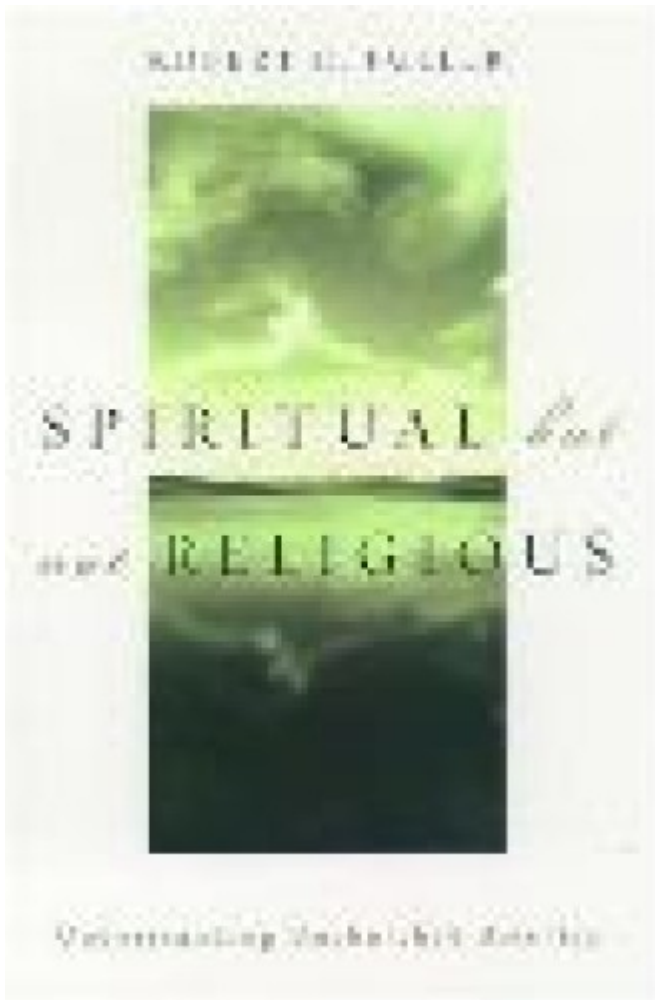


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By [David Dawson](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

In Review



Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America

Robert C. Fuller
Oxford University Press

That a book like this would eventually be published became clear to me years ago, when I opened an “Introduction to Christian Thought” class by inviting students to

reflect on the nature of religion. Before I could even begin to work into the conversation a little provocative Barthian “interrogation” of religion as a category, students beat me to the punch. “I think of myself as a spiritual person, but I don’t have anything to do with religion,” announced one brave soul. Virtually the entire class nodded in approval.

I have been more than happy to lead students into the intricacies of what I was once trained to call the “experiential-expressivist” tradition. A little Schleiermacher or Rahner in the syllabus, I thought, might connect with student interests. But again, I have been behind the curve. While I enthusiastically led discussions on the “feeling of absolute dependence” and the “supernatural existential,” my students just as enthusiastically composed analytical, historically informed senior theses on Starhawk, the Wiccan movement, Wendell Berry, Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics*, and the mindfulness of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

The students’ interests mark them as “spiritual, but not religious.” They represent that 20 percent of the U.S. population that has no formal affiliation with church or synagogue but is nonetheless engaged in spiritual seeking.

Almost every significant manifestation of American spirituality finds a place in Robert Fuller’s book—everything from the metaphysics of the American Transcendental movement, to the mysticism of imported Eastern religions, to the therapeutic power of alternative medicines, to the self-realization potential of “humanistic” psychology. Every name you might expect to find is here—Joseph Campbell, Carlos Castaneda, Deepak Chopra, Hare Krishna, Shirley MacLaine—as well as some that might be surprising—John Muir, Jonathan Edwards, Jack Kerouac, Perry Miller, Norman Vincent Peale. Fuller considers a welter of diverse movements and gurus, pamphlets and conventicles, in order to argue that “these diverse spiritual interests are linked as part of a larger historical tradition.”

But Fuller’s argument reaches beyond the claim to have discerned a tradition of alternative spirituality. He argues for the legitimacy, the cultural significance, the balance and, above all, the “maturity” of the spiritualism he describes. He is especially aware of the continued disrespect and criticism this “tradition” receives from the 60 percent of Americans who are “churched.” Fuller’s conclusion is decidedly upbeat: “Our unchurched traditions have enabled a sizable percentage of Americans to achieve as mature a spiritual orientation to life as can be reasonably expected in our contemporary world.”

The body of Fuller's book consists of a well-written, engaging survey of the myriad forms of alternative spiritualities available to Americans, from the inception of the nation to the present, with many pertinent and illuminating forays along the way into the deeper social and cultural roots from which these movements grew. This survey is bracketed by a set of anticipated objections from the ranks of the church, and by corresponding rebuttals formulated from the perspective of participants in the spiritualist movements. Often this framework of objection and rebuttal remains imbedded in the surveys, as, for example, when the "church" traditions are charged with sexism, bureaucratic inertia, insensitivity, formalistic ritualism and the like. But in his final chapter, Fuller provides readers with a more direct and sustained point-counterpoint, confronting church opposition to spiritualist traditions head-on, knocking down these arguments one by one from the spiritualist perspective, and finally invoking a couple of contemporary psychologists of spiritual and religious development (Gordon Allport, Richard Fowler) to argue for the "maturity" of the unchurch spiritualist quests. No, spiritualists are not unhealthy narcissists; no, they are not facile and superficial; no, they are not oblivious to the tragic or complex features of life. Or, they are at least no more narcissistic, facile, superficial or Pollyannaish than the church population. Readers who count themselves among the church are likely to overlook the book's exceedingly useful descriptions and be tempted to debate these claims.

The terms of the debate are generated by what Fuller sees as unfair church criticism of unchurch spiritual movements. Since church Americans are indeed prone to object that contemporary spiritualism is self-indulgent or immature, I do not fault Fuller for framing the debate in these terms. As a historian rather than a theologian, he has no particular obligation to identify the theologically and ecclesiologically most appropriate objections that church objectors might advance. But I'll make a brief effort at doing so, speaking specifically for Christianity (though Fuller's argument aims to be broader, with "church" serving as rubric for all those who are members of traditional religious organizations).

In my view, if someone wants to explain why he or she continues to embrace serious church membership rather than one of the spiritualist movements, the explanation should include the fact that he or she is committed to a community of other persons constituted by its collective allegiance to a specific story about God deemed to be true.

Fuller largely ignores both of these kinds of explanations. The debate about maturity he puts in play does not require any engagement with either the identifying Christian story or the self-constitution of the Christian church as a body of those “called out” from purely individual journeys into a communally constituted discipleship.

Fuller dispenses with the theological claims of Christian identity in a single paragraph. “Our established religious institutions accept the special authority of the Bible,” he states. “For Christian Churches, this includes belief in the unique divinity of Jesus. And, in Jewish congregations, members are expected to adhere (some more strictly than others) to the inherited traditions of Talmudic law. Furthermore, both Jews and Christians believe that humans are in some way fallen or in rebellion against God. They consequently proclaim that the path leading to the atonement for our sins is a narrow one; one we stray from at the risk of eternal estrangement from God.”

This is not a very detailed or nuanced account of the formative narratives of either Judaism or Christianity, but no matter—the unchurched spiritualists “have long ago turned their backs on these concerns.” Does their repudiation lay down a gauntlet for theological debate? No. According to Fuller, we can move on because “objections to unchurched spirituality are probably more about style than substance.” Fuller may well be right about the characteristic lack of theological awareness and principle in the objections of the church. I would urge them to dig in their theological heels. Is God’s grace different from human self-realization? Is the Torah the manifestation of the divine will for human life? Is Jesus’ life and teaching the display of God’s identity and aim for human fulfillment? Or not? Fuller’s dismissal of theological objections to unchurched spiritualities—perhaps primarily because the church has themselves dismissed them—should not be accepted by those who pray rather than channel. The first practice expresses commitment to a story fundamentally different from the story for which the second practice is important.

Even more astounding is that a debate on the character of commitment to church as communal ecclesia drops out of Fuller’s discussion. The very categories “church” and “unchurch” would seem to make the question of commitment to communal, collective organization absolutely central to the subject of the book. But the issue of church affiliation appears in this book mainly as the object of unchurched critique: membership in churches is rejected because churches are sexist, authoritarian, insensitive, ritually formalistic and the like. Though the issue does surface

momentarily in the church objection that spiritualist, narcissistic self-absorption cuts people off from “the nitty-gritty of interpersonal relationships and true community,” Fuller quickly dissolves this potentially significant debating point (church affiliation substantially differs from many spiritualist movements precisely because it entails commitment to a historically rooted, institutionally organized community with lines of interpersonal obligation, responsibility and accountability) into yet another refutation of the charge of immaturity.

The question posed by the ranks of the church on this point should be: Is religion via the incorporation of believers into the Christian community where Christ is present, or into the Jewish synagogue where the Law is promulgated, fundamental to Christian or Jewish identity? Churched Americans need to ask whether physical gathering together in their religious worship is central or peripheral to their religious communities, and they might reasonably challenge unchurched spiritualists to debate the significance of such a question. Of course, that kind of debate—like the one about identifying, foundational stories—might end not with agreement or compromise but a parting of the ways. Defining the relevant debate as one about spiritual “maturity” makes it seem as though we all necessarily have a stake in adjudicating some mutually persuasive compromise: after all, who wants to be labeled “immature,” spiritually or otherwise? But there’s no reason why an Emersonian Transcendentalist or New Age crystal devotee should necessarily find much common ground with churched Christians and Jews.

Before either entering the debate as Fuller stages it or resisting its assumptions, we might step back and consider carefully the results of Harvard public policy professor Robert D. Putnam’s study, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). Putnam documents the precipitous decline in American civic engagement, and people’s corresponding retreat into private media and home-based pursuits during the last third of the 20th century. Seen from Putnam’s statistically grounded sociological perspective, the ascendancy of (as Fuller readily acknowledges, often private) alternative spiritualities and corresponding repudiation of public, communal investment in religious institutions is but one among many ways in which Americans have steadily retreated from public, civic life.

There are remarkable convergences between Fuller’s discussion of Baby Boomer spiritual quests and Putnam’s discussion of the Boomer (and subsequent Gen X) retreat from all areas of public life. Putnam identifies four changing features of American life responsible for this crisis in public leadership and collective

activity—pressures of time and money; mobility and sprawl; technology and mass media; and generational change. He suggests that technological and generational changes together may account for as much as 80 percent of the withdrawal from communal life and civic responsibility.

These are the kinds of factors he would invoke to account for why fewer and fewer of us attend churches and more and more of us embark on personal journeys of self-realization. It's not only that we might see churches as hopeless repositories of sexism or bureaucratic inertia or pointless formal ritualism, in contrast to the appeal of personal spirituality; it's also that we just don't want to be bothered to leave our homes very often—for church services, for school board meetings, for parent-teacher meetings, for backyard barbecues, for bowling leagues—for anything.

Seen from either vantage point within the smaller world of churched religion and unchurched spirituality, it looks like we are in the midst of a hot and heavy struggle over notions of cosmic connectedness, stories of Jesus and Moses, and personal self-realization or collective identification with saviors who are "other." But viewed from the standpoint of the larger world of home remodeling and rapid job turnover, of suburban sprawl and telecommuting, of a four-hour-per-day average adult TV habit, of Internet and channel surfing, our retreat from the churches and embrace of alternative spiritualities makes perfect sense, though not perhaps for the reasons Fuller finds most compelling.

For any churched reader who continues to believe in the utter centrality of regular physical proximity to others (say, during the Eucharist) for serious, faithful membership in a church, and who also believes there is some vital and nonnegotiable significance to be found in the differences between the story that identifies the church and the stories that identify various unchurched spiritualist alternatives, Fuller strikes perhaps the most pertinent note near the end of his book. Various contemporary social and cultural trends are likely, he suggests, to create an ever more "favorable environment for unchurched traditions, but probably at the expense of churches' ability to sustain the loyalty of casual attenders." He then surmises that "many who would formerly have sustained these weak ties to churches will instead drift completely away." Perhaps the message of his book is that only churches able to sustain (or worthy of sustaining?) strong ties and deep loyalties will be able to flourish.