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UFF DA!: A Description of Contemporary American Spirituality

Growing up in North Dakota and marrying a Norwegian have given me an opportunity to observe the usage of a very fascinating word: Uff da! It defies definition as to whether or not it is a verb, noun, adverb or adjective. Just when you think you have identified some grammatical rules for its usage you hear another context in which it is used. For example:

- . the word can be used to express an experience of exasperation
- . to express your feelings when you can't find a word to describe your current **state of affairs**
- . **to exhort** a person to move faster or to require a machine to do its work properly

Spirituality in the United States is increasingly used in the same catchall form as Uff da. (In fact, I know some Norwegians who could make a case for a clearer definition of Uff da than some current images of spirituality being "marketed.")

In a recent book by Wade Clark Roof, he observes that if we were to ask random groups of 100 Americans the question, "Are you religious?" very few would raise their hands. In fact, the response is increasingly, "I'm not religious--I'm spiritual!" The new "shibboleth" that is used, whether a person is an enlightened New Ager, staunch conservative or practicing Pentecostal/Charismatic is "spirituality." As with all words its definition must be understood in light of current usage. That's where the difficulty emerges. In the year 2000, what does the word spiritual mean in North American Christianity?

One response (and justifiably so) could be that spirituality is what it has always been-- clearly defined in Scripture, subsequently and faithfully expressed through particular Christian traditions. What we must acknowledge is that certain assumptions that have long been held as unshakable have made some significant shifts. We live in a spiritual quest culture and as such faith as a settled doctrinal position . . . revealed and revered . . . is being replaced by faith as a journey that is an end in itself. What is also being eroded is the sense of faith's object as a totally transcendent God; with its replacement being an object of faith defined as "finding truth for me." Unfortunately churches can so easily create structures that appeal to this emerging cultural definition of spirituality as they become centers for the consuming of the latest religious experience . . . a veritable Super Wal-Mart religious marketplace. In reality the spiritual quest for many is yielding a more pressing question than "what must I do to be saved?" The new spiritual quest query is "How can I feel good about myself."

Spirituality is increasingly like Uff da! A catchall phrase that ends up catching nothing at all. Spirituality has become a slippery slope and a murky pool filled with definitions ranging from greater

self-awareness and personal empowerment to a perspective that a person is only a little drop in the great ocean of Being (say what?)

I just don't think that the church can capitulate to "this present danger." What is at stake is not simply a particular tradition's definition of spirituality, but the nature of revelation itself. This new view may **be nothing more than recycled Rene Descartes**. (I think therefore I am, i.e. I define reality for myself and for my own pleasure) What's a stake is not merely our favorite doctrines but the very basis of knowing God at all! (Hint: read Romans 1 and find out what occurs when our starting point is the created instead of the Creator)

I have some questions that I'd suggest be included in our evaluation of the current state of affairs. Can one define spirituality or be spiritual without the meaning of that being grounded and shaped by biblically rooted creed and theological reflection? Further can one be spiritual apart from the Holy Spirit? (I Cor. 2:12-16) Can a person know what spirituality (or true spiritual maturity) really is outside of deep and committed participation in a faith community? (Ephesians 4:11-16)

I'd make one last observation. Christianity in the non-western world (now called the majority world) is the place that is reshaping the face of Christian spirituality. The tendency among these vibrant nonwestern Christians is to perceive spirituality in relation to how the God *encounter* you have radically changes your life to conform to the image of Christ in real concrete situations in life. There is an assumption that a holy life, moral living, equitable relationships and a life lived in reliance on the Holy Spirit for empowerment to meet the challenges of everyday life, elicit from an deep encounter with the God that is authoritatively described in the Bible. The proof of Christian spirituality is in the living and the living is linked to God's authoritative revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ as authoritatively recorded in His Word. (See James 1:19-27)

In other words **Christian spirituality is not about our search for our true selves, it's about God's divine search and rescue of lost humanity and our** obedient and joyful responses to such grace. (See I Peter 2:1-9)

One last observation: The spiritual quest culture that is part of the contemporary North American reality is a huge opportunity for the Church. Discussions in the marketplace about spiritual realities happen naturally. Christians who will listen and respond to the genuine search of people with clear answers to questions and concrete models of living spirituality will see lives changed by the power of living Christ, who is among us by the power of the Spirit.

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Check it out.

Books

The Greatest Generation Speaks, Tom Brokaw, Random House Publishers, 1999.

I recommended Brokaw's first book, *The Greatest Generation*. He got so many letters from people in response to that book, he wrote a sequel. Worth your effort to read. Amazon.com has it offered for \$9.99. *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Wade Clark Roof, Princeton University Press (\$24.95).

This is the volume I referred to in this month's commentary. Unsettling information that comes from a mainline Christian observer. I'm always looking for ways to "exegete" my culture with rigor.

An additional mainline evaluation of the reshaping of American religion is *Reinventing American Protestantism*, Donald Miller, University of California Press 1997.

More opportunities to understand the huge paradigm shifts occurring all around. Current spiritual awakenings are more clearly understood against the backdrop of the huge changes occurring in North American religious life.

Website

www.booksandculture.com

This is the publication that prompts many of my ideas for the Prez Release. Part of the *Christianity Today's* family of publications.

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