

SPIRITUAL SHOPPING AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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Let me introduce to you a woman named Vickie. **[Read highlighted excerpts from Wade Roof Clark, *Spiritual Marketplace*, pp. 30-32.]**

Vickie's spiritual journey is both unique and typical. Her story is told by Wade Roof Clark in his book titled *Spiritual Marketplace*. Like millions of Americans born after World War II, she has pursued a path of continuous exploration in search of a spiritual orientation that will enable her to feel that her individual life fits into some larger framework of meaning and purpose. She considers herself "spiritual but not religious"—deeply mistrustful of the restrictions on individual freedom that organized religions impose on their followers. Commenting on her lifelong quest, Clark says, "She is open to, but seemingly not all that desperately in search of, a spiritual unity within her life." [p. 32]

Vickie's story provides a classic example of what sociologists of religion call **spiritual shopping**. As Robert Wuthnow explains it, "The idea of shopping reflects the fact that American religion is shaped by the consumer culture to which all Americans are exposed from early childhood. Shopping connotes making choices and having the freedom to choose according to one's personal tastes and needs. Because many Americans fill up their leisure time with shopping and acknowledge that they shop for pleasure, shopping often conveys a casual, light-hearted approach that strikes some observers as repugnant in the context of spirituality and religion. . . . Shopping involves trying out new things, considering whether or not they fit one's lifestyle, and piecing together beliefs and practices from a variety of traditions. . . . Shopping is one of several ways in which the public accommodates religious diversity. It is not the most common response, but in the opinion of many observers it is a kind of bellwether that signals how a growing number of people may think about religious diversity in the future." [Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, pp. 107-108]

The "shopping" mindset appears not only among those who are not committed to any particular religious tradition, but also among those who are highly involved in a particular faith. As part of his ongoing research about the changing landscape of American religion, Wade Clark Roof asked this question: "Is it good to explore many differing religious teachings and learn from them, or should one stick to a particular faith?" "The intent of the question was to discriminate between a seeker mentality that is open and inquiring as opposed to a more particularistic faith commitment. Sixty percent of [his] respondents said they prefer to explore, 29 percent said stick to a faith, and 11 percent could not choose or said do both. . . . **Even half of the Born-again Christians chose to explore**—indisputable evidence that the questing mode of spirituality was not limited to a handful of eclectic experimenters but found expression even in traditional faith communities demanding a strong personal commitment." [Clark, p. 83] The seekers outlook on life is deeply rooted in the American psyche.

How did all of this come about? As usual, we can thank—and blame—the Baby Boomer generation, as well as demographic changes in the American population. Prior to the 1960s, “religious diversity” was understood in terms of the dominant Judeo-Christian tradition. The classic study of that period was a book by Will Herberg titled *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, in which he argued that the similarities among these three traditions outweigh their differences. But he also “drew a circle that explicitly left out Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other non-Western religions.” [Wuthnow, p. 34] Religious diversity for most Americans meant little more than different varieties of Christianity.

The 1960s brought a dramatic change in the American religious landscape. One of the sea changes was cultural and the other was political. The cultural shift involved mainly the burgeoning youth population of the Baby Boom generation, who re-discovered the individualized spirituality of the Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau and combined it with the wisdom of Eastern traditions such as Zen Buddhism and Taoism that were being actively promoted by articulate writers such as Allen Watts and the use of mind-expanding drugs. A whole new generation of life-long spiritual seekers came into being who had no loyalty to traditional Christianity.

As Robert Wuthnow explains, “The personalized quests for the sacred that characterize spiritual shopping have contributed to the emphasis that many people now place on the distinction between spirituality and religion. Spirituality refers to an individual’s relationship to the sacred, whereas religion connotes organizations, clergy, doctrines, and traditions. The distinction between the two has helped to create a niche in the larger religious marketplace for entrepreneurs claiming to have special insight about spirituality. Thus, much of the present spiritual shopping is guided by authors, speakers, artists, healers, and lay individuals who view themselves as spiritual leaders rather than as religious leaders.” [p. 128]

The second sea change was brought about by a piece of mid-1960s legislation that was overshadowed by all of the political turmoil of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. In 1965 Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which for the first time opened the gates to Asians and other non-European immigrants, who brought with them new and strange religious practices. Suddenly religious pluralism meant more than varieties of Christianity. The religious “other” was no longer an idea in a book. It was a family in my neighborhood and a new student in my child’s classroom and a new co-worker whose appearance, language, and daily habits I had never dealt with before. For millions of Americans during the past two decades, religious diversity was no longer an idea but a fact of daily life, particularly for those who lived in urban areas or academic communities—even in seemingly isolated communities like ours, which hosts an increasingly diverse population.

Somewhere along the way, our friend Vickie might end up visiting a Unitarian Universalist congregation. What would she find? Our opening hymn and responsive reading express it well: We welcome you as you are. Come join us in our shared quest for personal meaning. We will not impose any particular beliefs on you. We will help you explore many different faith traditions. And if you don’t find what you’re looking for here, you’re free to leave and pursue your quest elsewhere. **We are a spiritual shopper’s paradise!** Let me do a quick survey. How many of you are official members of this Fellowship? [pause] How many of you

are not? [pause] Is it any wonder that there are roughly twice as many people who identify themselves as “Unitarian” as there are members of UU congregations?

By whatever name we may call it, spiritual shopping is near and dear to those of us who prize our freedom to choose our own personal path to enlightenment. But there are downsides as well. Spiritual seekers are often all too willing to borrow ideas and practices from non-Western traditions without deeply engaging their historical and cultural foundations. This is called **spiritual consumerism**. A good example is the appropriation of American Indian practices such as the vision quest and sweat lodge ceremony by Euro-Americans who are eager to enrich their spiritual life without bothering to learn about the cultural history from which they arose. “Practices such as techniques for breathing and meditating are well suited for a consumer market. They can be packaged in ways that beginners can understand and experience.” [Wuthnow, p. 112] Come to the spiritual cafeteria and choose the items that satisfy your personal tastes, then move on to the next cafeteria.

By placing individual satisfaction as its highest value, spiritual shopping **undermines commitment to a community**. Like other forms of consumerism, spiritual shopping **takes but it does not give**. It does not ask what we are willing to give back or give away as an expression of belonging to a community that beckons us to transcend our self-interest. At its best, Unitarian Universalism attracts people who are searching for individual freedom and then challenges them to join a community devoted to serving others. Folks who arrive as **individual shoppers** are encouraged to become **community servers**. Perhaps you are one of them. In the words of Richard Gilbert:

We bid you welcome, who are seekers of a new faith.
 Who come to probe and explore. Who come to learn.
 We bid you welcome, who enter this hall as a homecoming,
 Who have found here room for your spirit. Who find in this people a family.
 Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are on your journey,
 We bid you welcome.

DISCUSSION

HYMN # 168 “One More Step”

CLOSING WORDS # 456