



When "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church

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The phrase "I'm spiritual but not religious" has become a cliché. It's easy to find God amid the convenience of self-styled spirituality--but is it possible (and more worthwhile) to search for God through religion?

Minister and celebrated author Lillian Daniel gives a new spin on church with stories of what a life of faith can really be: weird, wondrous, and well worth trying. From a rock-and-roller sexton to a BB gun-toting grandma, a church service attended by animals to a group of unlikely theologians at Sing Sing, Daniel shows us a portrait of church that is flawed, fallible--and deeply faithful. With poignant reflections and sly wit, Daniel invites all of us to step out of ourselves, dare to become a community, and encounter a God greater than we could ever invent.

Humorous and sincere, this is a book about people finding God in the most unexpected of places: prisons, airports, yoga classes, committee meetings, and, strangest of all, right there in church.

When "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church Details

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Emma says

This wasn't what I expected. I anticipated a much more academic consideration of what the church has to offer but instead got something much more personal, which I enjoyed. Her humor and easy going writing style made this book a please to read.

Although only offering a selection of stories from her life and work that could have illustrated her point, I think she makes her argument -- that we need the church, not just spirituality -- very well (and perhaps the fact that there are so many more examples she could have used only makes her argument stronger). I really appreciated her snarky claim that we religious folk -- often confronted by our 'spiritual but not religious' friends who claim they find beauty/God/whatever in nature --can also find God in nature. Imagine that! Being part of a religious community doesn't make you any less spiritual but instead, as she discusses, grounds you in our millennia-old tradition and gives you a group of people who will not only support you in times of struggle but challenge your beliefs and send you in new directions you wouldn't find on your own.

I encourage everyone to read this! If you're the religious type, this may be affirming (although there are certainly challenging parts as well). If you're the spiritual-but-not-religious type, I hope this will urge you to consider why you're willing to find God in nature but not anywhere else.

James says

Lillian Daniel gets frustrated with those who tell 'they are spiritual and not religious' as though church-going-people don't know that you can connect with God in nature. She rightly observes that in church, people have intentionally thought about and pursued God and therefore may have a little more spiritual substance.

However this book looks at where we encounter God in the world. Her argument for 'church' or 'religion' is an argument against hyper-individualism. If we are to grow spiritually, we need others.

The stories are funny and Daniel is a great author. This isn't a book exploring the depths of theology though. Progressives and more orthodox believers will appreciate Daniel's writing.

Thomas Christianson says

If someone has only read heady and dry theological content previously, I think they might be delighted by this book.

Having read Don Miller, Anne Lamott, Nadia Bolz-Weber, and Sarah Miles, it was not an approach whose

novelty would automatically capture my attention. I simply could not connect with this book.

After an opening chapter addressing the thesis of the title which I found worthwhile, the remainder of the book does not adhere to a visible structure. We are simply wandering with the author through various stories and seemingly non-sequitor thoughts.

In a couple places, the author makes allusions to Universalist values, but does not actually explain her thoughts or her journey to arriving there. It is also possible I simply misunderstood what she was saying. I would have appreciated additional clarity in this area.

All in all, I would probably recommend works by the aforementioned authors in place of this text.

David says

If you want a collection of stories that briefly touch on what religion means to a minister's personal life, told in a way that is informal and tinged a safe and mild form of an almost hipster-like edginess, you may find this entertaining or affirming of your views and values. If you are looking for something that addresses why religion might matter to a crowd that isn't already religious (and preferably Christian), this book will likely disappoint. The author's criticism of narcissistic idolatry in our self-image conscious society (for those in the US and other parts of the larger secularized modern world) and of our consumer/personal satisfaction based approach to our life experiences are valid and welcome, and it is true that being part of larger, long-lived tradition can provide humbling insights, platforms for social and emotional stability, and a less superfluous way of understanding life than self-made mirages of idealism. If, however, you want more than that, or more than a semi-autobiographical critique of religion in modern culture that reads like an extended Christian testimony or witness, you are likely to be disappointed.

This doesn't mean the book is poorly conceived or written, but it tends to come across as more of a circling the wagons against the decline in interest in (the Judeo-Christian forms of) organized religion than an effort to make such tradition appear relevant or inviting. If you don't already assume her version of God and that the appropriate response to such a God is other-directed praise and worship (i.e. the services aren't about your needs or preferences but about pleasing God), there is nothing in the book that attempts to bridge that disconnect. In that sense, at least the book maintains a certain integrity, but this approach can also make that worldview seem inaccessible or irrelevant to many who may be wondering about the value of spirituality with or without religion. It may challenge some to dig deeper, but it will almost certainly turn others off from such effort, at least within the framework of Biblically based faiths.

Again, this is not a badly written book, nor is it dull or boring. The human moments are bravely shared and well-rendered. The question is, what are you hoping to find in it? I was personally hoping for more that would speak to someone outside of formal religious tradition.

John says

MANY things that Lillian Daniel brought up in this book have been my reality as a military chaplain. We often have to do briefings on the differences and similarities between spirituality and religion. Her experiences, however, shed a whole new light on how to begin to look at all this in a more helpful way. I would especially recommend this to anyone who works in a more ecumenical setting.

Jendi says

This collection fails to deliver on the provocative claims of its title essay. Daniel opens with an attack on the supposedly shallow and cliché spirituality of the unchurched. Her critique has some merit, though she perhaps displays more snark than is pastorally appropriate.

In any event, it sets the bar pretty high for her to demonstrate that what you'll find in church is deeper and more original than a long walk on the beach. The rest of the book doesn't make the case. It feels like a batch of unrelated cutesy magazine columns that the publisher threw together under a controversial title.

Few will argue with her general point that the ideal spiritual life is enriched by community and tradition. But an unhealthy community, or an oppressive tradition, is worse than none at all. Not everyone has the leisure to scour a 50-mile radius for a safe church, nor the willingness to be only halfway authentic in a church that's psychologically healthy but doctrinally unsound (or vice versa).

Daniel's failure to validate these concerns alienates the people she's trying to win back to the fold.

Kari says

From what I can tell, Lillian Daniel wrote an essay on Huffington Post about the perils of being "spiritual but not religious" and then was asked to write a book on the topic but didn't really have a book's worth of stuff to say so she just told stories instead. I liked the stories in this book but there didn't seem to be any structure to it. Also, a few (not many) of the stories were anecdotes I have heard from other speakers/preachers. I feel like that can work in a sermon but it doesn't work for me in a book. In the end, I didn't feel like she made a convincing case that being in a church is important (which I think is what she was trying to do).

Vicki Steevensz says

The thing about Lillian Daniel's charming, hilarious, relatable take on the importance of faith in community with others is that I just can't get enough of her. If she wrote a daily meditation, I'd be on it every day. She is earthy, yet a fine, creative thinker, eloquent in the most entertaining way, and she cares enough about faith that she's willing to be challenging and provocative but is also remarkably warm-hearted and never harsh. In the past I've been one of those "spiritual but not religious" folks, and when I first heard the title of the book, I was a little taken aback. Shouldn't those who are on a spiritual journey, but not part of a community, be nurtured into coming back? Shouldn't they be cajoled and lovingly coaxed into church? And truth be told, that's precisely what Daniel does in her book, but in a elbow in the side, friendly, get-out-of-your-own-way manner. I hear her saying, "Aw, come ON, it's easy to sit up in your bedroom and think positive thoughts about the world - but it's getting your hands dirty and your agenda tromped on by real people in community with one another that actually helps you grow in faith." She's right. She wins me over.

Sometimes religious ideas can be communicated in a sterile manner. That can make religious tomes downright boring. But Daniel hilariously points out our (and her own) foibles and quirks in recounting contemporary real-life stories, and I can't help but relate to what she says. If you're looking for religious (and spiritual!) inspiration and growth, you can't do better than Daniel's new book. On the other hand, if you feel

like she's mistaken and on the wrong track, give her a try anyway. She might surprise you and in any case she'll surely entertain you.

Julie - Book Hooked Blog says

When I saw this book available on NetGalley, I was very intrigued by the title. It's something that people tend to say a lot, but hard to pin down as a specific world-view. Daniel is a progressive liberal minister who pastors a UCC church and she unpacks the meaning of this phrase in one of the essays included in this book, along with other thoughts on faith and culture.

Writing

I was really impressed with the author's writing. I think she tackles sensitive topics in a clear, level-headed way that doesn't alienate those on either end of the spectrum. At the same time, she doesn't come across as intimidated by the need to meet expectations or limited in her willingness to challenge popular opinion. Some essays were weaker than others, but I think that's the norm for any collection. I would certainly compare her writing style and depth of insight with authors like Donald Miller or Rob Bell.

Entertainment Value

Again, as with any collection of spiritually-minded essays, some appealed to me more than others. I particularly enjoyed the title essay, "An Honest Prayer", "We and They", "Sing Sing", and "Please Stop Boring Me". Theologically I'm not always on the same page as the author, but I didn't feel that that kept me from understanding or gaining insight from her essays. In fact, what I appreciated most about her essays were the recognition of multiple points of view within the Christian faith and her move to embrace religion and doctrine, instead of following the fad of rejecting anything "organized". At the same time, she is honest and willing to examine the failings of the church as a whole.

Overall

I highly recommend giving this one a try. I thoroughly enjoyed the read and came away with some applications for my own life and a wealth of new ideas to consider.

A few quotes relating to the title essay and the importance of organized religion, as well as answer themes that I see as very timely for religion today and in my own life:

"There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in a 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 you did not invent all for yourself."

"You can be open-minded and still know what you think. You can be accepting of other people's ideas and still articulate your own."

Katie says

This book suffers from a misleading title. I was thinking it was going to be about people finding comfort in religion after previously writing it off, but it's actually just the musings of a UCC minister. And those musings are...fine...but they don't really come together as a whole very well. I might have liked this better if I wasn't expecting something different and if I hadn't just read *Accidental Saints*, much better book by a

progressive female minister.

Karen Zacharias says

I have made a new friend.

She doesn't know that we are friends, yet. This is my way of letting her know that I may or may not be stalking her.

Okay. Not really.

Truth is I don't have time to stalk anybody, even if I wanted to, and in this case, I do so dearly want to. At the very least, I want to have coffee with her.

But as she herself noted — why should any of us want to do the very least?

Don't we want to be the kind of people who are known for being extravagant? Not in that cheap Kardashian way, but in that expansive Jesus fashion?

So, one date for coffee might not be enough time. We might need to make it a regular affair.

My friend's name is Lillian Daniel.

You might already know about her because she's kind of a big deal, at least within certain theological circles.

Oh. Those who think women have no place in the pulpit will be entirely dismissive of her. That's their great loss. I don't hold to teachings that suggest that women ought to wear head coverings, or carry stadium cushions around to protect against the uncleanliness of menstruation, even though I'm well past the age where I have need of any of that. (An astronaut's diaper might serve me better.)

Personally, I don't care if the person in the pulpit is a man or a woman as long as they have something of God to say. You may feel differently. You may think God has chosen to make man the Supreme Burrito over all of us pinto beans. If so, I'm not going to argue all that with you.

Rev. Dr. Lillian Daniel doesn't look much like a theologian. She looks like that sweet girl you met in 8th-grade that you wanted to get to know better but she was so quiet you didn't know how to approach her, so you never did. And then high school graduation rolled around and you realized that night that you really should have spoken to her sooner because you could just tell she had good stories to tell, and now you'd never know them.

Except that she became a preacher woman and a writer.

How fortunate are we?

Wendy Grisham of Jericho Books sent me Lillian's book "When Spiritual But Not Religious is Not Enough."

I'll confess that I put it on the pile of TO READs and might not have gotten to it this early had it not been such an absolutely beautiful Saturday. But the sun was shining and I didn't want to be in the house any longer. So while Tim shampooed carpets — hey, it's his dog after all — I snuck out to the patio and sat in the sun reading Lillian's book.

Oh. Buddy. This girl can write & preach.

As Lillian tells it, upon encountering yet another soul who felt the need to explain to the good Reverend why it is he no longer goes to church — because, he is, you know, spiritual but not religious — the lady preacher pondered all the reasons why lame spirituality will ultimately fail.

"When you witness suffering and declare yourself to have achieved salvation in the religion of gratitude, you have fallen way short of what God would have you do, no matter what religion you are called to. And by the way, while I think God does want us to feel gratitude, I do not think God particularly wants us to feel lucky. I think God wants us to witness pain and suffering and, rather than feeling lucky, God wants us to get angry and want to do something about it.

"The civil rights movement didn't happen because people felt lucky. The hungry don't get fed, the homeless don't get sheltered, and the world doesn't change because people who are doing okay feel lucky."

Amen. Amen. Amen.

There is a gratitude movement underfoot in the Evangelical community.

We should live lives far more consciously grateful.

We should fall on our faces daily in gratitude. Not necessarily for all that we have – because all of it could be gone tomorrow, then what? – but before the God who is Almighty and loves us anyway.

It is a good thing to be grateful.

It is a right thing to be thankful.

It is holy thing to account for all that is grace ...

But it is not enough.

If we only sit around counting our many blessings, like a wealthy King counting golden coins, what good is that to anyone but the one lucky enough to be King?

Lillian Daniel is absolutely right.

Nobody ever changed the world by sitting around cataloging all their many blessings, and feeling fortunate that they were born in a country where TV Evangelists abound.

The world is changed by people who are willing to stare suffering in its unforgettable face...

And promising that child, that man, that woman, that having witnessed their suffering, we will do all that is within our power and God's grace, to stop it.

In the last year of her life, my girlfriend Connie told me that she had learned to cut short meaningless conversations. Time was a precious commodity for Connie. She was intentional about how she spent it. She looked suffering in the face — her own face — and determined that she wouldn't let suffering have the last word.

Too many of us are unwilling to look suffering in the face.

Too many of us are content to let suffering have the last word.

Too many people of faith and a whole lot of unbelievers alike are fat with gratitude, and feeling lucky.

They are too comfortable and too afraid to actually get out and do something that might ease the suffering of others.

They pray for a new heaven.

They just won't do the work necessary to make it happen.

Lillian, if you read this, gimme a call. Coffee's on me.

Karen Spears Zacharias is author of A Silence of Mockingbirds: The Memoir of a Murder

David Van Brakle says

I am a Lilian Daniel fan, but this book didn't really click for me. Filled with several stories, it felt a little disjointed. Some of the stories, though, are getting pulled for future sermons.

Sarah Marie says

A judgmental, self righteous woman she is. I'm on chapter 19, titled "Please stop bothering me" I don't know if I'll make it to the end. To be honest, I don't know how I even made it that far.. Who is she to decide if someone experiences God on the mountain, or at the ocean, or anywhere else? Jesus seemed to spend lots of time out in nature, and on his own to be with his Father.. I just could not connect with this book at all. The chapter titled "Speaking in tongues" was about how poorly she performed in a Spanish class? ZERO mention of the holy spirit or speaking in tongues. In fact as far as I've read 121 pages, I don't remember one bible verse reference at all.. You won't miss much if you pass on this one. Go read Donald Miller Blue Like Jazz, a favorite of mine, or look up books put out by Bethel church, Bill Johnson, that's good stuff, this, this.. I have no idea how this book was successful at all..

Miriam Downey says

You can find my full review here: <http://mimi-cyberlibrarian.blogspot.c...>

Lillian Daniel, a United Church of Christ pastor, has created an interesting amalgam in her book *When "Spiritual but not Religious" is not Enough*. Part sermon, part memoir, part existential musings; Daniel is always on point and personal as she explores what it is to be Christian in the 21st century.

A contributor on several national blogs, such as *The Huffington Post*, Daniel is also a nationally known speaker and workshop leader. She is the pastor of First Congregational Church of Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Some of her entries in this book are obviously sermons. One that I especially appreciated is called, *An Honest Prayer*. I have always been a bit a bit reticent about the asking for myself in prayer. I am pretty good at asking for others, praying for others, or asking for clarification for situations. In other words, I ask for others and not myself. Daniel says, "...that reluctance to ask God for what we really want is arrogance posing as humility. It seems humble to not ask God for our own desires, and to put other larger matters first. But doing that seems to imply we have power in all this. As if by asking God to cure diabetes before asking for a raise, we might actually affect God's priorities." What I especially appreciated about this essay on prayer is that I have noticed that when I pray sincerely, I usually end up in a different place than where I was as I began the prayer. Daniel confirms that power in our prayers..."an exposure of the deeper need beneath our prayers."

I also enjoyed the brief essay entitled *Things I am Tired Of*. She begins by saying "I am tired of hearing people say stupid things in the name of Christianity." She suggests that we live in a society where "...stupid and simple spirituality always trumps the depth of a complex faith." It echoes my sentiments exactly. Some essays and sermons are sarcastic and biting; others are joyful, while others are haunting—especially the final essay in which Daniel discusses her parent's separation and divorce in relation to our relationship with God. She says that we are always trying to separate ourselves from God and each other, while God is always trying to knit us back together again. This essay really touched me because we have family members who are trying to find ways to remain in relationship; I wanted to print off the essay to give to them, but they are "spiritual but not religious" and I'm not sure they would appreciate my intervening. So, I will have to pray for them instead.

At best, the essays are profound; at worst they are trivial. There is an unevenness to the essays that makes the book all the more interesting, because the reader is left in a guessing game. I have issues with the title of the book; it is too cumbersome. However, that is a minor issue. Then I wonder who I will give this book to. Who is the intended audience? in other words. I liked the book; it caused me to think, but I am not sure who else would appreciate it. *Publishers Weekly* calls this book a "wise and witty collection" and answers my questions about the intended audience when they say that Daniels "offer a rich banquet for pastors, lifelong congregants, disaffected Christians, and confused seekers alike." Daniel makes me want to attend her church or one of her workshops. I like how she connects her faith with the trials of living. Her concerns remind me of my own.

The *Publishers Weekly* review: <http://reviews.publishersweekly.com/9...>

An interview with Lillian Daniel: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandet...>

There are a lot of Lillian Daniel sermons on You Tube. Here is one of them: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRJfOa...>

Naomi says

Best bits:

Chapter 11 - Things I Am Tired Of

I am tired of hearing people say stupid things in the name of Christianity. I am tired of nutty, pistol-packing pastors who want to burn the Koran. I am tired of televangelists who claim that natural disasters are the will of God. I am tired of Christians who respond to the pain of disease with a lecture about behavior. I am tired of preachers who promise prosperity. As grumpy as it sounds, I am even tired of Tim Tebow.

I am also tired of people who say that they are privately spiritual but not religious. I am tired of people who have one bad experience with a church and paint the whole of Christianity with that brush. I am tired of celebrities who criticize the church for being patriarchal and homophobic but do nothing to support the churches that are not. I am super tired of Anne Rice.

I am tired of people who say they want a church like mine but cannot be bothered to attend one. And I am tired of people who criticize churches like mine and go somewhere else.

So I resonate with the angry words from letters to the early church that criticize shallow believers with itchy ears. I feel like I live in a society where stupid and simple spirituality always trumps the depth of a complex faith. We are a people of itchy ears, who depart from sound doctrine in favor of easy answers.

Perhaps I am really just tired of myself. In criticizing others in their faith, I hardly live up to the best in my own faith. Perhaps the people who irritate me the most are exposing my own false doctrines. And this is why I can't do this religion thing all by myself. This is why I need a community.

Chapter 19 - Please Stop Boring Me

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 as 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.

Being privately spiritual but not religious has become the norm in American culture, and has even made its way into the culture of some of our churches. So while I can't stop these people from talking to me on the airplane, can I at least inform them that they are boring?

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.

These are two very cynical excerpts, but OH MY LANTA how they resonate with my caustic spirit.

Eric Ledermann says

Sadly: fluff. Chicken-Soup-for-the-Soul-like. Mildly entertaining at times. But seriously lacking in depth for a preacher/pastor that seems to be so highly regarded by so many.

David Ackerman says

Some time ago I attended a huge church where nothing but happy music was the order of the day. On the overhead screen (away from the cross), warm cuddly images of children, flowers, butterflies and puppies were shown to the delight of all the people. The pastor rose to speak and told a story of two men who fell from a ten story building. The one died, but the other – praise God – lived. If we only believe, the pastor concluded, we too will be like the man who survived because we are filled with upbeat, positive thoughts.

I left that church feeling utterly deflated, like I was a dinosaur in a slick, “whoever’s teeth are the whitest wins” kind of world. My mind kept going back to the poor guy who died and wondering how his spectacular failure (what faithlessness he showed in dying!) was fodder for this preacher’s sermon illustration. I felt like the odd-person out because I did not love this and because it was about as far away from what I believed as I could get.

Lillian Daniel light-heartedly and effectively pokes holes in people’s easy theology in her book, “When ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’ Is Not Enough.” Before I read her book, I expected it to read more like an essay, but I was delighted to find narratives - stories that related her experiences of life in the church and how that life is often misunderstood by those outside of it. I admire her willingness to take on those who set up a caricature of the church and conveniently dismiss it as so much hocus-pocus. Daniel is one of the most gifted and engaging writers of our day, and as great as this book was, I suspect that her best writing is ahead of her. For readers like myself who really enjoy her storytelling, I hope so!

Dawn says

Having heard Lillian Daniel speak, I was interested to read her books. I did like this book although many of her musings didn't appear to tie back to her theme/title of the book. I guess I was hoping for more discussion on the idea of it not being enough to be 'spiritual but not religious' rather than just a series of musings about faith and life and how they intersect. Although they were interesting to read. One thing to note, Lillian Daniel does not pull any punches, she says it like it is, and says what she is thinking. I appreciate her honesty and forth-rightness. I look forward to reading other books by her.

Tara Tetzlaff says

As a young-ish United Church of Christ pastor I know I should swoon all over this, but the truth is that I wasn't overly impressed. I was expecting more depth, but what I found was a collection of disjointed ramblings and random thoughts, dripping with a voice of privilege. Certainly there were some great passages but overall there was very little substance. Disappointing...

Robert D. Cornwall says

Lillian Daniel is a preacher and consummate story-teller. In some ways this is a response to the "spiritual-but not religious" phenomenon, but it is also an attempt to share stories of encounters with God's people and thus with God. Chapters are as brief as two pages and as long as 10, organized around six sections. It's well written and easily read. Good devotional read.
