

Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me

Lillian Daniel

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On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is “spiritual but not religious.” Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.

Next thing you know, he’s telling me that he finds God in the sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets. And in walks on the beach. Sometimes I think these people never leave the beach or the mountains, what with all the communing with God they do on hilltops, hiking trails and... did I mention the beach at sunset yet?

Like people who go to church don’t see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building. How lucky we are to have these geniuses inform us that God is in nature. As if we don’t hear that in the psalms, the creation stories and throughout our deep tradition.

Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn’t interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.

Thank you for sharing, spiritual-but-not-religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead? Can I spend

my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that’s who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church.

You can’t make this stuff up. There are limits to self-made religion.



Lillian Daniel is a pastor in Iowa. Her last book, *When Spiritual But Not Religious Is Not Enough: Seeing God In Surprising Places, Even the Church* is a provocative case for why religious community matters. Her new book *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To: Spirituality Without Stereotypes, Religion Without Ranting* (Hatchette, 2016) explores the changing religious landscape, including the rising number of “Nones,” people who self-identify as having no religious preference. Her previous books include, *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony*, the story of one church’s attempt to get people to talk to each other about God.

She has taught preaching at a number of schools, including Chicago Theological Seminary, the University of Chicago Divinity School and at her alma mater, Yale Divinity School. On Sundays you can find her preaching at First Congregational Church in Dubuque, Iowa.