



A Lamp Unto Oneself

*Ultimately, there is only one teacher,
one authority. Life itself.*

Charlotte Joko Beck

AN OLD PARABLE RELATES HOW God and the devil were walking along together one day, when suddenly God spotted a bright, sparkling object. Picking it up his hand and examining it closely, after a moment God exclaimed, “Ah, *Truth!*”

“Here, give it to me,” the Devil quickly said to God. “I’ll organize it for you.”

Of all the differences between organized religion and spirituality, perhaps the most striking is that religion is *given*, and therefore based on faith and trust, while genuine spirituality—as exemplified by Buddhism, Advaita and other contemplative, non-dualistic traditions—is *direct*, and based on present evidence and firsthand experience.

Organized religion is authoritarian in nature, deriving its power from ‘received truths’—a sacred text like the Bible, the Qur’an, or the Vedas—with a venerated deity and a self-appointed elite authorized to mediate between God and Man.

In stark contrast, spirituality is humanistic. Each individual is assumed to be capable of finding truth within themselves, without the need for scriptures, messiahs, prophets, or unchanging, incontrovertible dogma. To the extent that there may be teachers to help guide one on their journey, they are usually considered equal in relation to their pupils.

Religion also tends to be exclusive, with each faith claiming to have a monopoly on the Truth. And yet, people of every faith (as well as those of none) have throughout history had similar spiritual experiences, so there must be a deeper difference at work.

A clue can be found in the word *religion* itself. The word is derived from the Latin *religare* (to bind) and most religions historically considered apostasy (the abandonment of one's religion) as deplorable, sometimes even a crime worthy of death.

In contrast, spirituality is inclusive. Rather than blindly adopting the religion one happens to be born into, one is free to follow a path of one's own choosing, and free to leave it without dire consequences.

Finally—and perhaps most tellingly—religion, by virtue of claiming to have the one true way to salvation or everlasting life, is naturally biased toward evangelism, relentlessly seeking to convert others to save them from damnation or oblivion.

People who are strong in their convictions generally do not need to convince others they are right by proselytizing. Ironically, one might even view this urge or obligation to convert others—if necessary by force—as evidence of a lack of conviction in their own faith on the part of the evangelists.

Throughout history, millions of innocent people have been killed in the name of the gods of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Systematic persecution for holding heretical views has even spurred the rise in places like Myanmar of fiercely militant sects within predominantly pacifist Buddhism.

Religionist arguments against spirituality tend to rest on several false assumptions: that people inclined toward spirituality are shallow, lazy, and weak-minded, incapable of meeting the demands of religious belief; that the non-religious deprive themselves of the support and validation of belonging to a church or religious community and tradition; and that lacking a strict code of ethics to guide them, they are subject to constantly falling into sin and immoral behavior.

Frankly, this dismissive attitude reveals a profound lack of faith in life and in people. Following a spiritual path is *not* easy, and certainly not compared to blindly following the directives of one's religious elites. It takes serious work to explore one's inner nature, and dedicated practice to apply the insights one discovers there in everyday life.

What's more, a deep sense of connection with others can be found in spiritual practice. Spirituality is about love, not laws, and can unite people at a more profound level than religion, beyond the level of individual ego.

Spirituality doesn't equate to moral license, either, since one's conscience can be a much stronger guide than mere fear of punishment. (Not only do religious people frequently commit immoral acts, but they often do so at the specific command of their faith!)

In a deeper sense, all organized religions are fundamentally flawed because they rest on the existence of a separate self in need of salvation, and a diligent exploration of one's true nature will expose this as an illusion.

Rather than offering certainty, spirituality allows us to live with uncertainty, with change, and ultimately with death—not because we believe that a 'better place' awaits us, but because we understand our ultimate nature is unborn and undying.

Ultimately, there is only one true teacher, ever-present and available to all. Life speaks to us all the time, and doesn't require us to surrender our rationality to superstition.

The last days of Gautama Buddha are—like the rest of his life—shrouded in myth, but it is said that he died at the age of 80, lying in a grove of blossoming sala trees.

His last words likewise vary with the source, but one oft-cited phrase counsels, "A Buddha can only point the way. Strive on diligently; be a lamp unto yourself." ■