient care. When asked about their religious practice, 46 percent of the doctors surveyed said they attend religious services twice a month, compared with 40 percent of the general public. When asked about how likely they are to carry religious

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beliefs into their daily work, 58 percent said they would do so, versus 73 percent of the general public.

So we begin to see that there is a wide range of religious experience, as well as a differentiating of how that experience impacts on our professional, as well as our personal lives.

Another trend within the U.S. particularly, and in the Western world in general, is that not only do a greater number of people eschew organized religion, they often will borrow spiritual teachings from various traditions to create their own individual set of spiritual practices. For example, they’ll take some things that they pick up from the Hindu, such as doing yoga, but at the same time they’ll pray the rosary.

Therefore, it is interesting to note that on the one hand, spirituality is a universal experience, i.e., everyone has it, but it is also a private one.

Religion is more specific to the individual person; some people have it, some people don’t. Religion is almost always carried out in a community, therefore, one can say that there is no such thing, really, as a “private religion.”

My own particular point of view is that a private, religion-less spirituality, while possible, is almost always harder to live out than is some form of a religious spirituality. I had a friend of mine who said, “I can pray to God out in the woods.” And I said, “That’s wonderful, I understand that; when was the last time you did that?” And he said, “Well, I haven’t had time to do that.”

We can have that spirituality, but when it is not related to a religious community to which we feel a connection and a commitment, it is more difficult to consistently exercise or carry it out.

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How, then, do these varying approaches which attempt to discover meaning and purpose in life relate to one another? My own point of view is that when a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and an atheist speak out from their own personal convictions, there will inevitably be in all of them a spiritual underpinning which will resonate — or at least can resonate — with the other.

Ultimately every human individual is unique, and the way in which that individual chooses to relate to the transcendent is unique. Spirituality is ultimately personal, but it is also universal in its appeal and in its experience.

Now that we have more clearly differentiated between the idea of spirituality and religion, the question remains how do we all get along with one another when we have differing ideas, approaches and language when we speak about this experience of the transcendent, which many of us would call God?

I think it is important to remember that never in the history of mankind has there been a war or a crusade fought over spirituality. Rather, it is the religious expression of those spiritual values that has been so deeply felt, sometimes even passionately felt, which has led to such stark and even, at times, violent confrontation.

In a culture and a world where it is easy to become more divided on these issues than united, there is a vital need for what the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin referred to as a common ground for understanding. This requires the qualities of civility, mutual respect and at least a certain level of maturity, lest we give in to the childish and selfish tendencies that we all fight against, those tendencies of thinking that our way is the only way. Even when we believe that the approach or religious tradition in which we may have been

born, or raised, or have embraced at some point in our life is, for us, and in our view, the true way to go.

At the same time, it is important for us to be able to respond and reach out to those of other traditions and approaches and beliefs with a hand of friendship and a heart of mutual desire for seeking out the common good.

We can and we must work together. We can and we must listen to one another. And we can and we must find that common ground, which, when trod upon as brothers and sisters, can become, in the finest and fullest way, holy ground.

Ecumenical, interreligious dialogue

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and dialogue with those who may not share a belief in God, while challenging to say the least, must be our goal if we are to fulfill the most fundamental goals and the most noble of ideals of our various religious and spiritual traditions.

We do so with joy and with a belief in the innate dignity of every human person who walks this earth. These are the values which join us as human beings and help to create the human family.

As one observer noted, “Spirituality is to religion as justice is to law.” Just as our laws are the means towards which, in halting fashion, we seek the goals of justice, so also are religious practices and communities of faith the ways in which we flawed human beings seek to meet the needs of the human spirit.

On a final note, there is always the temptation to believe that when we start to speak about spirituality, we are entering into the nebulous, wonderful world of divine, warm fuzzies. Nothing could be further from the truth. The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once said, “The spiritual life does not remove us from the world, but leads us deeper into it.”

On a personal note, when I was preparing these remarks, I could not help but think of a friend of mine. He and I shared many good conversations together, despite the fact that he claimed throughout his life that he was an atheist. I said one time that because of that great noble spirit he possessed, he wasn't really an atheist, and he responded, “I swear to God that I am.”

As he lay dying, we sat and talked about the films that we loved. One of our favorite films was called “The Keys of the Kingdom.” The film, in part, was about the relationship between a priest and his friend who was a doctor, just as my friend was. And like my friend, the doctor in the movie claimed to be an atheist, although he was, indeed, a very good man.

He said to me, “Larry do you remember what the doctor in the film said to the priest as he lay dying?” I said, “Yes I do,” and I smiled. The doctor told the priest, just as he was breathing his last, “I really want to thank you because you never tried to bully me into heaven.” Echoing those same words, my own friend died. And just as we shared so many good moments of life on this earth, I wouldn't be surprised, and I will be so delighted, to say hello to him again in the life which is to come.

We strive first to enter more deeply into our own world, and then into our own life, to discover the meaning and purpose which lies there. But we are called, just as my friend and I were, to enter into one another's world with compassion, with understanding, and with a great desire for unity — the unity of people of all ages, of all backgrounds, and of all beliefs. We ask in this spirit, and we pray that all may be one.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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