

At home in the spiritual marketplace: Five types of religious questers

by [Louis B. Weeks](#) in the [February 23, 2000](#) issue

Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion, by Wade Clark Roof

"We have three services now. Are you still game?," asked the Georgia pastor when he invited me to preach. "Worship is pretty much the same at the early and the 11:00 a.m. services, though the choir sings only at 11:00. The 9:30 service is where we take our ties off." Sure enough, an informal service with percussion, violin, flute, piano and praise music was sandwiched between two traditional services at this venerable church.

Worship service variety in Georgia. Saturday night youth services in a high school auditorium in Kansas City. Quest groups in downtown Pittsburgh. "Christian transcendental meditation" advertised in a church bulletin in Louisville. A huge 12-step group meeting in the sanctuary at a suburban New York church while a small Maundy Thursday service takes place in the chapel. These are just a few examples of the variety I have encountered as I spoke in churches around the country during the past few months.

And variety in Christian worship and spiritual resources pales beside the bewildering array of personal stories of faith. A UPS pilot seated beside me on a recent flight tells me about the Sunday school class he teaches at a fundamentalist church. Then he says that his daughter has married a Buddhist and, while his wife has some trouble with that, "I think it's fine, just as long as he treats my daughter well." A prospective student testifies that she found Jesus through the Jehovah's Witnesses. A telephone caller questions me about extraterrestrials because he "wants to get a professional opinion."

A seminary colleague recently commented on one of the ways that current students differ from those of the '70s and '80s. "When I began to teach, students who did not come from Presbyterian families apologized. Now they brag, 'I came from a Baptist-

Catholic background, became Orthodox, was born-again in Inter-Varsity and now I'm Presbyterian.' It's those born and reared in the denomination who apologize."

Pastors tell of parishioners' children who are in Eckanar and other New Age movements, of members who also belong to spiritualist and Wicca groups, of people from Eastern religions who join their churches and are baptized. People give pastors self-help books and explain how these books "saved" them.

How can Christians make sense of this situation? How shall we present the gospel, nurture the faithful and sing the Lord's song in this strange land? These are the kinds of questions Wade Clark Roof has addressed during the past decades. His most recent effort is also his most comprehensive.

As in his previous works—including his pioneering *Mainline American Religion* (1987), coauthored with William McKinney, and *Generation of Seekers* (1996)—Roof tries to map the religious changes that occurred during the second half of the 20th century. He has shown that most Americans, especially baby boomers and their progeny are seekers and choosers of spiritual and religious experiences. Many of the people he has interviewed repositioned themselves between the time when they first told their stories in the early '80s and when Roof questioned them again in the early '90s. For his latest book, he and a team of colleagues interviewed many of them for a third time. In addition, Roof has been attentive to the growing numbers of scholars who are studying contemporary spirituality and its manifestations. He also seems to have been listening to those who cross his path as he teaches, travels and worships.

In Roof's words, the tectonic plates underlying American culture are shifting. Those "living closest to society's fault lines—most notably the younger generations—are the first to alter their views. Hence the thesis of this book: the boundaries of popular religious communities are now being redrawn, encouraged by the quests of the large, World War II generations, and facilitated by the rise of an expanded spiritual marketplace."

Roof introduces five figures who recount and comment on the complexity of their spiritual quests. All five see themselves as active agents in determining their religions. One man reawakened religiously when his fiancée introduced him to a small group of Catholics. A woman explores feminist writings—Eastern, New Age and Christian—with a like-minded group. A second-generation immigrant has become a

committed evangelical Christian. A woman who rediscovered her Episcopal roots seeks to revitalize her congregation through service and study. An independent thinker with a Jewish father and a “culturally Catholic” mother was a Scientologist for a while, but now “looks within” herself “to find out what [is] right and true for me. I also like Star Trek—is that a religion?”

In exploring what he terms “the culture of questing,” Roof points to the decline of traditional theism and the appeal of other meaning systems, “such as mystical, social scientific, and secular-individualistic perspectives.” Following the insights of Peter Berger, Roof speaks of the special relationship between Protestantism and modernity, in which accommodation to reason led to loss of the sacred and mysterious. The sense of personal and communal ontological security is gone—not just for Protestants but for most of the post-World War II generations. “Wholeness hunger is an apt description of what underlies much of today’s spiritual malaise.”

Roof examines the process of “traditioning,” which has been turned upside down to foster innovation rather than continuity. Boomer disaffection with conventional forms of piety such as Sabbath observance, their reluctance to make commitments and the gender revolution all contributed to the overturning of traditional religious practices, though not the quest for wholeness.

How can we Americans satisfy our “wholeness-hunger”? Roof claims that we have adopted a “reflexive spirituality” by necessity—deliberately cobbling together our own responses to the need for wholeness and encouraging others in similar efforts.

The spiritual marketplace itself produces an ever-expanding array of possibilities. New suppliers augment the churches and synagogues that gave spiritual sustenance to previous generations. New vocabularies emerge as a part of the “spirituality industry.” Individuals locate resources for their spiritual fulfillment and test the authenticity and dependability of their symbols over time. Crucial for the success of these spiritual products are their accessibility and simplicity. Churches and parachurch organizations also offer them. Evangelical Christianity especially presents a variety of options to a culture questing for meaning, providing journey language and help with the problems of everyday life. Accessible seeker churches specialize in meeting people’s spiritual needs simply and in the context of contemporary life.

Roof argues that people today seek to be simultaneously fluid and grounded. We want the benefits of anchors without their limits. This desire, with its built-in contradictions, leads Americans frequently to realign their allegiances and loyalties. Most of us locate ourselves at some point along a spectrum, with religious dogmatism at one extreme and ideological secularism at the other. And over time our place on that spectrum can change, sometimes radically, as Roof's five portraits illustrate. People use qualifying descriptors to name their particular location—"ecologically minded," "charismatic" Christian, and the like. In other words, most of us largely improvise our religious identity.

Roof constructs an instructive typology based on the personal narratives he has heard. This typology maps five current American subcultures: born-again Christians; mainstream believers; metaphysical believers and seekers; dogmatists; and secularists. The largest of the five, to which one third of all boomers belong, is the "born-again." Most of these people term themselves "evangelicals," or "Christians." They have personally experienced the presence of Christ in their lives, and most can tell the story of the experience(s). More than half identify with "conservative" Protestant bodies, but a quarter are Roman Catholic and a fifth are in mainstream Protestant denominations.

Roof explains that the label "mainstream believers" is something of a misnomer, since historic denominations no longer have the hegemony. The people in this category, about 25 percent of boomers, belong to Catholic, Jewish and Protestant bodies and identify themselves with a particular denomination or tradition. They value religious history and a shared tradition as well as a personal faith. Interfaith marriages are common among mainstream believers, which adds to the complexity of the picture. Many mainstream believers explain that they are not born again, and many born-again Christians speak of the time before they "found Jesus," when they "just belonged" to a denomination. But many others claim both subcultures.

Metaphysical believers and spiritual seekers vary enormously. Many emphasize that they are "not New Age" believers. More important, from first to second interviews, only one-fourth identified themselves as they had a decade before. Roof found that 14 percent of boomers were in this complex subculture. He warns, however, that "boundary issues are particularly difficult here, for mainstreamer and born-again subcultures both are deeply affected by the beliefs and sensitivities of this group."

Dogmatists and secularists Roof combines—a fascinating recognition that both subcultures, though radically different in their expressions of “lived religion,” share a disaffection with the contemporary spiritually minded. Dogmatists, whether fundamentalists or neotraditionalists, are more concerned with the form and phrasing of religion than with its spirit, according to Roof: “Tradition for them is largely bounded by the encrusted institution and frozen in a nostalgic past.” Dogmatists constitute about 15 percent of the population.

Secularists, about 14 percent of the population, are likely to describe themselves as “irreligious,” rather than “antireligious,” and they frequently view religious adherents as dogmatists. More likely than dogmatists to be professionals and to have high incomes, they come chiefly from religious backgrounds they consider “oppressive.” Most grew up in mainline churches—Protestant and Catholic.

Roof says that people in all five subcultures distinguish their internal and external spiritual identities from their internal and external religious identities. Thus born-again Christians and mainstream believers alike affirm both a spiritual identity and a religious identity. Metaphysical believers and spiritual seekers affirm their spiritual identity and deny a religious identity, while dogmatists, including fundamentalists, institutionalists, moralists and neotraditionalists, affirm a religious identity but deny that they have a spiritual identity. Secularists deny both.

Though such labels have limits, the typology can help us map our own narratives and find our location in the confusing marketplace. More, they cast light on the elements of our “lived religion.” We all to some degree balance our social-support structures and our openness to spiritual realities.

Roof concludes that three of the five subcultures are in the throes of a spiritual awakening, and that the pervasiveness of today’s “reflexive spirituality” has profound implications for family life. With spiritual questing so prevalent, even members of the same family may not share a “lived religion.” Family-based rituals and activities present the most obvious opportunities for passing on religious culture. But these have become difficult or perhaps impossible to maintain. How, then, can spiritual questing be supported, except on an individual basis? Roof suggests that the realigning of family, work and community life is causing anxiety and stress for Americans of every subculture. This realigning has not been adequately assessed; its implications are yet to be explored.

What does the spiritual marketplace imply for public life? What are its implications for our moral vision and values? Roof calls these open questions, and considers the situation extremely complex. Binary explanations, such as the idea of a “culture war,” he finds insufficiently enlightening, except as applied to the dogmatist subculture’s view of reality. Rather, he points to our increasing unease about work and the family, our worries about the environment, and the other anxieties of boomers and the cohorts succeeding them. Most are trying to cobble together “a good life,” economically as well as spiritually.

“Whirl is King, Having Driven Out Zeus,” the title of one of Roof’s concluding chapters, borrows from Aristophanes via Walter Lippmann to restate the thesis. Spiritual questing is increasingly reflexive and individualistic, with cultural expectations fulfilled for all but the cynical secularists and the feisty dogmatists. Religious sensibilities are a “patchwork quilt” for all five subcultures. “Religious capital” is not depleted simply by the rapidly changing forms in which it appears. Current “centers of value” include a shift toward higher expectations of mutuality in relationships and an environmentalist ethic.

Analysts such as Roof have frequently described a “thinning of the ecosystem for faith development” in recent decades of American life. The collaboration of formal and informal institutions such as Sunday schools, Sabbath observance and family devotions—once the mainstay of American religion—has disappeared. We have not yet “baptized” many of the elements in what could be a new ecosystem. Roof describes a radical shift in the religious consciousness of all of us, especially boomers and subsequent generations. But he does not think that this shift creates a slippery slope to secularism and disbelief.

In an excursus, Roof takes up the case of Sheila Larson, who was discussed in Robert Bellah’s classic *Habits of the Heart*. In an interview Larson had said that she might call her religion “Sheilaism.” Intensely personal and devoid of much theological content, her phrasing of religious individualism was seen by Bellah and his colleagues and by many of us who analyze American religion as a threat to community in general and to our denominations in particular. In the words of *Habits of the Heart*, individualism was becoming “cancerous to American society,” and Sheilaism epitomized that threat.

Roof muses that those of us writing and debating the issue at the time seemed more concerned about the survival of our institutions than the spiritual health of people.

He examines Larson's narrative and concludes that she may have been choosing spiritual resources wisely and appropriately, given her early experiences with oppressive conformity and her attempts to sort out the confusing array of gender roles before her. She may well have been at a transitional time in her life and engaging in "spiritually rejuvenating" reflexive spirituality.

Roof challenges us to engage our culture creatively and to look for the work of the Holy Spirit among us. He says we should concern ourselves more with the well-being of people like Larson and their spiritual growth than with the maintenance of our traditional ways of being church.

Of course, from a genuinely Christian perspective, such caring cannot be divorced from fidelity to the central truth of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Yet we do have to sort the wheat from the chaff—become more effective in proclaiming the Christian gospel and less preoccupied with propping up a particular way of being faithful to it. That challenge I find difficult to hear and meet. I think many of us who encounter spiritual renewal and religious vitality experience this difficulty.

Soon after I read this book I heard a sermon on "The Star of Bethlehem" (Matthew 2), in which the preacher quoted Roof. He concluded, "The new is the old," and he repeated several times that the same old story is the one to tell.

I mused on the text: The wise men took new steps in faithfulness when they saw a new star. They worshiped Jesus the Christ, whom we confess as Savior. We also understand that God's creation activity continues. We know that we translate the Christian gospel anew for each tongue and each generation, so that it can be heard by all. And we rejoice that the resurrected Christ is always before us, leading us into God's future. Roof challenges us to more effectively care for people, to help establish a sustainable environment and to engage our culture. In a spiritual marketplace? Yes.