

Spiritual, Not Religious

by Dr. Donald De Marco

There is a scene in the motion picture, *Amadeus*, in which, due to the decree of a misguided emperor, the dance in Act III of Mozart's opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*, must be performed without music. The scene, of course, is highly amusing. In the absence of music, we hear only the sounds of rustling clothes and feet ran randomly hitting the stage floor. As he witnesses this strange spectacle, the emperor, himself, does not know what to make of it. "Is it modern?" he asks, rather nervously. He concludes, finally, that the charade is nothing but "nonsense," and asks the music director, in an evidently sheepish manner, "Can we see the scene with the music back?" The music plays and immediately gives life, form, structure, meaning, and delight to the motions of the dancers. It is a happy re-union. Once again, all is right with the world.

If dancing is an incarnation of music, music is dancing's soul. Dancing without music is a soul-less spectacle, like mouthing words that are inaudible as well as unintelligible.

Allow me to use this cinematic anecdote as a parable. Music is to dancing what religion is to spirituality. There is a widespread and rapidly developing trend in our society to dismiss religion altogether from spirituality. We often flatter ourselves by insisting that such an isolation of spirituality from religion is very "modern." We also are deluded into thinking that it is "liberating." But this divorce is as nonsensical as separating dancing from music. Nor is it liberating, if, like dancing without music, it is liberated from meaning. Here the point is reached where liberation becomes annihilation. Just as dancing requires music, spirituality, nebulous by nature, needs something other than itself to give it meaning and coherence. And what spirituality needs is religion, specifically, one that safeguards, nurtures, and directs spirituality to its proper end. Without such a religious context, spirituality, like dancing a cappella that invites us to attach our thoughts to the rustling of clothes and the sound of feet hitting the floor, will attach itself, like a parasite, to whatever happens to be immediately available.

"I believe in spirituality, not religion," says TV's Bill Maher, as he punctuates the "R" word with a sneer. He speaks for many. But mere spirituality, unprotected by a sound religion, will marry itself to whatever is in the

neighborhood. And the first thing lurking in the neighborhood is usually the ego. Not far away are the elements of the day's reigning ideologies: individualism, hedonism, consumerism, naturalism, relativism, or whatever happens to have pop currency.

The one-dimensional spiritualist looks at religion and sees only the obvious flaws. But this is essentially because of the myopic way he views it. Thus, he fastens his attention on clerical "abuses," "boring" ritual, "rigid" dogma, "apathetic" parishioners, and "outdated" attitudes. When he looks at spirituality in a similarly one-sided way, he is blind to what he does not want to see: inflated egoism, radical contradictions, subservience to trends, self-serving convenience, and intellectual vacuity.

Spirituality without religion is like a man without sight. It tends to attach itself to whatever is nearby. The last thing that it can claim to be is liberating. When certain feminists discovered paganism, they were attracted to the idea of goddess worship and the notion of a matriarchal past. Hence, so-called Wicca feminists turned to an "Earth-based spirituality." A witch by the name of Deborah Cooper has created a Temple of Elvis, identifying the king of rock 'n' roll as the Horned God. Other pagan spiritualities have emerged out of a cult following of authors such as Ayn Rand, Abraham Maslow, and Robert Heinlein.

One of the strangest forms of contemporary spirituality is that of filmmaker Antero Alli and his followers. Alli's spirituality centers around Fred Mertz, Ethel's husband from the TV comedy *I Love Lucy*. For Alli, Mr. Mertz is a master of "such sophisticated techniques as Senseless Bickering, Scathing Indifference, Bad Timing, Advanced Balding, and the Five Secrets of Stinginess." Then there is the First Arachnid Church that is devoted to "The Great Spider and the True Web." Unfettered spirituality easily leads to unfettered nonsense.

If spirituality must attach itself to something, what should that something be? Well, a good religion, notably one that includes a real God, a respect for truth, and a means for salvation. This, at any rate, is at least a good start.

St. Augustine has pointed out that because there is a multiplicity of interpretations of Sacred Scripture, we should be prepared to abandon any particular interpretation if it should prove to be false. There are many religions, but there is only one truth. Spirituality, therefore, should be

allied with a religion whose teachings are true. The mind must play an integral role in affirming the validity of a particular religion. Spirituality should not be either mindless or agnostic.

We human beings are error-prone and highly vulnerable to seduction. In his book, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religion and the Unity of Truth*, Mortimer Adler recognizes "Mankind's sense of its delinquency and the inadequacy of its own power to raise itself up from its earthly condition, its need for help from above to rise above where it finds itself." Religion is God's idea of saving man from his own illusions. Mere spirituality is man's idea of saving himself.

A religion that is anchored in truth, reveals the Word of God, and offers man a way to personal fulfillment is exactly what spirituality needs so that it can achieve its proper purpose. Left alone, it does not flourish, but becomes parasitically attached to alien and pernicious forces.

It may be tempting for an individual to jettison religion so that he can "personalize" his spirituality. But the chief enemy of spirituality is the ego, which often attires itself in the raiment of personal liberty. Augustine has aptly stated that the three requisite virtues for religion are humility, humility, and humility.

Religion saves us from ourselves. It gives our spirituality a context wide and broad enough to enable us to dance to the music of the spheres and to participate in the life of God. It allows us to experience that exhilarating awe as we stand in the presence of a Transcendent Being who embraces us with a love that flows from a loftier and more salutary source than our own ego. Spirituality marks our disposition to be united with God; religion provides the unification that spirituality merely anticipates.

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