

*Spirituality and  
the Writer*

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# Religious Author, Spiritual Writer

The very best in art is too spiritual to be given directly to the senses; it must be born in the beholder's imagination, though it must be begotten by the work of art.

—*Arthur Schopenhauer*

Most of us in the West know what a religion is. We know it by its myths and artifacts, its history and beliefs, its God and its texts. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we know that old white man, Jehovah, bushy gray beard and furious scowl. We know John the Baptist, his sandals in the river, and Francis, the people's pope, his slippers in the Vatican. We've stood before the Celtic cross and inside the cathedral of Rheims. We've seen still and moving images of mitred bishops, snake-handling evangelicals, boy preachers as young as two. We've imagined a monk praying in a Benedictine cell, a nun chanting Compline in a convent chapel. We've beheld Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* and Titian's *Madonna and Child*.

We've heard Protestant hymns and civil rights anthems, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*. In Barcelona, there's the Sagrada Familia. In Rome, St. Peter's Square. At Holy Ghost in Harlem, the Pentecostals roll the holy up and down the aisles, while in Mexico City, pilgrims stream by the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The blood of the nailed Christ drips on our upturned heads. Whether it's real or metaphoric doesn't matter; we raise his suffering above all as our Lord and Savior.

Most of us know the Judeo-Christian texts—dictated documents and composed convictions whose pronouncements, parables, and punishments are decreed by God and dispensed by humankind: the Talmudic Law, the Ten Commandments, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And, though not all of us subscribe, most of us recognize religion's brightest beam: to flock a congregation of like-minded souls who share moral convictions, ceremonies of birth, baptism, marriage, and death, as well as obeisance to a supreme being.

As much as we know that a religion is its palpable presence in the world, we cannot claim the same of faith's capricious partner, spirituality. We know that realm—if we do at all—by its immateriality, its expressions inscrutable, transient, and inborn.

*Spirit* suggests a life force, a will, which Arthur Schopenhauer calls the “striving of matter,” the “eternal becoming and endless flux” of life. We don't know for certain, but at one time spirit may have brought dead matter to life, stardust to chemistry. Spirit invites paradox almost from the get-go. Its absence from our grasp is its presence. It's the unseen in the “evidence of things unseen.” It's a ghost in the machine. Invisible but charged. Embryonic. Popping in unannounced. Gone in a heartbeat. The spirit-voice of the wind. The spirits in a gin and tonic. The spirit of an imp or a goblin, conjured or cast out. The spirit of our Revolution. The spirit of the 1960s. The spirit of Black Lives Matter. Spirit manifests in singers like Billie Holiday, in towns like Santa Fe, in buildings Frank Gehry designs, in the pinstripes worn by the New York Yankees. Spirit guides the Eucharist, the Day of the Dead, the Quaker

meetinghouse, the cradle and the coffin maker. Even without the New Age woo-woo of Deepak Chopra, most of us know that spiritual feelings are real. Our spirits bend from elated to depressed, from songful to sorrowful. Merciless, we break the horse's spirit; bereft, we sing a Negro spiritual. We laud the men who gave "the last full measure of devotion" at Gettysburg and honor the spirit of those dead men who live on, somehow, if only by reciting Lincoln's matchless address.

It seems impossible to separate religion and spirituality. One reason is that the spiritual, which predates organized faith, has been appropriated, if not colonized, by the fixed doctrines, the pious rites, and the tribal sects that further a creed's cause. Religious pioneers branded the appropriation the *holy spirit*, a divination for members who acquire the creed, by conversion or birth. Untold examples come to mind: the haloes encircling the heads of saints in medieval paintings, the crutch-throwing and money-soliciting circuses of televangelists, the prayers of parents who petition God to save their opiated babies and selves.

In contemporary America, amid a stalled Christianity and an avid New Age, where sects are returning the transcendent to its pagan realm, our culture has little agreement as to what spiritual means. Nowadays, all sorts of hip practices vie for coverage; they are sacerdotal and silly, kooky and generic. Celebrities in particular are the new (and least qualified) purveyors. They promulgate unnuanced notions that spirit is synonymous with sensitivity, compassion, an innate sense of fairness and peace. The spiritual, they say, focuses on love, caring for oneself and others, kindness to animals and the planet. It can also be spiritual to tidy your desk and pack your suitcase well, parceling that transcendent feeling into a diet and exercise program or a Viking cruise. From it we get dubious concoctions like "interfaith ministry," "smiling meditation," "mediumship," "messages from the other side," and "mindful recycling."

In our hothouse environment of uncheckable climate change and mass migration, religious certitude continues to threaten our

survival. To see beyond the headlines seems to be good for all beings, who, if nothing else, are or should be or should hope to be humane. Though unlikely, the fundamentalist must lie down with the atheist, not to mention the Muslim with the Jew. We agree Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was religious *and* spiritual in the best sense. But despite King's grace, religion's tribalist nature, its rare reform, and its right-wing politicization of late encourage the unaffiliated to avow they are "spiritual but not religious."

Many in the West want to reconstitute spirit outside our history's two-millennia tower of Bible-based faith. Indeed, removing the spiritual from the religious—emphasizing that *but not*—is one of the deeper, and least acknowledged, causes of our cultural malaise.

Today, we live in a culture that is severing spirituality from religion. The examples are everywhere apparent. Millions wish to sever spirit from religious sects that inculcate one belief over another. To sever spirit from religious sects who say disbelief in their way is a ticket to hell. To sever spirit from sacred texts whose so-called divine origin argues against science or wars on behalf of the saved. To sever spirit from Christian commandments and the exemptions their adherents claim the U.S. government needs to protect. To sever spirit from all that so what we hope remains is uncorrupted, personal, universal, and kind. Whatever the outcome, spirit has a fierce, renewable, intrinsic value, which we cling to like a life vest.

Religion is put upon us, most heavily in childhood, by parents who maintain it is a right to raise their children in the faith. Once acquired, that faith in most heirs seldom strays from their parents' beliefs and remains immovable like blood. The spiritual, by contrast, strays any way it chooses. It may take you in, take you on, take you for a ride, but just as ficklely let you go—for spirit has other winds to hound, other souls to haunt beyond loyalty to family or the prosperity gospel. The spirit is the fairest of fair-weather friends. And there are those who as creators of art and makers of literature activate that fair-weathering without recourse

to anything institutional. Most of them—most of us living in the age of *but not*—know that the arts we practice need no religion to shape our inviolable sense of how and who we want to be.



IF THE spiritual need not lie with a faith, might it lie more reliably somewhere else? At times, the spiritual is out there, a heron gliding over the lake, uncageably alone and free. At other times, the heron is caged within, that is, *preternaturally* within, as unfettered as a lion cub. We may call on the spirit and the spirit may refuse. Then again, the spirit may be smitten and leap in, taking his saxophone solo. Erratic turns and misty off-ramps comprise the contemporary character of spirituality. What's more, spirit is a kind of unrehearsed intimacy we have with an unknown—the timelessness of nature you are lofted into at the edge of the Grand Canyon or the helplessness your stomach roils with while stirring your son's ashes into garden soil.

It's from these without us / within us modes of celestial and private being that my inquiry begins. On a seesaw, I go up and down, studying the *inner* stake religious authors and spiritual writers bring to their work. The dichotomy is entirely mine, though I aim to simplify and to extend it. At once, there's the literary parent, the classic autobiography, centuries old. At once, there's the literary descendent, the new American memoir. Autobiography and memoir pedestal personal veracity, from which social and cultural reflection arises.

The spiritual dimension that exists in personal writing has its seed in the formidable convert Augustine, the foremost of confessional authors. His guilt-ridden and shame-based tell-all, *Confessions*, remains the apotheosis of self-disclosure for any of us who write personal essays and memoir.

I'm interested in this field only when the writing is authentically personal, felt, and original, which, as such, increases the likelihood of its reliability and, at times, its truth. How difficult it is to describe the inner experience of our enigmatic selves, how

cunningly we *set* or *trouble* our beliefs. Spiritual understanding sets the conduct of our belief, in private and social domains, in lieu of a religion's often single-minded insistence that we ascribe to what the fathers of the faith assert.

Incomparable, epiphanic events in our rainy and sunny lives spring on us nonverbally; it is only when rapture (or dread) is given a tongue to speak, or a literary style to write, does it become real to others. Reality, proof, testimony, take your pick. Textual semblance transforms an epiphany. Words, and their best order, highlight language's evocative and expansive realm, whereas, by comparison, any lived numinous moment fades. In its wake, a new discursive experience arises—*writing*, which itself may be an incomparable, epiphanic event all its own.

Among the questions I'm asking are, How do life-writers express these spiritual breakthroughs? Do their works differ from each other? How might differences be significant for writer and reader? For example, if you write from the Christian faith, what makes the story Christian? What in the literature of Christianity *do* we value—surely not a mere summary of biblical tenets? And what are the pillars of past confessional writing that yield the leafy green and the hanging fruit in the spiritual memoir today?

It seems not to matter whether these life-writers are the guilty disclosers of sin-soaked autobiography or the unruly testifiers of revelatory memoir. In either form, we herald someone like Thomas Merton, the young hedonist who in his twenties converts to Catholicism and ten years later, in 1948, writes his majestic self-examination, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton works with strategies of rhetoric and narration, often in the Augustinian model of depravity and salvation, until he realizes he's telling his story, in part, to reveal and to convince himself how Catholicism has rehabbed him. That's his motivation. And yet, despite his tale's honesty and intensity, he understands that autobiography is not the measure of a man. In a letter to the French philosopher Étienne Gilson, Merton expresses the core idea: "Please pray for me to Our Lord that instead of merely writing something I may *be* something."<sup>1</sup>

Our best spirit-haunted narratives are chockablock with queries about the topsy-turvy relationship between writing and the author's life. Such narratives grow more unwieldy the more each *scriptor*, a useful synonym from Roland Barthes, grapples with those queries. As we will see, Merton's story is a case in point.

For first-person authors, the most germane question to ask is this: To what degree is your art, backboneed by your religious or your spiritual quest, your lost or never-lost faith, a voyage of uncovering the mystery of sudden, numinous, and life-altering events, whose tensions and illusions and disclosures will not let you be, until you start writing about them?<sup>2</sup>



BEFORE TACKLING my many questions, I want briefly to examine the origin of writing, the expressive dimension of speech. Speech's domain is the fountainhead of storytelling and the source of language's felt nature. To illustrate, consider the shaman who uses his body to conjure fate, or the charismatic Billy Graham, who testifies that God is as real to him as his skin. So much of their communicative value rests on voice, passion, sincerity, emotional logic, oratorical flourish, and the live, sweating, possessed enactor or tale-teller whose conviction is on display. It's called testimony, *Tell it, Brother*: the more animated its theater, the more enthralled are the bodies who receive it.

First order of distinction. Text is not speech. Such was the great insight of those who wrote or took down God's dictation as the Bible: in order to make the writing come alive—to a largely illiterate and awestruck audience—disciples had to preach the Word. By contrast, readers have fewer means of verifying the convicted spark when the voice, its arousal, its elegance, its bellow is silenced onto or by the page. As music elicits feeling much more directly than text can, so, too, does the sonority of the heaven-bent pastor elicit faith in and for the community than a treatise on original sin. Better to bloodedly quote Leviticus than to turn in another student essay.