

## Monastic Scribe LXXVII: August 16, 2024

### I AM NOT RELIGIOUS

Most readers have probably heard of the “Nones” (It sounds like “Nuns” and the comparison is sometimes amusing). The name comes from a growing tendency for applicants for a school, job, etc., to list, when asked if their religion is Christian, Jewish, Muslim, etc., to choose “none.” This is particularly prevalent among young people who want nothing to do with institutionalized religion. This doesn’t mean they have no beliefs or any spiritual life. I believe they may be an important stimulus for the rest of us believers to ponder.

Here’s what I think and I offer this for your consideration though there may be better explanations. Religion refers to a way to think, speak and act about our relationship to God, to morality, to other people and creatures of the earth. It is bound to be organized in sacred texts, rituals, prayer books, sermons. In the past, through the mid-twentieth century, religion was often tied to your ethnic group. If you were Irish, Italian, Polish, etc. you were Catholic. If you were Scandinavian you were Lutheran. If you were an Indian you were a Hindu. Much of this association broke down, following post World War II, as people came to know people from other countries. It was also a time when many found the opening of the eastern religions to western readers.

With the secularization of the west, religious and ethnic customs have decreased but, unfortunately, have been often replaced with nationalistic and political beliefs. “Christian nationalism” is a real farce promoted by some. To speak of conservative and liberal points of view in churches misplaces the essential place of the gospel teachings for Christians, the Torah for Jews, the Koran for Muslims. Some religious people follow a political party rather than the Bible and teachings of faith traditions.

Religion ought to be a help for us as we embrace the particular traditions to help us live morally and in union with God and others, to get beyond our own little domestic worlds, beyond our own country and ethnic group. Religion gives us a system to pass on to our young, a way to live our lives beyond our own selfish needs. We learn that “I am not the center of the world.”

Along, with the Nones, there have been many people who claim to be spiritual but not religious. They see that many church-goers, practitioners of organized

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religion, do not have much of a spiritual life beyond following the precepts of their religion. They are not inspired by religious practices. Their spirituality becomes based in nature, in solitude, or their own desires. It is personal and often based on a more intimate relationship with God and with all God's creatures. For Christians, this means intimacy with Jesus Christ. A healthy spirituality knows that I am loved by God and made to love others.

Now let me share another interpretation of what has happened. I take these thoughts from the recently published book, "The Afternoon of Christianity." The author, Tomas Halik, is priest, theologian, psychotherapist, and was leader of the opposition to the Communist persecution of Christians in the forties when he clandestinely was ordained a priest. He distinguishes religion and faith which, he believes, really need each other. Religion is the tradition of beliefs, rules, rituals and history. Faith implies total trust in a power beyond us, a personal trust in God. Halik thinks that many people practice a religion but do not really have faith. And some, such as individual atheists, practice no religion but have faith. I see this as characterizing the state of religion, especially in the west, a people who have become affluent, comfortable in their religion which is respected in society, but indifferent to much that is beyond them. Life is good and that must mean God loves them. This is very far from our Biblical God and the God of most major traditions.

Let me summarize. I agree with Sister Joan Chittister when she says that Religion is the glue of a society. It teaches ethics and community and awareness of God. It brings us to the starting point of a holy life. Then, in today's secularized culture, we badly need to deepen our spirituality, our self-knowledge, our intimate awareness of our God. Spirituality, Joan also says, is what takes us beyond religious practice to the purpose of religion: the awareness of the sacred in the mundane.

Yes, I know that the Church and other religious institutions must also show us spirituality and faith and just not adherence to beliefs and rules. All of us, for instance, have to become real devotees of the Bible, know our community and history, and struggle with our own place in the world, including our dark side or shadow. Going off on our own can simply be the means to a self-centered and individualistic life.

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We need the community, our traditions and, above all a personal commitment to seek our God in all things. That's an incomplete summary of what I believe. You can contact me at [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto:joycet@glastonburyabbey.org)

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.