

Commentary

Ethical and Political Spirituality: A Pathway to Greater Engagement With the World

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Spirituality is defined as “the quality of being concerned with the one’s own spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things” by Oxford dictionary. Unfortunately, such common yet limited understanding of spirituality perpetuates the association of spirituality with the notion of self-absorption and detachment from the world. In this essay, I argue for the real-world significance of spirituality with regards to its ethical and political implications, thus elucidating how spirituality galvanizes individuals’ efforts for social changes. By deconstructing the misperceived image of spirituality as solely a pursuit of one’s self-interest and discussing spirituality in the socio-political landscape with reference to real-world examples, including feminism and gay and lesbian activism, I aim to illuminate how and why spirituality is elevated to a social dimension, ultimately presenting engaged spirituality as a pathway to societal transformation and greater engagement with the world.

The prevalent focus on self-happiness, self-interest, and inner truth might have erected a misconstrued façade of spirituality as solely a means to individual fulfillment. When Ralph Waldo Emerson laid the foundation of contemporary American spirituality in the late 19th century, he described a form of the essential human as “the self, the soul, and the forms of its potency and striving that could take possession of such a world for those people daring enough to seize such possibilities for personal spiritual fulfillment” (*Divinity School Address*). As a result, the overwhelming focus on “the self” might have created the perception that by drawing people into their interior worlds, spirituality distances them from the exterior world. As argued by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, the overt emphasis on individuals’ private interest has been translated into a broader social trend of “privatization” and “commodification”, where religion has become “a set of private beliefs that enjoyed a certain separation from whatever public religious activity a person might engage in” (*Selling Spirituality*). While Carrette and King are valid in pointing out the capitalism-driven self-interest that underlies the manipulation of modern spirituality, their assumption that all forms of spirituality are cut adrift from social justice concerns is highly contestable due to two main reasons. Firstly, the pursuit of one’s “own truth” and self-interest should not be automatically equalized to a retreat from real-world problems. Secondly, we should not examine the implications of spirituality in a narrow dichotomy that dictates a conflict between individual and societal interests. Said differently, the pursuit of spirituality is not necessarily a zero-sum game, but has the potential to be a win-win situation where positive individual and societal changes align with and catalyze each other.

The practice of spirituality has the capacity to connect personal and socio-political transformations, thus leading to one’s greater engagement with both the “self” and the world. I believe that the fundamental question here is whether we can discuss the internal self in isolation from the external world. People resort to spirituality to seek inner peace with the world, which simultaneously implies that the notion of self-seeking

and self-fulfillment is inevitably rooted in the external world where ethical and socio-political concerns give rise to the discordance between individuals' inner truths and the external social reality. Therefore, the common understanding of spirituality that is bound within a solely individual spiritual realm is quite paradoxical because it is practically unrealistic to have a discussion of personal transformation and fulfillment that is bereft of the social backdrop that creates the need for individuals to pursue changes in the first place. As suggested by Thich Nhat Hanh, engaged spirituality encompasses people committed to social changes from all faith traditions who seek to fulfill their individual spiritual pursuits. The concept of engaged spirituality taps into the ethical and socio-political dimensions of spirituality, uniting spiritual beliefs and practices with progressive social values and positive social impacts. Spirituality thus becomes an ethical and political force as individuals actively engage in the world in order to transform it in positive ways that would allow them to find inspiration and guidance in their spiritual beliefs and practices. As suggested by Jeff Wilson, practices of spirituality could provide solutions to the social issues in American society, such as political liberalism and ecological conservationism, by emphasizing positive views of human nature, compassion, kindness, freedom, and harmony with nature (*Mindful America*). Wilson's argument further accentuates the connection between individual pursuits of spiritual happiness and the socio-political climate of the real world in which such happiness is grounded. The rise of feminism and gay and lesbian activism are two prominent examples of this intricate interplay between the socio-political manifestation of engaged spirituality and individuals' spiritual journeys.

What underlies feminist and gay activist spirituality is the quest for socio-political empowerment against an oppressive status quo, where individual spiritual pursuits unite to fuel collective social changes. Feminist spirituality emerged during the second wave of the modern feminist movement in the United States in the 1970s. It set out to reclaim the value and dignity of women by encouraging women to search for their inner truth and power. Women gathered in consciousness raising groups to voice their experiences of unjust female subordination. Goddess worships were revived to celebrate women's most sacred selves (*The Spiritual Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess*). Reproductive justice was brought to the forefront of public discussion as a basic human right to "address the struggle of marginalized women" (*Reproductive Justice*). The use of the erotic was upheld as a source of power and liberation from patriarchal dominance (*Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*). All these spiritual pursuits stem from individuals' desire to regain the unexpressed and unrecognized feeling of power and fulfillment. Subsequently, women who practice feminist spirituality are propelled to engage in a collective social cause as they seek personal transformations. Women's spiritual sensibilities become an active force of change against gender inequality in the political plane.

Likewise, as gay and lesbian activism rose to prominence in the late 20th century, gay activists tap into the power of spiritual pursuit to rebel against gendered and sexualized acts of dominance, liberating a previously marginalized and oppressed identity from the suffering of social injustice. Through the spiritual search for "self-definition" and "self-realization", gay and lesbian people who have fought through their self-hatred and their self-recriminations acquire a capacity for empathy and a profound sense of

self-empowerment (*On Becoming*). Practices of spirituality becomes the means of “final healing” and salvation, rescuing people who have been wounded by their experience of homosexuality, subsequently empowering them to challenge the social stigma that creates such unjust suffering (*Rebirth Through the Wound*). Ultimately, spirituality creates a window through which gay people can “critically examine the workings of tradition”, “create new ways for shaping the culture”, and “adapt to changing conditions” (*Reinventing Ourselves*). Once again we see a deep connection between personal and social changes driven by the practice of spirituality. Gay and lesbian people resort to their spiritual power to challenge and eradicate all forms of social injustice enforced upon them. Gay people’s individual spiritual quests and desires for recognition and inclusion become politically charged as their collective effort bring about social revolutions against heterosexism.

Feminism and gay activism both suggest a recurring pattern of when, why, and how spirituality transcends its spiritual landscape and integrates itself into the broader social, ethical, and political landscape. Essentially, when social oppression occurs, which results in a dissonance between social reality and one’s inner reality among the oppressed, spirituality becomes the means for this group of disadvantaged individuals to seek feelings of recognition and make peace with the social injustice that they have to endure. The pursuits of internal and external change happen simultaneously in this process. While one makes peace with oneself through the spiritual pursuit of self-assurance, inner happiness, and fulfillment, he or she also actively seeks to change the status quo in the real world to challenge and thus remove the source of oppression. Through this two-fold process, the individual and the collective mutually support, shape and transform each other. Consequently, the practice of spirituality functions across the individual, ethical, and socio-political landscapes, creating a pathway for both greater self-realization and greater engagement with the real world.

In conclusion, in this paper I have elucidated why spirituality entails a continual interwoven process of both individual spiritual growth and dedication to improving the global community. The root of politically and ethically engaged spirituality speaks to people’s perennial struggle against social oppression and injustice. Fortunately, spirituality provides us with a pathway to the betterment of the self as well as the betterment of the world.