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Why Americans are talking less and less about ‘love’ and ‘kindness’

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It’s not often that Roy Speckhardt finds himself going to church to talk about how to make the world a better place.

Yet as a leader in the community of American atheists and humanists, he’s been part of a few interfaith councils, some of which meet in churches near Capitol Hill. He’s even served on boards for groups advocating religious freedom, offering a nontheistic perspective to wide-ranging interreligious dialogues. Still, it took a while, he says, for some of the denominational leaders to get used to his being around.

“When I first entered these circles, the thought was, ‘Oh, should we allow atheists in?’” says Mr. Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association in Washington. “Should we allow people who are nonreligious to be part of this essentially religious community? So there was this hesitation and even trepidation – and especially a gap in knowing each other’s language.”

Participants would refer to themselves as “people of faith,” for example. “But pretty quickly people started changing,” Speckhardt says. “They’d look over and see me, and then they’d quickly add, ‘oh, yes, and people of goodwill.’”

There’s a measure of levity in his words, since part of his role as a thinker and advocate is to keep religious language out of public affairs. And goodwill is often notoriously lacking in discussions of religion and politics, the proverbial topics that, given their long history of divisiveness, should be avoided in polite conversation, many say. There’s also the fact that most Americans still have a chilly view of atheists, ranking them near the bottom of the country’s panoply of religious perspectives in opinion polls.

“But people started realizing, ‘Oh, we can come up with words that include us all, words that describe how we’re all seeking to make this world a better place, and how we have a common interest in humanity and in spreading compassion,’” Speckhardt adds.

Fewer and fewer Americans, in fact, spend much time talking about moral or spiritual matters with each other anymore, researchers say. As the country has become more pluralistic, even the most devout have tended to avoid talking about God and moral values, even among themselves.

50 percent less ‘love’ and ‘kindness’?

Words like “love,” “patience,” and “faithfulness,” for example, as well as words like “humility,” “modesty,” and “kindness” have each declined in use by some 50 percent or more in the modern

age, researchers have found as they survey the millions of books and written records that have become digitized. “Moral ideals and virtues have largely waned from the public conversation,” concluded the authors in a study in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* in 2012.

“Religious language was once a source of spiritual undergirding, a language for your spiritual identity, and a resource of strength for coping and dealing with life and life’s unpredictable qualities,” says Bill Leonard, professor emeritus at the School of Divinity at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. “But that language may be less viable and less considered now, even by religious folks.”

Professor Leonard and Speckhardt point to the long-term decline in religious participation in American life, and the fact that the country’s largest-growing religious cohort are the so-called “nones.” Led by a growing number of Millennials abandoning traditional faith, around 30 percent of adults in the United States now reject identifying with a particular religious tradition. Of the 30 percent of “nones,” 37 percent say they don’t believe in God.

“But seeing the numbers go down for words like ‘love’ and ‘gentleness’ and ‘kindness,’ that is equally concerning to humanists as it is for religious folks,” says Speckhardt.

“Definitely, that is not what we want to be seeing, and it is disturbing,” he continues. “So how can we get back to that?”

The problem is especially acute as the bonds of shared communities have also declined, says the culture and religion writer Jonathan Merritt, who has traced the decline of “God talk” across American religious traditions, even among the most devout.

“What is interesting when you look at linguistics is, you will find that a community’s shared vocabulary, its language, will tend to decrease in usage as [the] speaking community gathers less and less,” says Mr. Merritt, author of “Learning to Speak God from Scratch: Why Sacred Words Are Vanishing and How We Can Revive Them.”

Leonard has studied the new “sociology of Sundays,” as the traditional day of worship for Christians has become more a day for weekend and family activities – sports, nature hikes, and other pastimes, he says.

And in this particular moment of political rancor, Millennials and others have also become wary of what they perceive as the politicization of religious faith, especially among the nation’s white Evangelicals, who are overwhelmingly conservative and arguably the most powerful political force in American politics today.

All of this has contributed to the steep decline in spiritual and moral conversations, Merritt says. Even among devout Christians who attend services regularly, only about 13 percent said they had a religious or spiritual conversation at least once a week over the past year, he found in a study he commissioned from the Barna Group, a social research firm in Ventura, Calif.

Overall, Merritt found that nearly three-quarters of all Americans rarely speak of spiritual or religious matters. Of those who do, most only had a couple of conversations over the past year. As in other surveys, he found most said they avoided talking about God altogether because it created tension or heated arguments, or that religion had become too politicized.

Spiritual curiosity among Millennials

But he also found something unexpected, and even hopeful. “The data shows that there is still kind of a spiritual curiosity among Millennials,” says Merritt, who commissioned the study for his new book.

“And I found that fascinating, because you would think, oh, we’re becoming more secular, so the young are less interested in talking about these things,” he says. “But when it comes to these trends, actually you are less likely to talk about God the older you get.”

Part of the reason for this is the fact that older religious folk didn’t grow up in such a pluralistic America. “They don’t know the rules anymore, what’s appropriate to say and what’s not, what’s PC and what’s not.”

Speckhardt, too, has noticed that among his community of atheists and humanists, younger members are also expressing a new interest in discussing morality and similar topics.

“You know, there was this anger, this kind of rejection of religion that went over the top of just saying that we don’t belong to a faith, or just mark ‘none’ as an identity,” he says, noting that many people in his circles felt their former faith betrayed them, or see moral hypocrisy and corruption in the sex scandals in Catholic and Evangelical churches.

Over the past decade, many were drawn to the angry polemics of “new atheist” writers Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens, he says.

“But I think that overreaction is fortunately something that I’m starting to see calm down a bit,” Speckhardt continues. “People are like, ‘OK, so I don’t believe. What’s next? How am I going to live my life now?’ And that question, I hope, is going to lead us to a place of more common ground where we can have those kinds of discussions.”

For him, there’s an inherent need for a social species like humans to create social rules, and a biological imperative toward empathy.

“Life’s traumas may also be the continuing places that we all share or revisit the moral and spiritual imperatives that we’ve been hesitant to talk about,” says Leonard. “It can be rooted in our common mortality, and, yes, vulnerability.”

But building a shared moral and spiritual vocabulary also requires that people re-engage with their traditions, Merritt says, and become grounded in a shared moral vocabulary – a prerequisite, in many ways, for seeking points of contact with other traditions.

“I love the idea of America being pluralistic, but that the notion that we are a melting pot in that we all just sort of coalesce together into one kind of meta community, it doesn’t really work,” Merritt says.

“And so what I’m hoping for is that you would have Muslims who are more Muslim than they have ever been, and Jews more Jewish than they have ever been, and Christians who have been more Christian than they have ever been,” he continues. “And each of those communities would be exercising the vocabulary of faith in the particularities of their own communities when they gather.”

Even though Americans have been attending church less frequently, and though those that do now attend in much shorter spans of time, a recent Democracy Fund Voter Study Group

report found that religious attendance moderates political attitudes, including the polarizing issues of race, immigration, and identity.

Compared with nonreligious conservatives, far more churchgoing Trump voters said they cared about racial equality (67 percent versus 49 percent) and reducing poverty (42 percent versus 23 percent) than those who did not attend services.

In all religious traditions, regular attendance is correlated with more tolerance. “Frequent participation in religious traditions also appears to bolster more tolerant attitudes and volunteer work among Muslims, Mormons, and Buddhists,” according to a New York Times op-ed by Emily Ekins, polling director for the libertarian Cato Institute.

Define ‘neighbor’

Many of the words that have fallen into decline, Merritt notes, are traditional Christian “fruits of the spirit,” and the concept of love is embodied in Christian understandings of God’s very nature.

Merritt once went to Times Square in New York to ask people to define the word “neighbor,” an important moral concept in Christianity. Christ emphasized the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Conversations grounded in the meaning of moral and spiritual words “would actually equip us to find areas of commonality with adherents of other faiths,” he says.

And people of goodwill, Speckhardt would say.

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“I’ve had this repeated kind of experience in these groups where people first have the trepidation, and then the grudging acceptance, and then the, ‘Oh yeah, you’re part of us,’ and then finding ways to seek common ground and a common vocabulary,” he says.

“When we think about the question of those who aren’t religious but who are seeking a moral future,” he adds, “I mean, that is almost the definition of humanism.”