

Do the “Spiritual but not Religious” (SBNR) Want a Theology Without Walls?

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Does the Theology without Walls have a purpose and audience in mind? Can one assume a most likely audience is the “spiritual but not religious?” The results of my interviews and qualitative analysis is that these unaffiliated persons do have nascent theological questions and issues. Without being an organized group, SBNRs seem to agree on what theological beliefs they reject, and also those they could accept. It is possible that a mini-meta-narrative is developing out of this. Would, then, they be open to a TWW? This paper examines if, in fact, they are interested, willing, and ready for such an enterprise...or are looking for something else. In either case, how can a TWW aid them in their thought-trekking?

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Why are we trying to construct a Theology without Walls? Is it for a specific audience? Or is this a scholarly exercise, albeit valuable in itself? If audience is important, are we creating this for a likely audience, the spiritual but not religious (SBNR)? Do we assume that SBNRs are “seekers,” perhaps looking for a viable religious community, identity, or tradition? Or do we assume that SBNRs, even if not interested in a particular religious home, are at least seeking a viable theology that can guide them in their spiritual practices?

For my book *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*, I had hundreds of informal conversations with SBNRs and made numerous “site” visits to such places as yoga studios, spiritual retreat centers, and meditation classes.¹ I formally interviewed ninety (90) persons plus conducting two focus groups, adding an additional fifteen (15) persons, creating a total pool of 105.² The procedure I used is often called the “snowball” method as my search for interviewees and word-of-mouth from other interviewees brought in dozens of persons interested in speaking with me.³ I created an open-ended semi-structured interview format that allowed me to explore SBNR beliefs in depth. As the sole interviewer, I worked to accommodate nearly everyone who volunteered. Although qualitative research does not claim to be representative, as does quantitative, I nevertheless endeavored to find a sample that covered a spectrum. Thus the interviewees represented a wide range of ethnicities, socio-economic groups, and gender-identifications, and included interviewees from the Silent Generation (born 1925–1945), Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Gen X (born 1965–1981), and Millennials (born after 1981).⁴

¹ Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² A description of the interviewees, including each generation interviewed, can be found in Chapter 3, “The Interviewees,” *Belief without Borders*, 35–67, including the “types” I found that cut across generations. I labelled these types: Dissenters, Casuals, Explorers, Seekers and Immigrants. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 50–67.

³ For more on method, see “On Methodology” in *Belief without Borders*, 263–69.

⁴ Generation Zs (born after 1996) were minors during this research and not interviewed; but recent studies indicate that they are following the same trend as the Millennials, although possibly leveling off rather than accelerating. However, this may change since, as of 2021, most Gen Zs were still barely out of college. See, for example, Melissa Deckman, “Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show,” *Religion in Public Life*, Feb. 10, 2021, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>.

From this research, I can say with confidence that SBNRs do not fit the usual definition of seekers, that is, people who are seeking some specific goal, tradition, or religious home.⁵ Since TWW does not claim to guide seekers toward any one tradition or religion, that assumption does not fit the enterprise. But does that preclude the interest of TWW scholars in the often observable, albeit eclectic, fascination of SBNRs with some religious traditions, sources, or alternative spiritualities? And does their interest hold the possibility of creating a new theology, one without walls, that will benefit and perhaps even provide an ethos around which SBNRs could organize or find common purpose? Additionally, given that this growing group prizes issues over institution—and, as I discovered, is drawn to progressive political and/or ethical positions—a significant percentage of SBNRs may want to find a way to organize to exercise their clout. TWW may be one way to aid in this quest.

In some ways, the generational differences in the SBNRs I interviewed were significant. The Silent Generation interviewees represented only about ten percent (10%) of the total. This is not remarkable, since all the ones I interviewed had been raised with traditional religious beliefs and practices. Those who did identify as SBNR were often unusual rebels for their time and were simply finished with organized religion. They would not be a likely audience for a TWW.

The Baby Boomer audience was much larger, representing somewhat over forty percent (40%) of the total. Unlike the Silent Generation, the people I met from this generation eagerly volunteered to be interviewed. Nearly all of them were proud to claim the SBNR identity. Like the Silent Generation, however, Baby Boomers were raised in a culture where religious affiliation was assumed. They came from a time, according to Will Herberg, where good citizens or worthy people were either Protestant, Catholic or Jewish.⁶ In that era there was usually only a dim realization of the presence of other religions in America and only a few elites showed interest in alternative spiritualities. But Baby Boomers' whole world changed when, as impressionable teenagers and young adults, they encountered the "question authority" atmosphere of "the long 60s."⁷ Given that, it was not surprising that all the Boomers I spoke with have grown suspicious of the exclusivism not just of religion, but even of denominations. They explained how they were disenchanted by what they perceived as a dour, judgmental, hell-fire-and-brimstone kind of religion where demands were many and rewards reserved for later.

However, a majority of the Baby Boomers I met continue to value spirituality. Although that term is defined in many ways and often overlaps with religion, for SBNRs spirituality is a

⁵ Some of the additional resources by Linda Mercadante, Ph.D., on the SBNR movement and beliefs include: "Is a Theology for SBNRs Possible?" in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed., Jerry L. Martin (Routledge, 2019); "Belief without Borders: Examining Anew the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious," in *Being Spiritual but not Religious*, ed., William B. Parsons [Routledge, 2018]; "Selected Topic: The 'Spiritual but Not Religious' Movement," in *Religion: Social Religion*, ed., William B. Parsons, (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2016); "Spiritual Struggles of Nones and SBNRs," *Religions*, Oct. 2020; "Good News about the Spiritual but not Religious," in *CNN Blog* (Feb. 22, 2014), <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2014/02/22/good-news-about-the-spiritual-but-not-religious/>; "Are the Spiritual but Religious Turning East?" in *The Huffington Post* (April 16, 2014); "Spiritual but not Religious: Knowing the Types, Avoiding the Traps," in *Oxford University Press Religion Blog* (Mar. 2, 2014); and "The Seeker Next Door: What Drives the Spiritual but not Religious?," *The Christian Century*, 129:11 (May 30, 2012): 30–33.

⁶ Wil Herberg, *Protestant—Catholic—Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, reprinted edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁷ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

personal quest, seen as heartfelt and genuine, while religion is thought to be too structured, organized, and even repressive of individuality. Although early framers of this split, Boomers began to search around for tenets that could be combined, and which offered a thought-world more open, tolerant, and less judgmental. Some have kept a remnant of the idea of affiliation and/or tradition, but now from a non-exclusivist place. As a large generation, they were raised in a group-oriented culture; as a result, the ones I met still often seek out alternative spiritual groups. Even so, they routinely see themselves as rebels, even if not radicals, feel obligated to question everything, and no obligation to stick with any one group or tradition.

Because of all this, SBNR Boomers might be interested in a TWW. Given their cultural or personal familiarity with religion, even if minimal, they do bring theological questions. They often start, however, by eliminating doctrines they find untenable, unbelievable, or restrictive. Most often they associate these with Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic. The predictable suspects are such doctrines as original sin—in fact, sin in general, as the idea of an offense against a higher power—exclusivism, a personal but transcendent higher power, and an afterlife that requires meeting the standards of the higher power and/or organized religion. They do not stop there, however. Perhaps because of a nascent longing for a lost spiritual narrative, they often go on to find replacement ideas that feel more adequate. For Boomers, theology still matters.

Younger SBNRs are often different. The Gen Xers who volunteered to be interviewed represent the second largest cohort among interviewees, totaling about two-thirds of the Boomers. Often raised by Boomer parents, Gen Xers told me their parents insisted they would not force them into any religion and would be left free to make their own choices. The Millennials I interviewed represented about ten percent (10%) of the total. This group was smaller simply because fewer of the Gen Xers I met were interested in being interviewed. Even so, in both informal and formal conversations, those Millennials raised by Boomer parents offered the same contention. For them and especially those with younger parents, often religion was abandoned long ago, a remnant they may, at best, identify with their grandparents. While I found some in all generational groups who were rebelling against an Evangelical background, those were in the minority among my interviewees.

In the panel “SBNRs: Doing Theology Beyond the Walls” convened in the 2020 AAR meeting and to which my original response develops into this paper, Paul Bramadat identifies younger SBNRs as those with little if any religious background and largely to be found in the Pacific Northwest. There may be a preponderance there, but I found plenty of similar types in the Midwest and other locales I traveled to, including, for instance, upstate New York and Canada. Even Vermont, once solidly churched, has now surpassed the Pacific Northwest “none zone” in percentage of unaffiliated.⁸ More than two-thirds of the younger SBNRs (and even some older ones) I spoke with do not have the cultural familiarity with religion that Boomers have, they are very often less interested in the same kind of quest, that is, openness to multiple traditions.

⁸ Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, eds, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007). Mark E. Rondeau. “New survey shows Vermont least religious state,” in *Bennington Banner*, May 16, 2015.

It was common that the majority of these SBNRs have already decided that religion is from a bygone age, too politically charged, too judgmental, exclusivist, and so on. If they are seekers, it is another kind of seeking. They may practice yoga, meditate or read books on spirituality, but I did not find they were looking for a consistent thought-world. Even so, I did find that both older and younger SBNRs have nascent theological questions, even if they do not like the word theology or are not sure what it means. Many prefer the word “metaphysical”⁹ but these two terms often produce similar questions for SBNRs, such as about the nature of reality, truth, what force may be larger than themselves, what is ultimacy, what happens after death, etc. This is clearly a growing audience and the TWW enterprise must take this contingent very seriously. But would they naturally be drawn to a theology without walls? Maybe, but not in a straight-forward way. It would take some effort to interest them.

Unfortunately, I think Hans Le Grand’s hope that the Unitarian Universalist way could satisfy the types of SBNRs I met is unlikely to be realized. I spoke before the leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association a few years ago at their annual conference in Portland. The reason they invited me was to find out why SBNRs were not flocking to them. After all, they *do* have an open, tolerant and relevant set of theological assertions, questions, ethics, and possibilities. They *do* use a variety of religious and non-religious sources as well as often supporting various alternative spiritualities. The leaders were puzzled, concerned, and distraught. They said to me: “They *should* be *our* people. Why aren’t they?”

I suggested that SBNRs of all age groups are not seeking a spiritual home as much as a spiritual *experience*—something that is unlikely to happen when you are sitting in a pew looking forward and listening to someone preach. Better theology is not going to fix that. An open theology which encourages multiple sources and engages important questions is still unlikely to create what SBNRs seem to want—that is, experiences of awe, wonder, unity, self-discovery, even self-transcendence. Katherine J. Jones very competently describes the feelings of the vast majority of the SBNRs I have met. When I have spoken with SBNRs who have read my book, they sometimes get a bit disturbed. Why? Because, they insist, they do not want to be grouped with anyone else. They often think—proudly, I might add—that they are unique. But in my book, they find others echoing the very same things they are thinking, and it bothers them.

For a moment of self-disclosure, I grew up in a non-religious multi-ethnic home with a multi-faith background that was not practiced. Surrounded by religious families in my neighborhood of Newark, NJ, I went through many iterations including Roman Catholicism, atheism, and spiritual seeking. In the end, as a young adult I decided to join a mainline Protestant denomination. I did not find it confining, but rather, grounding. I never felt I had to buy the whole package, and there was not a singular package anyway. I found an identification with a complex, deep theological tradition both permitted and encouraged spiritual growth, intellectual exploration, and experience. Even though I eventually got ordained, I have kept all the facets of my background and my current multi-faith orientation. But it is good to know that in this tradition and others, many thinkers besides me have wrestled with the same questions I have. It is helpful to see the various answers they come up with and also see how that tradition continues to grow, expand, and change over time. In other words, commitment is not all bad and

⁹ Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

it does not have to be a straitjacket. It can even *encourage* one to experiment with a theology without walls.

But practically none of the SBNRs I met were inclined to choose the path that I did. A new option seems necessary. Could a TWW provide tools with which SBNRs could create and refine a theology that suited this growing population better? Maybe. In my opinion, however, it would not be sufficiently attractive just because it is accepting, unlimiting, tolerant and open. Now, if a TWW could set some conditions that would help SBNRs recognize and reflect on spiritual experience, it might find more interest. If, going further, a TWW could be created that takes spiritual growth seriously, explains what it is and why it is important, and encourages practices to enhance that, that may well generate significant interest.

From that perspective, I think the work that Kate Stockly and Jeffrey Kripal highlight is important. The SBNRS I have met are seeking an experience that takes them outside or *deeper inside* themselves. Maybe the spirit tech approach will appeal to them.¹⁰ I have not found any SBNRs yet who have seriously taken that path, but I have only talked with a few hundred. This might ultimately lead them to theological questions on the back-end, rather than the front-end, but we cannot be sure. However, I agree with Kripal that these experiments are proto-religious and may lead to theological exploration.¹¹

It is very important to notice that no matter the generation, SBNRs consistently agree on what beliefs they reject, such as the original-sin type of doctrines mentioned earlier. However, it is also critical to realize that the SBNRs I have met do, in fact, have theological questions. I found much agreement on what these issues are all across socioeconomic, age, and geographic differences. In addition to the questions termed as “metaphysical” mentioned earlier, these include such philosophical/theological issues as whether there is an approachable knowledge of ultimate truth, the existence of truth in itself, the reality of transcendence, and others.

Even so, I found the majority of the SBNRs I spoke with had a mini-meta-narrative that reached beyond their personal meaning-making stories. In fact, nearly all of my interlocutors shared many similar aspects of this narrative, even if some of the details differed. The vast majority of interviewees agreed on such things as what doctrines to reject, what progressive political views to support, and what spiritual experiences they seek, such as wonder, awe, and self-actualization or self-transcendence. They often insisted there is some sort of after-life, that a committed spiritual community is optional, and that there is no individual higher power which is personal and relatable. While I suggest these views are unlikely to be adopted by the majority of Americans, their existence is worth noting in a group that is otherwise quite diverse. This discovery is also significant since today any overarching narrative is often seen as hegemonic or repressive.

¹⁰ About Stockly’s work on spirit technology, please refer to Wesley Wildman and Kate Stockly, *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2021).

¹¹ About Kripal’s work on proto-religious experience in the context of SBNR studies, please refer to Jeffrey Kripal, “‘Comparison Gets You No Where!’ The Comparative Study of Religion and the Spiritual but Not Religious,” in *Being Spiritual but Not Religious*, ed., William Parsons (London: Routledge, 2018), 253–67. For more details of the works of Kate Stockly and Jeffrey Kripal discussed in this paper, please refer to Rory D. McEntee’s “TWW’s Potential as Decolonial & Democratic Praxis: A Response” in this special issue.

So far, the mini-meta-narrative of shared aspects seems to have emerged as a direct opposition to a conservative Christian theology and its linkage to a right-wing political agenda. It is unlikely, however, that this mini-meta-narrative will result in the creation of a new religion, largely due to an SBNR hesitancy to belong to and trust definable groups/institutions. Instead, the freedom to try many different practices, paths, and a “pick-and-mix” approach to theological ideas pertains to most I have met.

However, the majority of the SBNRs I talked with have never had the chance, the training, the tools, or the mentors to help them think through their thought-experiments. They were regularly excited that I was asking them theological questions. Interestingly, almost all insisted no one had ever asked them about such things, much less provided resources they could use. Routinely, after the interview, they said they were grateful I had given them so much to think about. As a result, even if their primary goal is spiritual experience, self-transcendence and/or self-deepening, I think many would welcome help in identifying their issues as theological. Many would be grateful for tools to support them in thinking theologically. And many would welcome guides who show them how the realization of their goals may well require these theological tools. Given that, a theology without walls is potentially a valuable contribution to the SBNR phenomenon.



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