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EDITORIAL COMMENTS

An Explication of Our Collective Moral Consciousness

— Joseph P. Hester, Independent Scholar

As the public square fades into the void of the past, many remain insulated within their personal spheres of social media ambivalent about their nation’s future and reluctant to converse with others about ethical norms and the issues such norms unearth. Not wanting to offend or be questioned, some have kept their opinions quietly within acquiescing to the popular notion that ethics and truth are personally relative and privately their own. This is a situation of self-centering believing that “we” are the center of our own universe becoming tools of our own tools, independent and self-reliant. The moral culture of the United States (of the world) is obviously pluralistic and situationally relative, making opening a dialogue about spiritual leadership a difficult road to traverse. Yet, yielding to our normative imaginations and moral consciousness, a discussion of spiritual leadership is an avenue from which we should not shrink.

My statement that human beings are entities both biological and social in character accounts for the possibility that they are also spiritual in character. If human beings are spiritual entities, then their spirituality is an aspect of their sociality.
—Michael J. Perry, *Morality Politics & Law*, 1988

I began this discussion with “Advancing a Philosophy of Spiritual Leadership” in the 2020 winter issue of the *Journal of Values-based Leadership*. The purpose was to open a conversation and invite a variety of opinions and rationally articulated insights. I continue here by discussing the “Salience and Substance of Spiritual Leadership.” Clearly, attaching “spiritual” to “leadership” and identifying “spiritual” with “moral acuity” poses a problem as it raises the issue of moral exclusiveness and, parenthetically, moral relativity, especially when “spiritual” is *correlated* with religious beliefs and the moral values such beliefs support. Many remain unresponsive to such discussions. Compliant and unmoving, some say, “It is what it is”; yet, in reality, it is what we **think and say it is** exposing personal and social contingencies all requiring reassessment. “Reality as it actually is” is based on

Almost all the spiritual traditions recognize that there is a stage in man’s development when belief – in contrast to faith – and its securities have to be left behind.
— Alan Watts, 1953, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*

interpreting, evaluating, and explaining the activities and events around us, usually with some sort of intent often exposing our assumptions (opinions) and self-directing our moral effort. Our tendency is to project our beliefs and collective

insecurities onto the screen of reality, making “reality as it actually is” – a product of our limited personal narratives casting a delusional glow over our lives.

About the spiritual, what I write is but a small leap into these waters — a snap shot, a conjecture, a continuing discussion. As we are well aware, the spiritual is intrinsic — not seen, touched, nor heard; yet, an energy lying at the core of our humanity directing our behavior and, hopefully, unlocking our moral veracity. Noticeably, the spiritual is subject to cultural influences requiring understanding, reassessment, and cultivation. From this base, we work out our cognitive claims about things, relating them, describing them, and giving them value. There is a good deal of selective and exploratory activity here including the discernment of our physical and social environment, the pressures to conform and find stability among the subgroups to which we assign importance, and the growth of convictions, especially those to which we assign moral value. Fundamentally, “reality as it actually is” is a by-product of, or culmination of, a way of thinking; albeit, this generalization doesn’t do justice to the complexities of thinking, whether cognitional or valuational.

What then of the spiritual? Admittedly intrinsic, “spiritual” is not a descriptive term, for what would be describing? Rather, “spiritual” is more energy than thing, meaningful in a *referential way* directing our introspection and pointing to the need to help people live together. This provides “spiritual” with its normative and valuational import.

“Spiritual” has become ingrained in our religious consciousness, carried over in a practical sort of way into secular discussions about human essence and now about values-based leadership. Importantly, the spiritual is more than cognition; being *evaluative*, it is conceptual as well as verbal exploring how events, objects, plans, and patterns of human living fit into our lives. The spiritual then is representative of our normative consciousness. Verbally, the spiritual within responds to what is happening around us and is expressed in words such as “right” and “wrong,” “good” and “bad” — the language of morality — and in terms of acceptance and rejection respectively. In real life this represents a kind of balancing affair, an interplay of feelings and purposes, which issues in choices of goals and actions.

And whether spiritual is natural, metaphysical, or purely a conceptual referent lies outside our more practical concerns. Philosophers have discussed these issues for many hundreds of years. Simply put, the spiritual is recognized by many as an intrinsic energy definitive of human life. More often than not it has moral connotations, but we should remember its vulnerable nature as it lies within the subterranean features of our outward appearance.

Subsequently, spiritual energy is the essence of life, a natural proclivity, and we can be sure that nature does nothing in vain. Given the social and communal nature of spiritual, any comment about its intrinsic nature will be suspect yielding more to our cultural heritage and unexamined assumptions, subjective, many times acquiescent, and perhaps receptive more to what people may think of us rather than to personal introspection, rational inquiry, and the courage moral veracity compels. We can hardly avoid this, but we should make an effort.

Ours is a time of scientific rationalism and our *rational nature* wants to pull us away from this conversation, but intuitively we feel there is something deeply within called “spiritual” that is not only personal, but communicative, requiring illumination; something that is natural, but unreceptive to scientific investigation. Of course, even the idiom “rational nature” admits of the intrinsic marking our cultural encapsulation and often undisclosed commitments, perhaps exaggerated certainty. These *unexposed assumptions* often tint our experiences with personal preferences making impartial judgments unachievable. That the spiritual admits of a communal and evaluational nature, listening to others and engaging in

open dialogue are necessary for extending our ethical choices beyond self to an expanded moral humanity that we are.

Everyday common usage reveals the *spiritual is as an imperceptible* capacity centering us morally, sometimes religiously and other times not. We are tasked with driving this capability well and carefully and with intellectual prowess, tempered by sympathy and compassion, using experience and reasoning to control its normative impulse and often unarticulated suppositions. Care must be taken as scientific rationalism wishes to reduce our values to facts, generalizations, and explanations, or to the *nonsensical* products of belief, faith, and sentimentality known only through our words set to the

Philosophers...ask one another for definitions to be sure they're thinking clearly, and they push one another to pursue the implications of their ideas and statements. They prod themselves and others to examine the basic assumptions upon which their beliefs and arguments rest. Philosophers are persistent explorers in the nooks and crannies of human knowledge that are commonly overlooked or deliberately ignored. It is an exciting but restless adventure of the mind...Only disciplined study with an open mind will produce philosophic awareness. Insight and consciousness will come only with relentless labor. In this age of instant everything; there is still no instant wisdom, unfortunately.

— James L. Christian, 1973, *Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art of Wondering*

rhythm of a coherent materialism. Reason, *not unlike belief*, wishes to objectify the un-objectifiable making the spiritual a lifeless adherence to logical rationalism or to ancient doctrines bound by biases of our own choosing. The practical benefits of reason and science are obvious, but their conjectures about the inner workings of the intrinsic are dubious. However, one can understand the negative reactions to religion *per se* – to religious expressions and their manifold interpretations – and how the religious use authoritarian jargon, set to the rhythm of a mythological past, to project belief on the screen of reality claiming absolute truth.

So, with a *presumed absolutism* and being intrinsic, “spiritual” is a commonly used metaphor found mainly in religious discourse, but religious exclusivity cannot be allowed to harness this energy nor narrow its scope. Also, with some questions about their own assumptions, utilitarian rationalism cannot be allowed to dismiss the spiritual as useless and inconsequential. For the devout, when this occurs, the spiritual becomes little more than an agent of manipulation, sanctioning some behaviors and condemning others under the guise of religious belief. This we commonly see that both Christian Evangelicals and Islamic radicals have aligned their moral (spiritual) impulse with specific political goals in a quest for control over their adherents, thus strangling the flowering of a collective moral humanity.

The broadened view of spiritual offered in this paper is not bound by established religious rules, yet, not divorced from the religious either. Thus, a case will be made for enlarging “spiritual” beyond its religious confines, redefining it as *an essential moral capability* definitive of a shared humanity. Given that the spiritual is distinct within each person, it follows that it is personally relative and, paradoxically, normatively universal as it is common to us all. Introspection and courage are required to unhinge this capacity in the service of others. Thus, as a distinct moral energy, the spiritual labors to expand and enrich our view of

others, our communal interdependence, and the importance of human decency and service. It encourages a morality without conceptual borders, sacred in both a religious sense and a secular sense as well, but not subject to, or bound by, religious rules, racial or gender divisions, or political ideals.

A problem we face is over-inflating “spiritual” with unwanted rhetorical expressions – theological or philosophical, psychological or sociological – decreasing its meaning and devaluing its common usage. This poses a risk for common usage normally takes precedence over more theoretical nuances in everyday discussions, especially moral discourse. Institutionalized religion is pervasive both East and West but, for some, religion has become a tool of manipulation in which the spiritual is overshadowed by an objectification of the intrinsic, the moral, and the experiential. Religious beliefs, stained by inconsistent interpretations of ancient texts, often impound the spiritual and negate its moral value.

Care must be taken for when we objectify “belief-in” our beliefs often become an encrusted shell, fixed and unquestionable, verifying our behavior and often demonizing others. “Belief-in” reveals an unbending enclosure of our ideologies, sacred or secular and moral or amoral. People are thus standardized, divided, and *sloganized* as either “believers” or “atheists,” “Democrats” or “Republicans,” and much more. This describes much of our society today and we eventually pay a price for such arbitrary divisions, divisions which deny our commonalities while accentuating our differences. We prefer our religion and, parenthetically our politics, in the black and white not in shades of grey, for it’s in the grey areas where we struggle the most. Fear of blurring our identity and recognizing our common humanity, our moral discernment – our spirituality – languishes in the backwaters of our faith and commitment to a moral humanity.

In summary, the spiritual defines the *essentialness* of our humanity, *a normative consciousness or spiritual sensibility stirring us morally*. The substance of the spiritual is principled and evaluational, directing behavior and stirring our moral veracity. The spiritual within us must be intentionally recognized as a personal and collective moral consciousness challenging us to positively restore our virtuous and noble authenticity. Although an internal energy, the spiritual is also communal and interconnected to others as it is strengthened by civil dialogue, respect, and tolerance. No claim is made for the spiritual being unconditional as we are impressionable and pliable creatures susceptible to both moral and amoral influences. This admits, among other things, that the spiritual is contingent and contaminable building character that is sometimes moral and other times yielding to influences that are less so. Precaution must be taken as moral reassessment should be, prudently and socially, an ongoing task. Within these cloudy and moving waters, waters definitive of our diversity and our collective humanity, is where the spiritual is cultivated and advanced.

Thus, it is no easy task to discuss this topic and even more difficult to apply spiritual to values-based leadership. What is called “*spiritual*” – our collective moral consciousness – is not a thing-in-itself and doesn’t belong to a few no matter how forcefully they make their claim. It cannot be confined as it is an energy seeking release in the moral commons we call “humanity.” On the other hand, to talk about the “spiritual” in terms of “substance” poses a risk. Such talk has led some (notably utilitarians) to dismiss such intrinsic nomenclature as nonsense. Yet, philosophical dialogue has shown that utilitarianism per se relies upon some

theory of intrinsic value — something is held to be good “in itself,” apart from further consequences, and all other values are believed to derive their worth from their relation to this intrinsic good as a means to an end. In other words, utilitarianism has reached conclusions its own theory is unable to support. Thus, no apology is made for this discussion. My views represent my cultural eccentricity requiring clarification in the dialectic of conversation. Such clarification is a major purpose of this writing.

About the Author

Joseph P. Hester is an independent writer living in Claremont, North Carolina, and serves on the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Values-based Leadership* and the Advisory Board for the *Humanities Bulletin*.

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