

The Spiritual but not Religious

Summary: As the religious landscape of the United States is under constant fluctuation, an increasing number of people have begun identifying as spiritual but not religious. In doing so, they seek to distance themselves from “organized” religion. Although described as a new movement, the ideas that spiritual but not religious people engage with have deep roots in American history.

Over the past few decades, a new identity has gained popularity in the United States: being spiritual but not religious. A 2017 study by the Pew Research Center found that 1 in 5 Americans is spiritual but not religious, and that number appears to be rising. Challenging the typical categories by which many people define “religion,” spiritual but not religious people show the complexity of religious identity.

On one hand, this identity is not new. Spirituality is not a modern invention; people have long described themselves as spiritual. But the tendency to separate “spirituality” from “religion” has become more prevalent since the 1970s. Since then, scholars and religious leaders have noted popular resistance toward “organized religion.” Many people today decide to reject the religious upbringing of their childhood to begin a process of “spiritual seeking.” Today’s spiritual but not religious people are mostly young, having grown up in what some have called an increasingly “unchurched” United States.

Spiritual but not religious people sometimes think of religion as restrictive and choose to explore various practices and belief systems from the world’s many different traditions. Therefore, they aspire to be “spiritual” by living in a meaningful way, but they do not want to be “religious” by adhering to the dogma of any one religion. Beyond “spiritual but not religious,” there are many terms that represent this trend in American society: religious nones, the religiously unaffiliated, spiritual seekers, agnostics, and atheists.

The term “spiritual but not religious” is relatively new, but it comes from a long line of new religious movements that have challenged organized religion and described religion as a matter of personal experience. Unlike some branches of atheism, spiritual but not religious people do not necessarily reject religion in favor of rationalism or science. But the phrase “spiritual but not religious” is similar to secular, rationalistic branches of thought because it can be used to critique organized religion for its

perceived preoccupation with doctrine. Many emerging spiritual movements begin because people of certain identities feel barred from traditional religion; for example, some spiritual but not religious communities point out how organized religion can limit the rights of women or LGBTQIA+ people.

As spiritual but not religious people attempt to situate themselves within the American religious landscape, they face challenges with being accepted. Some scholars and religious leaders accuse spiritual but not religious people of being self-centered or inconsistent in their engagement with spirituality. Critics claim that being spiritual but not religious means cherry-picking the more palatable parts of religion without feeling the weight of responsibility and sacrifice that belonging to a certain religious tradition can carry. To these criticisms, spiritual but not religious people respond that all forms of religious engagement involve selecting tenets that resonate with the practitioner. Choosing a unique, thoughtful way of moving through the world allows them to be better human beings. By seeking their own way of being, spiritual but not religious people often see themselves as carving a new path in which religion can be freely chosen rather than inherited. In this way, spiritual but not religious people are representing and molding an understanding of religion that emphasizes individual choice.

Because spiritual but not religious identities are fluid, rituals and practices vary from person to person. Many spiritual but not religious people draw from various traditions to create their own unique approach to spirituality: common rituals include yoga, Buddhist meditation, or Pagan practices like tarot card reading. Rituals often center meaning-making and personal experience. Some spiritual but not religious people look toward certain books as spiritual guides: two popular texts for this purpose are Paramhansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. Because spiritual but not religious people draw from such different spiritual sources, many people have expressed concerns over cultural appropriation, and recent scholarship has criticized how whiteness is often centered in spiritual but not religious communities.

Ultimately, by engaging in diverse practices, spiritual but not religious people challenge the idea that religion is about belief alone, because they share a religious identity but do not necessarily share a moral code. These discrepancies also highlight inter-denominational pluralism within organized religion; just as not all spiritual but not religious people agree on a certain way of living, people who belong to the same religious tradition can disagree over their personal beliefs.

Although spiritual but not religious people are often portrayed as inherently solitary, communities for them exist. In her 2010 book *The New Metaphysicals*, sociologist Courtney Bender explores social gatherings of spiritual but not religious people in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ironically, many of the groups she spoke with meet in church basements, which serve as convenient rental spaces. In practice, these groups become interfaith spaces in which members do not fit into traditional religious categories. Beyond groups specifically designated for spiritual but not religious people, Unitarian Universalist and Pagan organizations frequently become comfortable spiritual homes for the religiously unaffiliated. Spiritual but not religious people may also find community online in places like the Facebook group Spiritual But Not Religious, where members post reflections on how to live a meaningful life.

As the internet becomes a more popular space for religious communities to engage their congregants, spiritual but not religious people challenge the idea that religion must be confined to a brick and mortar building. They are at the front lines of new spiritual movements, innovating ritual and creating their own paths. In today's changing spiritual landscape, spiritual but not religious people are pushing the bounds of what it means to be religious and challenging conceptions of religious identity.