

The seeker next door: What drives the ‘spiritual but not religious’?

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If you're asked to imagine a typical "spiritual but not religious" person (SBNR), you might envision a middle-class white woman with time on her hands, wearing a new yoga outfit, sitting in a lotus position and meditating. The television series *Enlightened* offers such an example: it features a disillusioned corporate manager (played by Laura Dern) who spends \$50,000 at a New Age treatment center in Hawaii, where she meditates on the beach, practices yoga and attends support groups. She comes back "enlightened" and tries, fairly unsuccessfully, to live out her new vision of life and communicate it to coworkers, friends and family.

It's tempting to dismiss SBNRs as salad-bar spiritualists concerned primarily with themselves. But for both demographic and theological reasons it is important to think more deeply about the people who invoke that description. They represent a profound challenge and an opportunity for religious groups today. Furthermore, from my intensive series of interviews over the past few years with people who regard themselves as SBNR, I've learned that many popular assumptions about this group are off target.

The SBNR phenomenon is not restricted to any part of the country. One can find SBNRs among rural Ohioans and small-town Michiganders, not just among bicoastal urbanites. They come from various socioeconomic and educational levels and racial-ethnic backgrounds. Politically, they tend to be more liberal than conservative, in

large part because they identify closed-minded, harmful religion with right-wing politics.

A common assumption is that SBNRs operate outside the world of organized religion. I've found, however, that many of the people who regularly or irregularly show up in the pews apply the SBNR label to themselves. Scratch below the surface of an average Protestant or Catholic church and you will find many who resonate to this description. They may attend church on Sunday but during the week pursue meditation, yoga, Reiki sessions, energy work and A Course in Miracles and read books by such non-Christian gurus as Eckhart Tolle or Deepak Chopra. Oftentimes, clergy themselves are among them. These SBNRs often say their various pursuits are a useful adjunct to traditional religious practices.

Nor are SBNRs necessarily wounded in some way by the church. I've found that many SBNRs come from nonreligious or barely religious backgrounds. Many of the younger SBNRs I meet were either purposely raised with no religion or come from mixed-faith homes where religion was left to personal choice, and so they had only a smattering of exposure to organized religion.

Few tell stories of abuse, prejudice or harm. For those who do have distressing stories about being involved in religious institutions, they seem to have encountered problems not just in organized Christianity but in other religions and in alternative spirituality groups as well.

Many of my SBNR interviewees who had some experience with church talked wistfully about the community and sense of purpose they felt when they were involved. These people show no hostility to clergy and speak favorably of the power that church music and ritual had for them.

I've heard many seminarians, professors and academics imply that SBNRs are anti-intellectual, unwilling or unable to grapple with serious belief issues. But that hasn't been my observation. Instead, I have found people eager to consider the big questions with which theology deals. In fact, for those who have left organized religion behind, the most often cited reason for leaving is that their theological questions were left unanswered or answered in simplistic ways. Most claim that no one has ever given them the chance to learn and dialogue about theological concerns.

Some intellectuals suggest that if SBNRs were really thoughtful about spirituality, they would be troubled by the inconsistencies that arise from their “mix and match” or syncretistic approach to religion. It is true that many SBNRs do not approach religion intellectually. But Americans have long tended toward a subjective, stimulation-seeking, experiential orientation toward religion.

I did find many people operating with a cobbled-together set of ideas gleaned from many diverse sources. But only a few insisted that the resulting inconsistencies were proof of “mystery” and authenticity. A larger percentage acted quite surprised when the inconsistencies were pointed out.

Of course, their inconsistency or experimentalism does not make them much different from many of the people in the pews. As religious professionals are well aware, few church members have a neatly packaged set of beliefs displaying consistency and depth. There are many members of the “fuzzy faithful.” Yet my interviewees seemed genuinely concerned when, in trying to articulate their beliefs, they uncovered the unexamined and inconsistent positions they held.

Perhaps the most common and pejorative assumption about SBNRs is that they are self-absorbed narcissists, commitment-phobes or just plain lazy. It is true that many of the SBNRs I talked to were highly individualistic, very unlike the joiners of the 1950s. A majority refrain from attaching themselves to organized religious groups and from making long-term institutional commitments. This should not be surprising given the nature of our epoch, with its market-driven environment, media-driven blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality, and mobile, transient, rootless existence. Individualism, self-focus and self-protective strategies are everywhere taught and practiced today. Self-help groups and books—including those marketed to clergy—regularly teach self-care as a primary survival and healing tool. Add to this a pervasive societywide cynicism toward institutions and authority and the SBNR resistance to joining is not hard to understand.

But even with all of these factors, I have not found SBNRs to be unusually allergic to commitment or inordinately self-absorbed. Rather, they hold back from involvement for reasons of personal integrity. They insist that they don’t join religious groups because they do not want to misrepresent themselves or promise something that they cannot deliver or live by.

Some observers might see this stance as an excuse for laziness, and others might fundamentally disagree with the reasoning behind it. After all, many people do affiliate with groups even when they can't affirm everything the group professes, and many people with religious doubts are often willing to hang on in religious institutions as they seek for answers. Not everyone feels they need to abandon ship at the first sign of conflict or disappointment. Nevertheless, my interviewees' insistence on integrity is an important factor to understand when we assess their attitude toward religious belonging.

The adamant bifurcation of spirituality and religion—a nearly universal trait among SBNRs—can be criticized as an artificial separation, since there is much functional overlap between the terms. Nevertheless, the majority of my interviewees insist that spirituality is the personal center and quest for an individual, whereas religion is something external, rule-ridden and institutional. In their thinking, religion is nothing more than a dispensable shell.

A little probing with a thoughtful interviewee usually reveals, however, that this isn't a deep philosophical tenet but more of a rhetorical strategy to get out from under the weight of traditional authority. Clearly it is also a very useful strategy for those who are selling alternative spiritualities.

Against the common view that SBNRs are the wounded, the shallow, the lazy or the dilettantes, it's becoming clear to me that SBNRs distance themselves from religion for deeper reasons, even what one might call theological reasons. Neither churches nor sociological surveys have probed deeply enough into the minds of this admittedly eclectic, diverse group.

In my interviews I have focused on beliefs in four major areas: the sacred, human nature, community and the afterlife. These categories correspond to major theological loci, namely God, anthropology, ecclesiology and eschatology. Since my respondents largely come out of a Western cultural milieu, and from a country that still has a large percentage of Christians, they would likely have considered these issues. Hearing respondents talk at length on these topics makes it clear how profoundly challenging the views of SBNRs are to religion as usual.

The most striking thing I've found is that many of the common beliefs of SBNRs are in direct opposition to beliefs they associate with Christianity. In their reflections, I hear an implicit critique of the positions they think most Christians hold—but which

most SBNRs have imbibed only secondhand.

For instance, SBNRs strongly object to the idea that one religion has all the answers or that there is only one way to be “saved.” Many are not sure that salvation is the right goal anyway. They reject the view that humans are defective and need help from outside themselves. They are unsure whether there is any kind of sovereign, transcendent, personal deity. And they often reject the idea that one’s eternal destiny is decided in this lifetime. Their complaints are not new or surprising, and some of them echo America’s underlying Pelagianism. The growth in numbers of those who hold these views, however, seems unprecedented.

Many people within churches are themselves reconsidering some of these positions, making ad hoc modifications to faith as they go along or espousing much more nuanced views. The SBNRs I meet are largely unaware of this development and rarely make any distinctions between different kinds of Christians or between popular theology and more sophisticated theological views. So they feel compelled to reject Christianity as a whole.

I don’t see among SBNRs the “turn to the East” that some have discerned. A number of my interviewees have experimented with aspects of Buddhism, Zen, Sufism or Hinduism and imbibed certain principles of Eastern religion, but very few commit themselves to these other traditions. The minority who try to join another religion tell me they find it difficult to adapt. Often it is specifically theological issues that trouble them. Even while they are making the standard critiques of Christianity, many maintain a nascent Christian framework—they seek a personal, involved deity, hope their identity will somehow continue after death, and long to be part of spiritual fellowship along the lines of a Christian congregation. They often seem embarrassed about these continuities with Christian tradition or contend that it is an area they must “work on.”

However, the Eastern veneer in the SBNR thought world has the potential to change Western theology in profound ways. My conversation partners’ image of the sacred tends toward the monistic. They entertain thoughts of reincarnation and past lives, focus on spiritual practices that downplay the rational, talk of karma rather than sin or mercy and cluster around a fluctuating, changing cast of gurus. Nevertheless, the result is mostly a very American blend of different themes. The movement shares views inherited from 19th-century transcendentalism and spiritualism as well as certain ideas from the 1960s and ’70s, such as an emphasis on experience,

antihierarchicalism and personal freedom.

SBNRs are frequently “perennialists,” insisting that all religions at their core teach the same things and that all mystics from whatever religion seek and have the same experience. For many, Jesus is simply one more “enlightened master,” and all religions are fair game for borrowing, often with no attribution or acknowledgment.

The SBNRs I interviewed were excited that I was researching their beliefs. People begged me to interview them, and almost every conversation has ended with a spontaneous hug from the interviewee. Even some clergy have tried to persuade me that they meet the criteria for being interviewed. Most surprising, no one has balked at or questioned my focus on core theological themes, in spite of the surface assertion of SBNRs that belief does not matter. Instead, respondents have been thrilled by the opportunity to articulate their views and by having someone take them seriously.

The rise of SBNRs represents a theological sea change that may quietly but profoundly alter the spiritual and theological landscape of America. Whether this alteration becomes beneficial or harmful to existing institutions depends at least partly on how institutions respond. Churches open to the things on the surface that SBNRs look for—informality, nonhierarchical leadership, recognition of diversity, deep participation—are more likely to be comfortable for SBNRs. But such surface changes go only so far.

Even more important than dispelling stereotypes about SBNRs is engaging them theologically. Unless the church takes seriously the theological reasons that they give for staying away from organized religion, any efforts to engage this population will be hampered. SBNRs represent an opportunity for churches to reinvigorate their ability to speak and think theologically.

Churches may well make the more superficial changes that SBNRs look for and have some success at attracting people with one foot in and one foot out of the church. Attending to opportunities for spiritual growth—such as offering classes on Christian meditation and other spiritual disciplines—will also be helpful. But these efforts will likely not attract the more serious seekers—the ones with the most potential for challenging churches to grow spiritually and theologically. A deeper, more constructive approach would be to address the four theological loci mentioned above—the sacred (God), human nature (theological anthropology), community

(ecclesiology) and the afterlife (eschatology)—and bring SBNRs' misperceptions and challenges out into the open.

For instance, to those SBNRs who believe they are coterminous with the divine, Christians can speak about the Holy Spirit which resides within but also highlight the distinction that Christian faith makes between God and humans. And to those SBNRs who want to affirm that humans are inherently good, the Christians can explain that their faith affirms that God created everything good and intends to restore humans to that state—but that between creation and restoration all of us have been swept up into a state of alienation from God which we cannot ignore. Many SBNRs will agree that as much as they want to affirm their connection with Spirit and inherent goodness, something is standing in the way of fully activating their potential.

As these two examples show, churches have many points at which to engage in theological conversation with SBNRs. But churches will have to be creative in fostering the venues for these discussions. The most likely audience is postcollege young adults, for they are both the most underserved group and also the most receptive to such discussions

Although not everyone I meet can be categorized as a dedicated seeker, I have found many who are willing to spend considerable money and energy trying to satisfy their spiritual hungers. I have also found people whose lack of experience with or misinformation about organized religion, in particular Christianity, is keeping them away from religious institutions. I have found people excited but often overwhelmed by the plethora of new and alternative spiritualities, wellness programs and competing claims of ancient wisdom. What is most striking is how hungry people are for both serious discussion and opportunities to grow spiritually.