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## **“I’m Not Religious, but Spiritual”**

“My church is the world—and my body is its altar.” When a faculty colleague recently mentioned that he had spotted this bumper sticker on his way to work, I knew I had found the phrase that captured the theme of this column. Older Catholics might view such a message as an irreverent jab at the sacred truths of their faith. But the sentiment it expresses is an increasingly common one in modern Western society: Individuals should fashion their unique relationship with God, mediated only through their own human experience in the world without belonging to an organized religion. As one woman recently put it: “There isn’t a church in all of America I want to go to.” Yet this same woman, born and raised a Catholic, nurtures a deep personal prayer life and meets frequently with other “seekers” like herself in an informal “Conversations with God” support group (Rosin: A1). These examples illustrate the perspective of the ever-increasing number of people who describe themselves as “not religious, but spiritual.”

In fact, there are signs in some countries that such persons are rapidly becoming more numerous than regular churchgoers. This fact hit me this past Christmas. I was catching up on some reading while seasonal music—the angelic tones of an English boys’ choir singing traditional carols—wafted in the background. But I was quickly brought back to earth when I read in *The Tablet* that a new study showed that “only a minority of Britons now believe in the tenets of Christianity” (Heald: 1729). A century ago, choristers like those I was listening to would have been expressing the faith of a “Christian nation.” Now the words of their carols had a religious meaning for only 45 percent of the British population—those who believed that Jesus was the Son of God. 19 percent felt that Jesus was “just a man,” and even more, 22 percent, “just a story.” The dramatic shift over recent decades should be noted: in 1957, the percentages were 71 percent, 9 percent, and 6 percent respectively [14 percent in both surveys did not know what they believed about Jesus]. In fact, the study indicated that only 48 percent of the British people are willing to identify themselves as belonging to any particular religion, a precipitous decline from 58 percent only a decade ago. However, only about half of these (25 percent) attend worship services on a regular (i.e., monthly) basis. They are far outnumbered by

the 38 percent of the population who express some opposition to organized religion, positively stating that they are “not religious.”

One might be tempted to say that this study shows the growing impact of secularism—there are simply more people who do not believe in any spiritual dimension to reality. To some extent this is true: the number of persons who did not think there was any sort of God has tripled in the last four decades (6 percent to 17 percent). But it is not the whole story. For only 12 percent of the British people were willing to describe themselves as “not spiritual.” The majority of the population (65 percent) continued to believe in the existence of God. And 27 percent positively said they were “spiritual.” Clearly, this illustrates a vital interest in spirituality even among those who do not believe in a personal God or who express some opposition to organized religion. Such trends may not yet be quite so dramatic in U.S. society, but increasing numbers of Americans are saying that their private prayer life is growing although the impact of religion on their lives is diminishing (Gallup and Lindsay, Roof).

What are the causes of this seemingly paradoxical trend: a growing disaffection for institutional “religion” in the midst of a burgeoning business in “spirituality”? The scholar who has gone the furthest in providing some answers is Anthony Giddens who views it as a prime manifestation of “late modern” culture. Giddens’s analysis begins from the fact that our culture is dominated by a global capitalistic economy which promotes a “free market” of capital and resources including human ones. Thus late modern societies are characterized by both geographical and social mobility. People increasingly cannot afford to be socially anchored. They must be open to change jobs three or four times in a lifetime, to move to the other side of the country if need be. More and more people are thus literally uprooted, cut off from extended family and local communities with their traditional authorities and folkways. Places are now interchangeable, where we can shop in malls with the same stores stocking the same plethora of brand names. Global migration patterns and instant communications have made formerly exotic cultures household items. But at the same time, Giddens sees that these same economic forces have produced “surveillance societies” dominated by abstract systems (multinational corporations, government regulations, scientific standards, computerized records) which have depersonalized many areas of life. We are thus confronted with a paradox: In their private lives people are increasingly cut off from the bonds of traditional social institutions, free to do whatever they want, while in the public sphere they are dominated by highly institutionalized systems.

What implications does Giddens see here for religion? On the one hand, these social dynamics explain the tremendous spiritual hunger

late modern people are experiencing. The traditional social institutions of extended family and local community were value-laden, providing the answers to basic questions of human meaning. Religious faith—whether embodied in tribal custom or in the beliefs and rituals of a structured “higher religion”—was a fundamental expression of these traditional societies. Religious faith and practice expressed a corporate relation to the divine in which the individual participated. But late modernity, by severing people from these traditional social institutions, forces them to find the answers to many basic “value” questions for themselves. Today “individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options” (Giddens: 5). At the same time the technological and bureaucratized social systems that dominate the public sphere are devoid of moral meaning in themselves. Resolutely “value-neutral,” they provide few resources for individuals negotiating such important life choices. The secular educational system, for example, has either marginalized or trivialized the religious questions young people naturally ask during their process of maturation. Thus, lacking any framework for the inner “meaning” and “direction” they need, people are faced with the arduous task of individually constructing and maintaining some kind of coherent inner “self” that can sustain them through the upheavals of personal life passages.

And more and more people are going about this task without the benefit of membership in traditional religious institutions. In a society characterized by a high degree of pluralism, mobility, and temporary institutional and personal ties, the “institutional Church”—with its hierarchical leadership structures, ritualized liturgy, and codified system of beliefs and regulations—seems too confining for many. After all, the word “religion” comes from the Latin word “to bind,” and more and more people do not wish—or feel they cannot—make the type of commitments required by active membership in an organized religion.

The rubric of “spirituality,” on the other hand, creates a space for them to attend to their inner growth, but on their own flexible terms. Indeed, people in late modern society increasingly share the assumption that individuals ought to *choose* their faith. The important thing is that I embark on a “journey” of self-discovery to arrive at a sense of my own life’s uniqueness and coherence: that I come to find truth *for me*. Such a journey might lead an individual to frame this truth in terms of a given religious system, but it may also mean that a person might well continue in a life-long “search,” fashioning an inner “spiritual self” in an autonomous and eclectic fashion without any formal religious affiliation. Indeed, for the latter type of individual, being “religious” often connotes being “rigid,” “uptight,” and “close-minded” (Roof).

In a compelling portrait of the development of Americans’ personal religious practices over the past half century, Robert Wuthnow captures

this shift when he says that a traditional “spirituality of dwelling” in the settled patterns of received truths and time-honored traditions has given way to a new “spirituality of seeking” in which people are forced to negotiate among “complex and confusing” religious meanings (3–4). The challenge such a shift presents for the churches is immense. No longer can they take their membership for granted. The traditional social institutions that created “born Catholics,” for example, and kept them in the Church for life—tight family ties, ethnic communities, strong local identification—simply do not have the hold they once did.

What should be our pastoral strategy for a society of “seekers”? Should the Church “deconstruct itself”—stop acting as an authoritative repository of unchanging truths and become a “spiritual marketplace,” offering a “cafeteria” of items helpful for individual spiritual growth (Roof)? Or should it aim primarily at holding that small segment of modern society that Roof characterizes as “dogmatists,” those who choose to reconstruct a sharply delineated religious “dwelling” in the midst of flux precisely by emphasizing those beliefs and practices which set them apart? Wuthnow—and I tend to agree—feels the most productive approach has to lie somewhere in the middle. If personal spirituality is to be both sustaining in the long term and transformative of the larger society, it needs to be imbedded in a larger religious institution which provides a core narrative and the basic rituals giving an interpretive framework for one’s life, but which also allows and fosters a variety of smaller subgroups which can provide the intimacy and flexibility that “seekers” desire (168–98). But that is another column. I have simply tried here to highlight a phenomenon that is rapidly transforming our contemporary religious landscape, and why it is occurring.

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*Human beings need two things: something to believe in and something to belong to. To be successful, the parish must be a place where both these needs are met.*

—Timothy O'Connell  
*Making Disciples*