

## **WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN ANYWAY**

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One of the great pleasures of life is to spend time with friends. This pleasure is enhanced when we can have philosophical discussions on serious matters such as, the meaning of life. Some of us had these discussions when we were young, and life stretched endlessly into a long and hopeful future. Now as we near the end of our journey here, the same questions take on different meanings.

I asked a group of women friends to talk about the difference between religion and spirituality, and about the everlasting question: "what does it all mean anyway." The joy of such a discussion is that no one claimed expertise, no definitive answers were provided, and there were many areas of grey, of doubts, and of certainty.

I will try to capture the interesting and thought provoking discussion, but it is obviously not a comprehensive thesis on religion, spirituality or mysticism.

The discussion would have been different if there had been atheists or humanists amongst us. Each of us believed in some power beyond the physical world. There were those who expressed doubts, both about a "defined" God, and about support for any organized religion. Many said they were spiritual without being religious.

So is spirituality distinct from religion or are these integral for some of us? What about mysticism, is it part of spirituality or of religion?

Definitions are not easy, but we agreed that spirituality is the acceptance of a reality beyond the physical world - more than what is understood by human reason. As Hamlet says to his friend, Horatio, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy." But for some, this does not necessarily lead to the practice of a specific religion.

We all seek principles that will guide our search for meaning to our lives. If one is spiritual, but not a believer in a specific religion, would a guiding principle be "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?" Does this provide the moral and ethical underpinnings to all one's actions? Is this a selfish and self - serving principle to live by?

For some, the advice of the American writer, Anne Herbert, to "practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty" was another guiding principle.

As best as I can understand, Humanists find meaning by focusing on this life and what can be understood by human reason. For them, what is empirical and observable is reality. There is no God or divinity, no other life beyond the certainty of death, and so it is this life which should be lived as ethically and as caringly as is possible.

But I think all of us - religious, spiritual and humanist - share a world view which values the development of a society where the dignity of the individual and the common good are critical.

Where does this leave those of us who believe in a specific religion - those of us who see spirituality and religion as a cohesive whole?

Simply put, all religions strive to bring God and created beings into a close relationship. They aim to achieve this by an organized system of beliefs and practices, with rules and rituals which should result in a "good life" on earth and in the hereafter.

It is true that though there is common ground amongst religions, there are distinctions in their understanding of God, and what beliefs, practices and rituals best create the ideal relationship between the Creator and the created.

God is seen as deeply committed to humans and actively engaged in assisting all creatures. God may be physically unseen, but there is a recognized order in the creation.

Some religions, such as Islam, teach concrete rules and practices for the development of a humane and compassionate society. The Quran makes constant reference to human reason for the understanding of the structure and design of nature, as proof of the existence of a Creator. The world did not come into being by chance or by an accidental cosmic big bang.

The physical, material world is not the end all. Islam teaches that we have become separated from the Godhead, and it is through adoration that we strive to return to the source of our Being, and a return to the Presence.

The Islamic spiritual path - a personal way of relating to the divine - is Sufism. It is the way to seek closeness to God in a loving, mystical, transcendental approach which is beyond rationalism. It is not a negation of the material world, but rather a focus on the spiritual, a desire for direct experience with God.

This is spirituality: where the focus is not merely on the practices and rituals, as these are means and not the ends. They lead us on the path to a space unseen but believed in firmly. It is up to the individual to embark on this journey of the soul, and a return to the Presence of God.

As the Sufi poet, Rumi, says in his description of how we should open our souls to God's radiance, "The window determines how much Light, [God] enters the house, even if the Moon's radiance fills the East and the West." It is up to us to have wide open windows so that God's Light and the moon's radiance shine into our souls.

For me, spirituality and religion are integrated, for both are necessary for my relationship with my Creator, and for my life on earth.

In some ways, Islam is an organized religion as it sets guidelines for the building of a just society. But to be fixated on laws, rules and practices is not the purpose of religion, because the message of Islam is about God and spirituality.

Islam has no church, no clergy, and no central worldly authority, as the emphasis is on my direct relationship with God. For my soul's journey, I am not accountable to any other person, because I, as a woman and a thinking person, am answerable only to God for my efforts and for my trials.