

Me, my church and I: "Spirituality" versus "religion"

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

"Spirituality" versus "religion" has become a defining conflict of our time. Former colleague Winnifred Sullivan taught me that some people take all of the things they don't like out of religion and call what's left "spirituality." Spiritualities modified by adjectives are not a problem: Jesuit, Jewish, African-American, feminist, medieval and other such spiritualities are rich; unmodified spirituality is banal.

For a recent case study let's examine the witness of singer Melissa Etheridge, who was recently interviewed by religion writer Cathleen Falsani in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Etheridge begins by taking apart "religion." She disses her father, the church and the church's God. She characterizes the denomination in which she was raised, United Methodism, as purveying "white bread . . . religion-lite," and she dismisses dogma, creed, hell, the "Jesus Christ myth" and Baptists. This polemic clears space for her to declare her own spirituality.

Let's line up "religion" and "spirituality" in her published witness.

- Religions make truth claims and offer benefits that come with faith. So, according to Etheridge, do spiritualities: "My faith has been rewarded. I have been rewarded for speaking the truth. I have been rewarded for saying 'OK, I'm in this really lonely, awful . . . place and it feels horrible where I am, but I believe.' And that's faith."
- Religions have a doctrine of creation. So does Etheridge: "My faith is, I believe, I know that I am on this Earth, and I am an energy that is moving forward, . . . and I'm in control. . . . I believe that. I have faith in that. And I've been shown that."
- Religions advocate humility but often fail to deliver. Etheridge's spirituality is not humble, but it delivers: "I know in my heart and soul that I am on the right path, and that I am not wrong or going to hell or any of those labels that certain religions want to put on me . . . I know what's right. And I'm declaring my truth."

- Religions make claims about meaning in the universe. So do Etheridge's kinds of spirituality: "I am not bound to religion or religious dogma or creed. I am not limited spiritually at all, and that's where I'm at right now, realizing that it's infinite and it keeps on unfolding."
- Religions depend on scholarship for legitimation. So do invented spiritualities. Etheridge boasts: "I know too much about history that it demystifies the Jesus Christ myth for me. But I do believe that a man existed who was speaking incredible truths about our souls."
- Religions derive from sources, from tales by tribal seniors, metaphysics, oracles, scriptures. So, too, do popular styles of spirituality. Etheridge describes her sources as "music, of course. String theory. Family counseling. Past-life regression. A little bit of Wiccans. And the occasional clairvoyant."
- Religions promote wholeness and claim healing power. So, of course, do home-grown spiritualities. Etheridge states that "I am and have always been a healer . . . It's about healing."

This religionless spirituality is strangely Trinitarian. Etheridge's credo seems to be: I believe in Melissa Etheridge, Maker of this Earth, and the energy in it. And in the unmythic Jesus Christ, who does not save but who said some wise things. And in an exciting, unlimited spirituality that heals.

After a good dose of such narcissistic and solipsistic faiths, expressed in pop culture sites, concert halls and anywhere but church sanctuaries, one is ready to rush back to First United Methodist Church, the Athanasian Creed, stewardship drives, offering envelopes, sermons, anthems and offering plates—and, of course, gifts of grace.