Understanding the Undefinable:

Exploring What It Means to Be Spiritual But Not Religious in 21st Century America

Senior Thesis

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By
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Asking Questions and Exploring Voices

My sophomore year of college, I was asked a question which would lead to this research: what is your spiritual or religious identity? I was in an anthropology of religion class, and the professor was explaining to us the unexpected challenge of trying to answer this question when asked to her during her fieldwork. Since an assignment for the class was to observe a religious tradition different from one in which each person grew up, the professor assigned students to write a paragraph explaining how they would answer this question if asked. I grew up going to a Congregationalist church, and would describe my upbringing as fairly influenced by this. However, I found myself struggling to find a concrete and succinct way to describe my identity. While trying to formulate my answer, I called my mom to see if she could help me make sense of all the intangible thoughts swimming in my head.

“Well, honey, you know what I’ve always said,” my mom’s answer was familiar. “I am spiritual but not religious. I think there is something greater, something bigger than us, and I use Judeo-Christian vocabulary to describe it, but I don’t believe that is the only way to acknowledge it, or that the church is the best way to be spiritual.”

“So, you’d call that spiritual but not religious?” I clarified.

“Yah, spiritual but not religious is the best way to describe it,” she concluded after a pause.

While the phrase “spiritual but not religious” did not fully resonate with me in the same way it had with my mom, after talking with her, I began to think more deeply about the meaning...
of this phrase. My mom had described herself as spiritual but not religious for as long as I could remember, but this always seemed like a phrase she had uniquely crafted for herself in order to describe her individual experience. However, I never stopped to wonder if others also embraced the same phrase. So, I did some research after our discussion and was greatly surprised to find that, as of 2017, 27% of Americans identified this way (Lipka 2017: 1). Unaware of this statistic, my mom had spent most of her life aligning with a group of people she was not aware existed, and this fascinated and shocked the both of us. I ended up writing my final research paper in the class on spiritual but not religious people, though I finished this paper feeling little closer to understanding what it meant to be spiritual but not religious or why so many Americans began embracing this in recent years.

**Questions and Methodologies**

Throughout my thesis, I aim to answer the following questions: *Why are so many people describing themselves as spiritual but not religious here and now, in 21st century America? Why might someone embrace being spiritual but not religious? What does it mean to be spiritual but not religious? What identities and values does this label convey?* There have been many scholarly works centered around the ways in which religion is foundational (or is distinctly not foundational) to aspects of society and culture such as nationalism (specifically Juergensmeyer 1996, Arieli 1964, Anderson 2006) kinship, and meaning-making (specifically Geertz 2008 [1966]). Additionally, scholarship has examined the crucial ways in which certain social and cultural factors help shape religious practice. One example of such work is Janet McIntosh’s *Edge of Islam: Power, Personhood, and Ethnoreligious boundaries on the Kenya Coast*, which explores how ethnicity and socioeconomic status shape religious practice (2009). These works have been important in understanding the roles of religion in culture and society. Yet, with an increasing number of Americans who reject religious affiliation, it is important to also consider
what this may mean for our understanding of social groupings, movements, identities, and methods for making meaning in 21st century America. Additionally, with a large group of Americans specifying that they are not simply “not religious” but spiritual as well, it is pertinent to consider how spirituality functions in American society and culture—specifically considering why people may not want to discard both religion and spirituality, and what this can reveal about what Americans are seeking in their daily lives. Through speaking with people who embrace being spiritual but not religious, my research helps to illuminate the ways in which not only religion, but also spirituality can be a powerful source of meaning-making and identity (or, as we will see, a kind of anti-identity) for people who reject religion but embrace spirituality.

Initially, I wanted to focus on how spiritual but not religious people form communities outside of organized religion. However, as I conducted interviews with nine people who embraced being spiritual but not religion, interlocutors were not very concerned with the subject of community formation. Instead, they much preferred sharing rich stories and talking about the differences between religion and spirituality, and why they subsequently embraced spirituality but rejected religion. Interlocutors also spoke a great deal about the role their spirituality plays in their daily lives, and what it means and does not mean when they call themselves spiritual but not religious. Therefore, I changed the scope from my original research question to further explore aspects which my interlocutors revealed as important.

In what follows, I set out to answer my research questions concerning what it means to be spiritual but not religious by analyzing interviews I conducted with nine people who embrace being spiritual but not religious. I will do so through anthropological lenses and frameworks—specifically focusing on freedom and choice, meaning-making, and conceptions of the self and identity. Using such lenses and frameworks, I hope to illuminate reasons as to why many people
are spiritual but not religious, and what this means in terms of their beliefs, practices, and daily lives.

My two criteria for finding interlocutors was that they lived in New England and said that they fit into my study exploring what it means to be spiritual but not religious. In this way, I was the one who proposed the phrase “spiritual but not religious” as a convenient shorthand for explaining what I expected would be a much more complex concept. I did not provide a definition for being spiritual but not religious to the interlocutors, as I wanted to learn how interlocutors defined this term for themselves and how they interacted with their being spiritual but not religious. Therefore, interlocutors identified themselves to me as spiritual but not religious according to their own personal understanding of the category. Each interview lasted for a minimum of 45 minutes, though interviews varied in length, with the longest interview lasting three hours. Though I asked certain set questions in each interview (e.g., “How would you describe your spiritual or religious identity?” “Is there a difference between spirituality and religion?” “Is there anything else you would like to tell me about?”), I let the interlocutors steer the conversation and allowed them to bring up information they found relevant. In this way, each interview was unique and did not follow a rigid structure. In doing this, I was able to gain insight into what being spiritual but not religious means for each interlocutor without letting my preconceived ideas or expectations cast too much of a shadow on my research (while fully understanding that no person is fully unbiased or objective).

The nine interlocutors ranged in age from twenty-one to seventy-three and were college students, massage therapists, psychic mediums, clairvoyants, behavioral consultants, and small business owners. Four are currently in college, three had completed college degrees, one had dropped out of college, and one never went to college. Eight identified as female, and one did not
identify with a particular gender. Most of the people I spoke with were either raised Christian (Catholic or some sect of Protestantism) and went to church (five interlocutors) or had Christian or spiritual parents but never went to church (three interlocutors). One interlocutor, Becca, was raised on a Native People’s reservation and learned about spirituality from an older woman in her area. She identified as an “Indian woman” who was influenced by Native People’s spiritual practices which aided in her role as a clairvoyant. In this way, my study does not include any people raised Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, or other religious or spiritual practice outside of Christianity, New Age or spiritual beliefs, and Native People’s spiritual practices. I could not find research indicating whether or not spiritual but not religious people are more likely to have been raised in one specific tradition over another, though the Christian upbringings of many interlocutors certainly highlights this as a possible area for future research. Seven interlocutors identified as white, one identified as Arab, and one, as previously stated, identified as “Indian”. In this way, this research does not aim to make a blanket statement about what it means to be spiritual but not religious for every American due to its limited scope in backgrounds and identities of the interlocutors (varying degrees of mostly white, Christian backgrounds and majority female identified, college educated interlocutors).

Table 1. The Nine Interlocutors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Religious Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becca</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Raised on Native People’s reservation and educated about Native People’s spiritual practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Mid to late 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Not raised religious, but parents were Catholic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Raised Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Religious Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Not raised religious. Mother was Catholic, and father was New Age or Buddhist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>Does not identify with a particular gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not raised religious. Mother Catholic, father anti-religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Raised Christian or Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Raised Congregationalist (Protestant Christian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muriel</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Raised Congregationalist (Protestant Christian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Raised Catholic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This research is built upon the power of listening to voices, grown from the stories and ideas people express when given an opportunity. Setting out to find interviewees, I was surprised by the number of people who were not only interested in, but enthusiastic about my research. I recruited interviewees through word of mouth and the snowball method, finding willing participants first through personal connections, and then snowballing to friends and or family members of those personal connections. A couple of hours after posting about my research on Facebook in attempts to recruit people, I received eleven Facebook messages, and had several more people approach me in person about being involved in my research. Though not all were available to be interviewed (some lived outside of New England or were unable to meet), this enthusiasm surprised me. It also gave me confidence that I had set out to explore a topic and ask questions people were so eager to talk about or answer. Most interlocutors revealed that they seldom had the opportunity to speak about being spiritual but not religious; this seemed to be a topic many people had thought a great deal about but were never given a platform through which they could share their ideas. In this way, I aim to honor the nine interlocutors I spoke with by providing qualitative insights into information which they shared about the important aspects of being spiritual but not religious.
Background and Frameworks

Anthropologists, sociologists, and religious theorists have long attempted to create a unified and succinct definition of religion. Though there may never be one definition of religion uniquely applicable to the lived experiences of people in all societies, many intriguing and insightful definitions have been given. Emile Durkheim defines religion as a natural expression of society which gives social cohesion (2008 [1912]: 34-47). In this way, he claims that all religions can be understood as valid and true because they exist as reflections of the society in which they belong. He also concludes that religion is “an eminently social thing,” and therefore “Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities” (2008[1912]: 38). In other words, religion is so social and collective that it constantly re-creates and reinforces collectivity and social cohesion among groups. In this way, Durkheim’s multifaceted definition of religion points to the main function of religion according to Durkheim: “to make us act and to help us live” (2008 [1912]: 9).

An important definition which still holds much resonance, Durkheim’s definition does not fully explain the existence of spiritual but not religious Americans as members of a society. If religion is a natural expression of society, does this view of religion assume that spiritual but not religious Americans cannot be members of a society? Furthermore, this definition may allude to the idea that people without religion are somehow “unnatural” which is incorrect, especially considering that by this logic, 27% of Americans would appear to be “unnatural” in their lack of religious identity (Lipka 2017: 1). It appears that American society accepts people who do not follow a certain religion (e.g., spiritual but not religious people, atheists) as being quite normal. In this way, it is important to consider how spirituality, and not just religion, functions within a society or culture.
Clifford Geertz gives a more interpretive definition of religion that relies mostly upon how religious symbols give structure and meaning to life which in turn shapes a person’s everyday experience. He argues that one main aspect of religion is its ability to make meaning of “the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience” such as pain and suffering (2008 [1966]: 67). Through the meaning of symbols, he asserts that religion affirms and even celebrates “the inescapability of ignorance, pain, and injustice on the human plane,” while denying its irrationality by “relating man’s sphere of existence to a wider sphere” (Geertz 2008 [1966]: 68). In this way, he argues that religion allows people to make meaning of the seemingly meaningless suffering and pain which is inevitable in life. The title of his research, “Religion as a Cultural System,” also suggests that religion is a central aspect of culture which provides a system through which people may be able to make meaning.

However, this definition of religion does not fully explain how people who do not identify with a religion may make meaning of their lives. The nine spiritual but not religious people with which I spoke showed that spirituality, similar to how Geertz defines religion, allows for a great deal of meaning outside of organized religion. Interlocutors explained complex belief systems about energy, spirits, and souls. Furthermore, many interlocutors made meaning of death and even shared with me their belief in human existence beyond death. In this way, we must explore how spirituality too may serve as an important way people make meaning in the way Geertz describes.

Building off of these examinations of religion, in the past few decades academics have tried to understand the beliefs of Americans who do not identify with any one religion. In 1985, Robert Bellah and his colleagues wrote the book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism in American life*, wherein they examined the importance of individualism in American society. During their
research, they interviewed a young nurse named Sheila Larson who described her faith as highly individual and not tied to any one organized religion (1985: 221). She called her faith “Sheilaism” and explained how it was made up of her “own little voice” (1985: 221). Bellah and his colleagues use this example of Sheilaism to describe a kind of highly individual religion that is not centered in one religious practice, but is inspired by many beliefs and practices, and is then given its own “internal meaning” (1985: 235). The term Sheilaism has become an important term which describes individually created and interpreted belief systems which are inspired by several belief systems but prescribe to the dogma or rules of none. This work was one of the first which detailed how Americans may not wish to identify with one specific religion, but still desire an internal and individual meaning-making system (much like the one described by Geertz).

In 1993 sociologist Wade Clark Roof set out to study spirituality in the Baby Boom generation in his book *A Generation of Seekers*. His research identifies a group of people who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. He calls this group “highly active seekers” and though they only make up about 9% of the total number of people in the study, he discusses them at length in his book (1993: 80). Roof identifies these seekers to be older, highly educated people with white collar jobs who are more likely to identify as female and politically liberal (1993: 80). He explains that seekers are “deeply concerned with the experiential and the mystical” and find religious institutions to be "stifling" (1993: 80). In this way, he explains how many find organized religion to be, as humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow describes it, the “major enemy” of the religious experience. In this way, Wade Clark Roof’s study in 1993 is one of the first bodies of research to reveal important insights into a group of Americans who embrace spirituality and reject religion.
In their book *American Grace: How Religion Divides And Unites Us*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell examine American religious trends in the past few decades through their analysis of two comprehensive surveys of American religious life (2010). In their study, they reveal that the United States is becoming slowly more secular due, in part, to the association of religion with political conservatism. They explain how generations before the 1960s viewed going to Church as an important American duty, but with the rise in skepticism of institutions (both religious and political) in the 1960s, people began to identify as “not religious” in growing numbers (Putnam and Campbell 2010: 91-134). However, in the 1970s and 1980s, college age students became both more religious (here they talk of Christianity, specifically Evangelical Christianity) and more politically conservative (Putnam and Campbell 2010: 91-134). Starting around the 1990’s, this caused many Americans to associate religion with political conservatism, and thus many young people began to view religion as “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political” (2010: 121). In this way, Putnam and Campbell give a comprehensive overview and intriguing explanation of how Wade Clark Roof’s group of “seekers,” as well as a growing number of spiritual but not religious people, came to be in America.

In 1997, four after Roof’s study of seekers, Brian Zinnbauer et. al. set out to define spirituality and religion in their work *Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzying the Fuzzy* (1997: 549-564). Their work studies the points of convergence and divergence between the two terms, and also examines a group of spiritual but not religious people very similar to Roof’s group of “highly active seekers.” However, while this group made up only 9% of Roof’s study, Zinnbauer et. al. identify 19% of their participants to be spiritual but not religious (1997: 555). While Zinnbauer et. al. find that spirituality and religion define two distinctly different concepts in the American mind, they also find that many view the terms as related or similar (Zinnbauer et. al.
1997: 561). While a number of respondents define themselves as spiritual but not religious, “most respondents indicated that they consider themselves both spiritual and religious” with 74% of respondents identifying themselves in this way (Zinnbauer et. al. 1997: 561). However, it is important to note how the number of spiritual but not religious respondents in the Zinnbauer et. al. study went up significantly from Roof’s study (by ten percentage points) just four years prior.

In 2017, twenty years after Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzying the Fuzzy was written by Zinnbauer et. al., a Pew Research study of over 5,000 Americans adults found that, “about a quarter of U.S. adults (27%) now say they think of themselves as spiritual but not religious, up 8 percentage points in five years” (Lipka 2017: 1). This shows just how rapidly this group has grown in recent years. However, just two years before in 2015, the Pew Research center found that the second largest “religious” group in America was “not religious,” and within this group of “not religious” people were those who specifically identified as spiritual but not religious (Hackett & Huynh 2015: 1). It is then interesting to consider why spiritual but not religious people do not simply describe themselves as “not religious” but feel the need to express their additional spirituality. These previous bodies of research have been some of the most important in tracking the recent growth in the spiritual but not religious population in America.

In examining the difference between spirituality and religion, many academics have identified traits attributed to each term by the American public, thus giving some insight into how Americans view the difference between the two. According to previous research, spirituality is associated with the private sphere, mystical experiences, and personal and individual thoughts and experiences, whereas religion seems to be associated with the public sphere, membership to an institution, formal rituals, authoritarianism, judgement, dogma and religious orthodoxy (Zinnbauer et. al.1997: 561, Putnam & Campbell 2010: 121, Roof 1993: 79). So then, spiritual
but not religious people have been described as seeking the interior and individual aspects of spirituality, while rejecting the organization, public participation, and formality of organized religion (Marler 2002: 289, Zinnbauer et. al. 1997: 561, and Fuller 2001: 5, Roof 1993: 80-81). However, these descriptions do not give insight into the actual belief and practices of people who embrace spirituality but reject religion.

In examining spirituality and religion, it is also important to consider how people describe and create their identities. Talcott Parsons describes the difference between ascribed and achieved identities and how they are assigned or created. He explains that ascribed characteristics or identities are those which are believed to be “fixed, immutable, or inherited” (Parsons 1982:111). Achieved identities or characteristics on the other hand, require performance and must be “achieved” (Parsons 1982: 111). In this way, identities may be described as either ascribed or identified. Wendy Cadge and Lynn Davidman take this further in their piece “Ascription, Choice, and the Construction of Religious Identities in the Contemporary United States” (2006). Through speaking with Thai Buddhist immigrants and unsynagogued Jews, Cadge and Davidman assert that people can understand their identities as both ascribed and achieved— meaning that the two are not mutually exclusive in constructing identities (2006: 1-37). In this way, they explore the multilayered and nuanced reality of identities and assert that there must be a “conceptual space and overlap between ascription and achievement by examining the mixed vocabulary used in actual narratives of religious identities” (2006: 37).

According to Judith Butler’s performance theory, identity is not an inherent thing which results in people's actions, but something which is actively created through specific culturally defined performance. Butler outlines this theory in her book *Gender Trouble* to explain how people are not born possessing a gender identity, but instead must make gender by performing
gendered acts outlined by a culture. In this way, she claims that “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990: 60). However, this idea may be applied to all identities, not just gender identity, to examine how people create their identities through performance.

In examining spirituality and religion, Courtney Bender explains how the phrases “spirituality” and “religion” are not so much identities in themselves but are instead used to establish relational identities and distinguish themselves from others (Bender 2007: 5). She explains a hypothetical situation in which a young conservative evangelical Christian woman, who frequently discusses her relationship with Jesus, signs up for her college Bible group’s upcoming spiritual retreat. She then might have a conversation with her roommate, who practices Buddhist meditation and considers herself to be spiritual but not religious and describe herself as “religious” rather than “spiritual” to her roommate. By describing herself as religious in the conversation with her roommate, this evangelical Christian young woman does not erase the fact that she is also committed to the spiritual aspects of her religious identity. Instead, she is using this situational identification as religious, and not spiritual, to draw a distinction between herself and her friend and create her identity in relation to the other person. Here Bender explains how “her decision to identify as ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ is largely dependent on the social context that she is in” (Bender 2007: 5). Through this hypothetical interaction, Bender shows how the phrases “spiritual” and “religious” are used to distinguish someone from other members of society in certain social contexts.

Two of the most recent and influential studies of people who embrace being spiritual but not religious are the books *Spiritual But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* by
Robert C. Fuller (2001), and Belief Beyond Borders by Linda A. Mercadante (2014). In his book, Fuller gives a historical background of spiritual but not religious people in America. He discusses previous spiritual movements in America and concludes that spiritual but not religious people may possess their own developed belief systems. Different from Fuller’s historical analysis, theologian Linda A. Mercadante conducted interviews with spiritual but not religious people in 2014. A former spiritual but not religious person herself, Mercadante presents findings from these interviews in her book, focusing mainly on the spiritual journeys of her interviewees, why they reject religion, and why they may identify as spiritual but not religious. She also explains her theory that certain generations may be more likely to identify in this way, similar to how Putnam and Campbell discuss generations from 1960 onward as more likely to not identify with religion.

Building off of these works, I believe that the lens of anthropology will give unique insight into the beliefs and practices of people who embrace being spiritual but not religious. In my research, I will explore and analyze the interviews I conducted with nine interlocutors through an anthropological lens, specifically focusing on understandings of freedom and choice, meaning-making, and conceptions of self and identity in addition to American cultural values such as individuality, secularism, and choice. By exploring the ideas and practices of the interlocutors through an anthropological lens— not a historical or theological lens — my research explores deeper cultural implications for what it means for people to embrace being spiritual but not religious in 21st century America. In this way, my research is unique in its approach to a topic which has been examined by others in different disciplines.

Exploring Answers

Throughout my research, I have come to understand certain aspects and themes which are important in understanding what it means to be an American who embraces being spiritual but
not religious in the 21st century, and why one may do so. In speaking with nine spiritual but not religious interlocutors, I have learned that being spiritual but not religious generally centers around individuality, meaning-making, and existing in the undefinable. Individuality is an American cultural value which emphasizes the worth of the individual person. The spiritual but not religious interlocutors with which I spoke explained the importance of individuality in their being spiritual but not religious. In the interviews, the term “individual” took on two meanings; spirituality is individual because it is unique to each person’s lived experiences and beliefs, and spirituality is individual because it is personal and not practiced in a group. One interlocutor, Taylor, perfectly summarized this individuality explaining how with spirituality, “everyone’s a snowflake.” This individuality was also expressed through the rejection of the “confines” of religious rules, and a desire to determine one’s own beliefs for themselves.

Clifford Geertz explains how meaning-making is an important aspect of religion. However, the nine interlocutors I spoke with discussed a variety of ways in which they used their spirituality to make meaning in their lives as spiritual but not religious people. Some ways in which interlocutors made meaning was through their individual understandings of “energy,” “souls,” “spirits,” or a “greater power.” Interlocutors also used their spirituality to be “mindful” or “present” during social interactions, allowing them to find deeper meanings in their interpersonal connections. In this way, many interlocutors seemed to make meaning through belief in an existence which supersedes the material and singular body or lifetime, whether that be through energy, a soul, a spirit, or the deeper meanings of interpersonal connection. This also implies that many interlocutors' conception of the self, while extremely individual and not part of a collective, is also not limited to their material body or singular lifetime. In this way, meaning-making through spirituality seems to be one of the most important reasons why people
may not simply describe themselves as “not religious,” but specify that they are also spiritual. It seems that through this meaning-making process which spirituality provides, interlocutors are able to separate themselves from organized religion, while still having strong meaning-making structures within which they can exist.

Finally, none of the people I spoke with gave a concrete definition or phrase for their spiritual or religious identity. In fact, seven out of the nine interlocutors expressed a strong desire to not define or label their spirituality. While interlocutors generally embraced calling themselves spiritual but not religious in social interactions and to differentiate themselves from other spiritual or religious groups and communities, this phrase did not serve as a unifying identity for the interlocutors. This relates to Courtney Bender’s understanding of the terms “spirituality” and “religion” as being used to differentiate the self from other people in certain social contexts. In fact, most interlocutors did not want to define their spiritual identity at all and described their spirituality as ineffable and extremely fluid. In this way, since many interlocutors viewed labels and definitions as “fixed,” labeling their spiritual or religious identities was not only impossible, but counteractive to the very meaning of their identities. Therefore, it is possible that the greatest thing which “defines” this category of people who embrace being spiritual but not religious, is their inability to be defined.

**Looking Forward**

In the chapters that follow I will explore answers to the questions: *Why are so many people describing themselves as spiritual but not religious here and now, in 21st century America? Why might someone embrace being spiritual but not religious? What does it mean to be spiritual but not religious? What identities and values does this label convey?* I will attempt to answer these questions using frameworks of freedom and choice, meaning-making, and the self and identity. In the next chapter, I will explore why so many people may be turning towards the
spiritual but not religious in 21st century America. By examining American cultural values such as individualism, secularism, and choice, as well as previous spiritual movements in the nation's history, I hope to give insight into why many Americans may identify with spirituality but not religion. In doing so, I will also explore previous academic works which attempt to outline the definitions, convergences and divergences of the terms “spiritual” and “religious.” I will then explore who is spiritual but not religious in terms of demographics, while giving a possible explanation as to why 21st century Americans in particular are increasingly describing themselves as spiritual but not religious.

The following two chapters (chapters 3&4) will explain how the nine interlocutors viewed and defined religion and spirituality respectively. In this way, these two chapters will explore why someone may describe themselves as being not religious and yet also spiritual. As explained before, so many Americans identify as being “not religious” that this constitutes the second largest “religious” group in the nation (Hackett & Huynh 2015: 1). However, there are specific reasons as to why interlocutors found it important to clarify that they were more than just “not religious,” but spiritual, too. These loose definitions of how interlocutors described spirituality and religion will thus provide insight into why the nine interlocutors align themselves with spirituality, and against religion.

The final chapter before the conclusion will dive more deeply into what it means to be spiritual but not religious, specifically in terms of identity and values. Here I will explain why the phrase “spiritual but not religious” is not an identity in itself, but a shorthanded way interlocutors distinguish themselves from other religious or spiritual groups. I will then explore values and ideals which interlocutors describe as important, such as having fluid and undefined identities, and constantly questioning norms and authority.
I hope that what follows will provide a deeper understanding of what it means to be an American who embraces being spiritual but not religious in the 21st century. Understanding these insights through an anthropological lens, I hope to build upon previous research, while sparking new questions and understandings about a growing number of people who embrace being spiritual but not religious in their lives.
Chapter 2

The Land of the Spiritual: An Examination of Spirituality in 21st Century America

Eva, a kind and inquisitive college student, was raised Catholic. During her freshman year of high school, around the time she was supposed to make confirmation, she began to realize that she did not resonate or identify with Catholicism and questioned her attachments to religious institutions in general. This prompted her to research a variety of different religious and spiritual practices.

“I was trying to research Buddhism and Paganism and all of these things. I actually met a girl in high school who was a practicing Wiccan, and she was really important in opening my eyes to a new kind of spirituality and religiosity that existed outside of the framework of religion and that really resonated with me.” During this time of exploration, Eva noticed that in each religion or defined spirituality, there was at least one aspect that she didn’t fully agree with, and so she finally settled into the idea that she did not identify with any specific religion.

Due to the importance of Catholicism to her parents, Eva made confirmation despite her disbelief in the religion. However, Eva expressed that she was somewhat comforted when she found out that other people in her confirmation classes also didn’t fully resonate with Catholicism or religion. She explained that it was nice to know that she was not the only person who, despite her religious upbringing, was spiritual but not religious.

Like Eva, several of the interlocutors with whom I spoke were largely unaware of the significant number of Americans who, like them, embrace being spiritual but not religious.
While the number of spiritual but not religious people has grown significantly in recent years, an exploration of individual spirituality is not entirely new in America. In fact, there is a rich history of spiritual movements and societies in America beginning as early as 1850. But what are these historical movements, societies, and beliefs which seemingly paved the way for a rise in spiritual but not religious people in the 21st century? Why has America specifically been such a fertile ground for these kinds of movements? And why might the number of people who embrace being spiritual but not religious have risen so much in only the past few decades? It appears that the historic American values of individualism, secularism, and choice combined with previous spiritual movements, as well as the experiences and characteristics of people and generations from 1960 onward, culminate into a strong reasoning as to why so many 21st century Americans may be shifting towards the spiritual but not religious.

In this chapter, I hope to answer the question: Why are so many people describing themselves as spiritual but not religious here and now, in 21st century America? In doing so, I also hope to provide important context for understanding the ideas and beliefs of the spiritual but not religious interlocutors with which I spoke. First, I will discuss three American ideals which seem to support the exploration of individual spiritualities outside of religion: individuality, secularism and choice. Here I will interact with American cultural values as well as observations made by anthropologist Tine Gammeltoft concerning choice in America, and Robert Bellah and colleagues about individual beliefs and Sheilaism. I will then explore previous definitions of spirituality and religion as given by anthropologists, sociologists, and religious theorists—namely Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, Wade Clark Roof and Michael Zinnbauer et. al.. Next, I will give a brief overview of spiritual societies and movements in America which seem to have paved the way for the growing number of spiritual but not religious Americans in the 21st
century. In doing so, I examine how and when Americans began to see spirituality and religion as separate entities, engaging with Pierre Bourdieu’s explanation of doxa. Finally, I will review previous research which explores the demographics of people who identify as spiritual but not religious, beginning with Wade Clark Roof’s study of spirituality in the Baby Boom generation. Here I will also explain reasons as to why generations from the 1960s onward may be more likely to embrace being spiritual but not religious, engaging with Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s research in their book *American Grace: How Religion Divides And Unites Us*.

**Individualism, Secularism, and Choice**

In beginning to understand what it means to be spiritual but not religious, it is important to understand the American ideals which may contribute to its popularity, namely individualism, secularism, and choice. Individualism emphasizes the importance of the individual and is the belief that a person’s life belongs solely to them. Therefore, what they wish to do with their life, personal time, belongings, and convictions are freely up to their own individual discretion. Individualism emphasizes the importance of individual freedom, and the ability to determine one's own ideas and actions. The value of individualism has been a central ideal since before America's founding, with a devotion to individualism being especially strong amongst colonial New Englanders. With their work ethic and devout puritanism, early settlers associated “godliness with prosperity” (Arieli 1964: 251). In this way, puritan New Englanders valued individual success so strongly, that they likened it to godliness. However, by likening it to “godliness,” early puritans used religion to promote the ideal of individualism. Though this early association of work ethic and the public sphere with religious ideals runs counter to the American ideal of secularism, the view of individualism as holy shows just how important it was to early New Englanders.
With more and more people attributing their life’s earnings to hard work and discipline, America soon became known as the “nation of individuals” and “another word for opportunity” (Arieli 1964: 284). This helped craft the idea of the “American Dream,” which proclaims that any citizen may make a nice life for themselves and their family through hard work and individual success. While the reality of this is questionable at best, individualism is and has always been one of the most important ideals of American life. As James Bryce said in his book The American Commonwealth, “Individualism, the love of enterprise, and the pride in personal freedom have been deemed by Americans not only their choicest, but [their] peculiar and exclusive possession” (Bryce 1891: 397). This value of individualism is still strong in American life today. For example, most Americans have, or at least strive for, separate cribs if not separate rooms for their infants. Starting from birth, it is expected that a baby will have its own nursery or crib so that, according to psychologist Richard Ferber, the baby can “see himself as an independent individual” (Ferber 2013: 2). This value of individualism is drilled into the lives of infants, showing just how pervasive and lasting this ideal is in the lives of many Americans.

The spiritual but not religious people with which I spoke characterized spirituality as being extremely individual. interlocutors describe spirituality as being free of the rules, doctrine, or dogma of organized religion. In this way, a non-religious person is free to determine their faith for themselves, and this aligns strongly with American values of individualism and individual freedom. interlocutors also describe spirituality as individual due to its uniqueness to each person and the fact that it is practiced individually instead of as a group. Taylor, a college student who was raised Catholic, describes how “everyone’s a snowflake,” explaining that each person determines their unique spirituality for themselves. This relates to Robert Bellah’s explanation of Sheilaism, or the creation of a personal faith which exists outside of organized religion and is
highly individual and unique to each person. Similar to Sheilaism, interlocutors characterize their spirituality as being free from dogma, doctrine, or ideology, thus creating an individual freedom in determining their own beliefs. Additionally, interlocutors describe spirituality as an internal and personal practice, thus making it individual because it is not practiced in a group. In this way, being spiritual but not religious can be seen as highly individual, and this may be one reason why spirituality outside of religion fits so well into a culture which so highly values individualism.

Another proclaimed American value is secularism. According to John Locke, secularism is the privatization of religion and the condition of creating a political community organized around public reason (Locke 1955 [1698]: 211-252). In this way, secularism does not, in theory, attempt to rid people of their religious beliefs, but rather make religion a private activity which does not play a role in public spheres like politics. Sociologist Jose Casanova explains that there are three different connotations of secularism which are important to distinguish between; 1.) the decline of religious belief in society, 2.) the privatization of religion, and 3.) the differentiation of the secular sphere (state, economy, science) from religious institutions (2006: 1). In this way, it is important that one clarifies how they define secularism when they speak of it. For the purposes of this research, I will focus on secularism as the privatization of religion and the creation of the secular sphere, as described by both Casanova and Locke. However, as Jonathon S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd point out in their book Race and Secularism in America, secularism often goes further than dictating only public sphere discourse. They assert that secularism is not just “the management of discourse but also as the management of practices and bodies” (2016: 6). In this way, it is important to note how secularism often does not simply shift public discourse, but takes an active role in altering, and in some cases suppressing, the daily practices and lives of
people. Though it was largely founded during the Renaissance, the idea of secularism gained much of its popularity during the Enlightenment which began in the seventeenth century. “From the time that modern secular nationalism emerged in the eighteenth century as a product of the European Enlightenment political values, it did so with a distinctly anti-religious, or at least anti-clerical posture” (Juergensmeyer 2003: 186). As a nation which emerged in the late eighteenth century and was greatly influenced by the Enlightenment, the United States has long been described by its citizens and leaders as a secular nation.

Though early colonists are often regarded as very religious people, not very many actually attended church. In fact, in 1600, only about 30% of adults in the colonies attended Church, and by the Revolutionary war, that number dropped to 15% (Fuller 2001: 14). In this way, if early Americans were fairly religious, they were so mostly in private. Additionally, since the creation of America as an independent nation in the late 18th century, many leaders, like Thomas Jefferson, have emphasized the importance of secularism. Thomas Jefferson frequently spoke of a “separation between church and state” which he believed to stem from the first amendment which promised the “freedom of religion” to Americans. Furthermore, Americans' commitment to secularism can be seen by the success of the Freethought movement in the mid nineteenth century, and the foundation of the American Humanist Association in 1941. Most Americans continue to uphold the “separation between church and state” and “freedom of religion” as some of the most important aspects of American society. Though America and its citizens can be seen as profoundly influenced by religion, specifically Christianity, most Americans have historically viewed secularism as an important American value.

Associating with spirituality instead of religion may be seen as a fairly secular act as it discourages the inclusion of religion in public sphere activities. In this way, being spiritual but
not religious may align well with the American ideal of secularism, especially secularism as defined as the privatization of beliefs and the creation of a secular sphere in society (As described by Locke and Casanova). The nine spiritual but not religious interlocutors describe spirituality as a very personal and internal practice. Therefore, according to my interlocutors, personal spiritual beliefs can never threaten the separation of personal belief from the secular and public sphere. In his book *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, Thomas C. Fuller argues that spiritual but not religious people are not secular because of “their fascination with supernatural phenomena” (Fuller 2001: 164). Fuller seems to argue that in order to be fully secular, one must reject any spiritual or religious belief that is at odds with western science, and this includes “supernatural phenomena” (Fuller 2001: 164). I find this supposition of secularism as contingent upon western science to be problematic as it defines the term according solely to Global North beliefs and structures. If secularism is instead defined as the privatization of religious or spiritual belief and the creation of the secular sphere, spirituality may be viewed as secular depending on its cultural and social context. Because the interlocutors with which I spoke assert the private nature of spirituality, I believe that spiritual but not religious people can be viewed as somewhat secular within American culture.

Finally, choice is another American ideal which may help explain the rise of spiritual but not religious Americans. Many Global North societies view choice and individual self-determination as very important aspects of society. In American culture, many things are viewed in a positive light so long as participants are given a choice. For example, the right to choose their political leaders through voting is seen by many Americans as not only their right, but their most important duty as citizens. This is a duty built upon the importance of choice and supposedly getting a voice in choosing one’s leadership and representation. Furthermore,
Americans often believe it to be a great injustice when citizens of other countries do not get to “choose” their leader through free and democratic elections. While Americans may, in reality, not have as much freedom of choice as they believe, it is still expressed as an important aspect of society and culture. However, as pointed out by anthropologist Tine Gammeltoft in her ethnography *Haunting Images: A Cultural Account of Selective Reproduction in Vietnam*, the language of choice can often conceal negative structural forces and inequalities (Gammeltoft 2014: 15-16). For example, drug addiction is widely seen in the American imagination as a “choice,” allowing people to ignore the structural forces behind drug addiction. Despite the sometimes upsetting reality, Americans view choice as an important part of their lives, even if the reality of their being able to choose is often a facade.

Many interlocutors associate the importance of choice with their being spiritual but not religious. In their interviews, they explained to me their *choice* to not identify with religion and create their own spiritual identity which they were able to choose for themselves. Here, we can see that they view themselves as having more agency over their beliefs as they are free of religious dogma or authority. Thomas C. Fuller explains how religion actually limits choice, explaining “Americans were free to choose whether they wanted to join a church and, if so, which church. But then their choice becomes more restricted” (Fuller 2001: 156). In this way, Fuller explains how after making the initial choice concerning which religion to join, people have very little choice in religion, or the church in this example. However, some of my interlocutors expressed their view that most children are actually not even given this initial choice. Eva, a college student who was raised Catholic, explained that children are encouraged into religion by their parents, like she was, and are thus not given a true choice. She was technically given a choice as to whether or not she wanted to make confirmation in the church,
but she felt that this was not a true choice due to pressures from her family. In this way, Eva sees religion as an institution which reduces one's ability to make choices for themselves. Therefore, Eva, like many interlocutors, associates freedom of choice with being spiritual but not religious.

Interlocutors described their being spiritual but not religious as very individual, private and free. Their own unique spiritual identity was often expressed as being practiced alone—often internally—and on their own terms. Additionally, interlocutors emphasized the freedom of choice which they experienced by being spiritual but not religious as they were not bound by religious rules or dogma. In this way, American cultural values such as individualism, secularism, and choice, may contribute to the rise in Americans who embrace being spiritual but not religious.

**Spirituality in America**

In order to understand spiritual but not religious people in America, it is important to understand previous definitions of religion. As previously explained, Emile Durkheim defines religion as a natural expression of society which gives social cohesion and solidarity (2008 [1912]: 34-47). In this way, he claims that all religions can be understood as valid and true because religion is simply a reflection of society, whose primary function is to provide cohesion and solidarity. Clifford Geertz defines religion as a structure which gives meaning to life and shapes a person’s daily experiences in his piece “Religion as a Cultural System” (2008 [1966]: 57-75). In this definition, he shows how religion is a core way in which people make meaning. In my research, I found that spiritual but not religious people also constantly use their spirituality to make meaning of life events, interpersonal interactions, and death. Therefore, it is important to consider spirituality, and not just religion, in understanding how personal beliefs allow people to make meaning of their lives and interact within their culture and society.
Before the 20th century, the terms “religion” and “spirituality” were nearly synonymous within American discourse. However, over the past one hundred years, spirituality and religion have come to hold separate and distinct meanings to many Americans, as described by Brian Zinnbauer et.al in their work *Spirituality and Religion: Unfuzzying the Fuzzy* (1997: 549-564). It is also important to note though that at the time of the study in 1997, Zinnbauer et. al. also found that the two terms were viewed as somewhat related within the American public, as “most respondents indicated that they consider themselves both spiritual and religious” (Zinnbauer et. al. 1997: 561). However, the percentage of Americans who identify as spiritual but not religious has risen greatly since the time of this study, indicating that the two terms may not be viewed as so related now as they were in the late 90s.

As explained previously, spirituality in America is often associated with the private sphere, mystical experiences, and personal and individual thoughts and experiences, whereas religion is associated with the public sphere, membership to an institution, formal rituals, authoritarianism and religious orthodoxy (Zinnbauer et. al.1997: 561, Putnam & Campbell 2010: 121, Roof 1993: 79). Therefore, Americans have described spiritual but not religious people as seeking the interior and individual aspects of spirituality, while rejecting the organization, public participation, and formality of organized religion (Marler 2002: 289, Zinnbauer et. al. 1997: 561, and Fuller 2001: 5, Roof 1993: 80-81). Theologian Linda A. Mercadante, who conducted a study of spiritual but not religious people in her book *Belief Beyond Borders*, further explains that some of her interviewees defined the religious realm as the “what,” meaning that it is more tangible due to its ascribed actions, symbols, or communities (Mercadante 2014: 5). Differently, the spiritual realm is seen as the “why,” or an area of “faith or belief that actually energizes and motivates [people]” (Mercadante 2014: 5). Generally, though she expresses that most spiritual
but not religious people define religion as the organization or communal aspect, while spirituality refers to a person’s personal life and faith which is characterized as highly individual.

The 21st century was not the beginning of spirituality outside of organized religion in America. In fact, the United States has a long and rich spiritual history which can be traced back to 1848, when the Fox sisters of Hydesville New York founded the Spiritualist Movement. Though spiritual practices of 21st century America might bring to mind images of crystals and meditation, the Spiritualist Movement founded in the late 1840s referred almost solely to the practice in which the living communicated with spirits of the dead or other extra human spirits and intelligences via human mediumship (Kyle 1995: 30). The movement was also significant in its existence outside of religion. Spiritualism thrived in America from the 1850s to the 1880s, and since then, has declined in popularity (Kyle 1995: 31).

Riding off of the success of the Spiritualist Movement, the Society of Theosophy was founded in the same state of New York in 1875. Co-founder of the society Helen Petrovna Blavatsky was born in Russia in 1831 and studied several religious and spiritual practices throughout her lifetime. Blavatsky founded the Society of Theosophy with Henry Steel Occot “as a response to the growing interest in occultism, spiritualism, and comparative religion which had developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century” (Pearson 2002: 241). Drawing from several spiritual and religious practices from across the globe, the objective of the society was to “collect and diffuse knowledge of the laws which govern the universe” (Pearson 2002: 242). Members of the society believed these laws to come from an “ancient wisdom” (Pearson 2002: 242). Described as “the single most important avenue of Eastern teaching to the West,” the society was one of the first to normalize the concept of reincarnation in American society (Kyle 1995: 34). Separate from the Spiritualist Movement, Theosophy was created as a society, with
governing principles, an organized set of beliefs, and an insular structure of governing. Therefore, “despite claims not to be a religious body, it has in fact provided for many of its members doctrinal and ethical teachings traditionally associated with religion” (Pearson 2002: 242). In other words, the society was careful to paint themselves as a non-religious body, though the structure of the society took on a similar role to that of organized religion.

The Spiritual Movement and Society of Theosophy were instrumental in inspiring one of the most influential and successful spiritual social movements in the past century: the New Age Movement. A popular mode for several different forms of alternate spirituality, the New Age Movement gained momentum in the 1980s, and continues to influence society even today (Chryssides 2001: 234). Originally created as a reaction against the institution of religion, many saw the New Age Movement as a response to the zodiacal Age of Aquarius. This was seen as a time of great upheaval and a change from the previous Age of Pisces which was characterized as a Christian era (Chryssides 2001: 234). The New Age Movement was also unique in its lack of “faith” in the orthodoxies and doctrine of Christianity, rationalism, high technology, routine living, and political establishments (Kyle 1995: 9). With its rejection of establishment and rules, the movement was often cited as a group of individuals as opposed to a uniform movement (Kyle 1995: 6). Despite being viewed as highly individual and widespread across all demographics, the New Age Movement was notable in its popularity among middle aged white women who were financially able to maintain a comfortable lifestyle and afford “new age activities” (Kyle 1995: 11). Furthermore, most “new agers” were fairly well educated middle class Americans who lived in urban settings. In this way, while being a part of a large social and cultural change, the New Age Movement was still fairly commercial, and thus possessed barriers to certain members of society, namely lower class and non-white Americans.
The Mindfulness Movement grew along with the New Age Movement and continues to actively affect American society. In its original Buddhist contexts, mindfulness is a life-long and strenuous tradition wherein ordained monks work within a framework of reunification and detachment in order to reach Nirvana, or the final transcendental state (Wilson 2014: 19). A previously lesser practiced aspect of Buddhism, mindfulness was introduced to American society in the 1970s by two Massachusetts born men who became invested in Buddhism during their time in the Peace Corps in Thailand. Raised Jewish, the men opened the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts in 1976 with two other women who were raised Jewish but adopted Buddhism, Sharon Salzburg and Jacqueline Schwartz. In an effort to make mindfulness practices more “appealing” to Americans, they made conscious efforts to downplay chanting and ceremony as well as aspects of Buddhist cosmology and belief; essentially stripping the cultural and religious history from the Buddhist practice (Wilson 2014: 33). Mindfulness practices became a huge cultural and commercial success in America, and by the 1990s, society saw the emergence of a variety of mindful practices were extremely different from their original context. These practices were anything from “mindful eating” to “mindful driving”. This movement was also largely responsible for encouraging the development of American Buddhism, which is an assortment of inward reflection, meditation, and mindfulness loosely related to forms of Buddhism practiced around the world, but stripped of cultural context, religious dogma, and history. It is important to note that while mindfulness and American Buddhism were originally inspired by different Buddhist traditions, they have become so appropriated, commercialized, and stripped of their cultural contexts that they now represent completely new sets of belief and practice.
These movements and societies display the rich history of spiritual practices outside of organized religion in America. However, if spirituality did not become explicitly seen as distinct from religion until the rise of secularism in the 20th century (Zinnbauer et. al. 1997: 550), how were the Spiritualist Movement and Society of Theosophy able to gain momentum in America as early as the 1850s? This certainly complicates the narrative that spirituality only became distinctly separate from religion in American discourse in the latter half of the 1900s. Due to the popular spiritual movements and societies which operated outside of religious institutions as early as the 1850s, it is possible that Americans have always viewed spirituality and religion as separate. However, this separation may have been in the doxa of American discourse, only to be explicitly discussed and therefore brought into the realm of opinion in the late 20th century.

Doxa is described by Pierre Bourdieu in his 1977 book *Outline of a Theory of Practice* as being “that which is taken for granted” (Bourdieu 1977: 168). He states how often “what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying,” and that certain ideas and beliefs are so accepted in a society, that their existence is never questioned or explicitly said aloud (Bourdieu 1977: 167). When an accepted fact in society becomes questioned, it is brought into the realm of opinion, thus leaving the field of doxa. A good illustration for this concept is the beliefs surrounding gender according to many Americans. It used to be, and still is for many, unquestionable and taken for granted “truth” that there were only two genders – male and female. When this “fact” became disputed in recent decades, it left the realm of doxa, and entered the realm of opinion. Though many Americans may still assert that there are only two genders, much of our society now views these assertions as opinions, not absolute truths. In this way, the gender binary left the realm of doxa and has now entered the realm of opinion in American society.
Similarly, the distinction of spirituality and religion as two separate entities could have been confined in the realm of doxa in America until the 1990s. The ability of both the Spiritualist Movement and the Society of Theosophy to be able to thrive as spiritual entities outside of religion alludes to the existence of this difference. However, if this distinction existed, it did not enter the realm of opinion until the 1990s, when researchers began discussing the small percentage of Americans who were spiritual but not religious. By questioning the existence of this group of people, researchers like Wade Clark Roof and Brian Zinnbauer et. al. may have brought the doxic distinction between spirituality and religion in the minds of Americans to the realm of questioning. Therefore, it is possible that the distinction of spirituality and religion as two separate entities has been present in the minds of many Americans far before the rise in secularism in the 20th century. While it is difficult to know whether this doxic distinction may have always been present, the idea that spirituality and religion were only seen as separate entities beginning in the 1990s must be reexamined due to the spiritual movements and societies which thrived in America beginning in the 1850s.

In this way, with its rich history of spirituality outside of religion, it makes sense that Americans in particular are likely to embrace being spiritual but not religious. Furthermore, if the separation of spirituality and religion has always been understood in the doxa of American society and culture, it is also possible that its entrance into the realm of opinion during the late 20th century contributed to such a sharp increase in Americans who embraced being spiritual but not religious.

**Who Is Spiritual But Not Religious?**

Most research about spiritual but not religious Americans has focused on quantitative aspects which give insights to the demographics more likely to be spiritual but not religious. For
example, Wade Clark Roof found that, compared with other members of their generation, “highly active seekers” were typically older, female, unmarried, highly educated, liberal, and white collar professionals (Roof 1993: 81). Similarly, in 2002 a group of researchers concerned with observing the overlap in spirituality and physical health found that spiritual but not religious people were (a) much more likely to be non-Hispanic or white; (b) younger; (c) less likely to reside in the South; (d) more well educated; and (e) less likely to be married (Shahabi et. al. 2002: 66). These works give integral insight into the demographics of the broad grouping of spiritual but not religious Americans.

As explained before, the sheer number of Americans who embrace being spiritual but not religious has grown significantly over the past few decades, from Roof’s 9% of respondents in 1993, to Zinnbauer et. al.’s 19% in 1997, and finally to Pew Research’s 27% in 2017. This steady rise in spiritual but not religious Americans since the early 90s has grown to a point where this group of Americans can no longer be categorized as a small subcategory of religious or spiritual identity; they have grown into a sizable group whose existence begs for further research and identification.

Spiritual but not religious people have also been examined in trying to define which generation or age group is more likely to identify themselves this way. In her book Belief without Borders, theologian Linda Mercandate sets out to examine spiritual but not religious people, whom she calls SBNR (2014). Mercandate finds that her interviewees are “inevitably affected by the events and thought patterns of the generation in which they grew up” (2014: 35). She thus separates her interviewees into the generational groups in which they were raised: the greatest generation (which she defined as born between 1901-1924), the silent generation (1925-1945), the baby boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1981), and Millennial (after 1981).
Though fairly arbitrary in which years they begin and end, the generational separations allows Mercadante to determine the generations most likely to identify as SBNR. She finds that the greatest generation (1901-1924) comprise a small portion of participants but concludes that Millennials (after 1981) comprise the smallest group of all and showed the least enthusiasm in being interviewed. The silent generation (1925-1945) makes up only about 10% of interviews. Baby boomers (1946-1964), the same generation which Wade Clark Roof studied in 1993, comprise the largest pool of interviews with about one third of participants. She notes their extreme enthusiasm about her research and explains that if she “had the tame, [she] could have interviewed two or three times this number” (2014: 38-39). Finally, Gen X comprises the second largest group of interviewees. In my research, two of my interviewees are baby boomers, two are a part of Gen X, and five are millennials or Gen Z (there is some debate about when Generation Z begins, and five interviewees were born during years which some say is part of the Millennial Generation, but others say is the beginning of Generation Z).

This separation by generation gives insight into not only the age groups most likely to identify as SBNR, but also the events and activities most likely to affect SBNR people. For example, Mercadante finds that the growth of rehabilitation centers during the 80s and 90s led many Gen Xers to discover spirituality through rehabilitation programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (2014: 42). Furthermore, having witnessed the televising of violent unpopular conflicts, Baby Boomers and Gen Xers typically hold a deep distrust of government which “persists today” (Gonyea 2011: 1). This distrust in government has been attributed to the tendency of these generations to distrust all forms of authority, including religious authority. In this way, different generations can be seen to have been affected by the different events they experienced growing up in their specific generation. This also builds nicely off of Putnam and
Campbell’s observation about how and why Americans, starting in the 1960s, have begun to separate themselves from religion.

Conclusion

It is likely that cultural values, previous spiritual movements, understandings of spirituality and religion, and defining events and characteristics of generations in America all contribute to why 21st century American are becoming more spiritual but not religious than before. American cultural ideals such as individualism, secularism, and choice shed light on the success of previous spiritual movements in America, as well as the current growth of spiritual but not religious Americans. Additionally, past spiritual movements and societies such as the Spiritualist Movement, the Society of Theosophy, the New Age Movement, the Mindfulness Movement, and American Buddhism show how the desire previous Americans have had to pursue spirituality outside of the confines of organized religion. In this way, cultural values as well as previous spiritual movements help provide important context in understanding why Americans in particular have begun embracing being spiritual but not religious.

Certain bodies of research, such as Zinnbauer et. al, suggest that spirituality only became distinctively separate from religion in American discourse beginning in the 1990s (Zinnbauer et. al. 1997: 550). However, it is also important to note that spiritual movements and societies which existed outside of religion have thrived in America since the 1850s. The existence of the Spiritualist Movement and the Society of Theosophy in the 1850s may suggest that Americans may have always viewed spirituality and religion as separate entities. In this way, it may be possible that Americans have long viewed it as possible to be either spiritual and religious, spiritual but not religious, or even religious but not spiritual. However, if this separation has always existed, it most likely lay in the doxa of American society. Examining how Americans view spirituality and religion and when the two became viewed as separate terms is important in
understanding how spirituality has developed in American society and led to the recent growth in spiritual but not religious Americans.

Most research concerning spiritual but not religious people has been focused on understanding who these people are. Using quantitative analyses, researchers have tried to understand which demographics are more likely to identify in this way and understand why numbers of spiritual but not religious Americans have grown recently. Theologist Linda A. Mercadante, building nicely off of observations made by Putnam and Campbell, suggests that Americans now are more likely to be spiritual but not religious than ever before due to the defining characteristics and events of the generations in which they grew up.

With a greater understanding of why so many 21st century Americans are increasingly embracing being spiritual but not religious, it is now important to gain further insights into the ideas and beliefs of spiritual but not religious people. In the next chapter, I will examine how spiritual but not religious people define religion, thus providing insight into reasons why they do not want to identify as religious. By examining and analyzing interviews I conducted, I shall begin to explore why Americans may embrace being spiritual but not religious.
Chapter 3

“But Not Religious”: Perspectives on Organized Religion

Elizabeth’s office smelled like incense. The scent was strong, and stayed with me after I had left, but it was not overpowering or aggressive. A psychic medium in her mid to late 40s, Elizabeth’s office looked how one may expect, with several plants and calming lighting that danced off of the cool colored walls.

“So, what are your ideas about organized religion?” I asked her.

“I think it’s about community for people,” she shifted in her chair as she actualized her clear thoughts into words. “I think organized religion is really about community, and I think a belief system is very powerful for people to feel safe.” Though Elizabeth’s parents were Catholic, she never went to church growing up, and her parents never tried to educate her in the Catholic faith. She explained to me how belief provides hope and joy for some, but as she went on, her expression began to change.

“I also see the other side of that. There's a lot of fear of other belief systems and shame with religion” She went on to describe how she had seen organized religion separate people, and how truly saddening that separation was to her.

“And so I think there's a lot of positive with organized religion because it can bring a very positive loving nature of connection for people in community, but on the other side of that coin, it can provoke a lot of fear and a lot of control, like if you don't believe what we believe or follow those rules, then you're wrong or you're going to hell and something like that.” Elizabeth paused, “It provokes fear in people and that's not why we're here. We're free to believe what we want to believe. We should have that freedom and hopefully have love be centered around that.”
Understanding how the spiritual but not religious interlocutors view religion is essential to understanding why many of the spiritual but not religious interlocutors made a point to assert themselves as “not religious”. In this way, we may better understand why a person may embrace being spiritual but not religious. With varying backgrounds in religion, each of the nine people I spoke with had definite personal opinions on religion. Most of the people I spoke with were either raised Christian (Catholic or some sect of Protestantism) and went to church (Taylor, Eva, Muriel, Kate and Mae), or had Christian or spiritual parents but never went to church (Jordan, Heidi, and Elizabeth). One interlocutor, Becca, was raised on a Native Peoples reservation and learned about spirituality from an older woman in her area. In this way, her practice as a clairvoyant was heavily influenced by Native Peoples practices, though she did not consider this to be a religious education. In fact, Becca had the biggest disdain for religion, most specifically the Catholic church, of any interlocutor. Though I did not intend for it to play out this way, this research mainly focuses on people with varying degrees of Christian backgrounds and is limited in understanding the beliefs of spiritual but not religious people who may have been raised in other religious traditions. Because of their familiarity with Christianity, when most interlocutors used examples to speak about religion in the interviews, they called upon their knowledge of Christianity. However, in speaking about the beliefs of Christianity, interlocutors indicated that they believed these things to be true of all religions. Therefore, regardless of their background, interlocutors presented opinions about all religions, not just the one in which they were raised.

Table 2. Religious Backgrounds of Interlocutors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Religious Background</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Religious Background</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Raised Catholic</td>
<td>Muriel</td>
<td>Raised Congregationalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Religious Background</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Raised Catholic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Not raised religious. Mother Catholic, father anti-religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>Not raised religious. Mother Catholic, father New Age and Buddhist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Not raised religious. Parents Catholic.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae</td>
<td>Raised Congregationalist</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Raised Christian or Catholic</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca</td>
<td>Raised on Native People’s reservation and educated about Native People’s spiritual practices</td>
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Some interlocutors made definitive statements they viewed as absolute truth, while several others did not wish to make blanket statements or major assumptions about how others engage with religion. Though each person had varying interactions with and opinions on organized religion, some major themes – community, rules, separation, and violence – presented as strongly associated with religion throughout the interviews. The aim of this chapter is to give a better understanding of how spiritual but not religious people understand organized religion and why they do not associate with it. Therefore, this chapter in part helps answer the question: Why might someone embrace being spiritual but not religious? Their definitions and understandings of religion also present a model of that which they do not wish to embody. Therefore, religion acts as their “other,” or the antithesis of their beliefs and actions. In this way, this chapter serves as an understanding of this group's “other” in attempts to better understand their conceptualization of “self” and their own beliefs. In this way, the attitudes expressed in this chapter reveal how some spiritual but not religious people define religion, while also showing the values and norms the interlocutors do not wish to associate with, thus giving the definitions of religion a dual insight.

I will first present a loose overarching definition of religion which reflects the major themes presented in the interviews I conducted, and then use the remainder of the chapter to
elaborate upon these themes and the definition as a whole. This is not an exhaustive definition of religion by any means; it is rather crafted specifically within the contexts of the people with whom I spoke. Therefore, it is an etic, or outsider definition. According to those I interviewed, religion is viewed as both an important source of community and also a divisive institution with strict rules which can be used to control people or even evoke fear, shame, and violence. In the remainder of this chapter, I will show how my interlocutors view religion as a strong source of community and feel that religion may hold a necessary place for certain people in society. Here I will build off of Emile Durkheim’s definition of religion as providing social cohesion. Then, I will explore the more negatively perceived aspects of religion such as rules, division, and even violence. In this section, I will use observations by Maurice Bloch and Webb Keane concerning rituals in religion. This non exhaustive exploration of attitudes towards organized religion by the people I interviewed gives insights into why these folks do not wish to associate with religion.

“It’s About Community for People”

Coming up on sixty, Muriel displayed a carefree spirit and a witty sense of humor. Though she described herself as a bitter divorced mother of two, joyous and kindhearted are words that I feel are more suitable for this woman so full of life. She was raised protestant, but in her young adulthood she began to realize that she did not resonate with the rules of organized religion. Though she described herself as deeply spiritual, she believed that the church, and organized religion on the whole, was a corrupt institution. Despite this though, when she and her ex-husband started a family, she found herself wanting to raise her children in a church community like the one she had in her youth. Her mind moving a mile a minute, she explained to me her religious upbringing, her disdain for religion, and her decision to raise her two daughters in a church.
“I kind of stepped back on the spiritual but not religious. I just let the church take over then, because I thought it would be too confusing for them to have nothing. But looking around, I knew I could raise my kids in the Congregationalist church, and have it be pretty open minded.”

Muriel and her husband Henry started looking for churches in which they would raise their two daughters. Henry originally wanted to join the Catholic church, but Muriel refused; she thought the Catholic church was too confining and rule oriented. Instead, she convinced her husband to go to a service at the local Congregationalist church which, according to what she heard, had a great children’s program. On top of the amazing sermon they experienced when they visited, Muriel explained to me the lovely coincidence that a family friend was the conductor of the youth choir. After that day, Muriel and her husband began going to that church Sunday, and soon they became very active in the community. Henry joined the choir and Muriel, despite her tumultuous relationship with organized religion, joined the women’s Bible study.

Then, the couple fell upon difficult times as Henry’s mom became sick and within a matter of weeks, passed away.

“About the choir…I think about the care they took of Henry. I mean, my Bible study ladies took care of me, but they really lifted him up too,” she paused and looked out the window while she recounted a memory, which was obviously fraught with emotion.

“We were driving home from his mom’s funeral, and he looked at me and said, ‘Okay, I got it. I want to join this church’,” Muriel’s eyes began to water. “It still makes me teary, because he finally got it. And that’s how we got started at church.”

After wiping her eyes, she turned to me and explained, “But I am also known to have said to the pastor, I just looked at him and I said, I can’t teach my girls your Bible, it’s unkind to women.”
Though she eventually left the church, Muriel’s continued gratitude for her church community was very apparent in talking to her. Out of the nine people I interviewed, eight of them emphasized the importance of community in organized religion. As Elizabeth said when asked about organized religion, “It’s about community for people.” Here, we can see how interlocutors describe religion as a communal practice, a community centered around a specific belief, an outlet for people to create community and find their place in society, and a way to bind people together. One young woman, Mae, even expressed how growing up her “people were the church people.” Not only did she feel a sense of community within her church, but in regarding them as “her people” Mae expresses the deeper level of kinship, one that bonded them together as one cohesive “people.” These views of religion relate back to the social cohesion Emile Durkheim discusses in his definition of religion. Durkheim describes religion as an expression of society which “gives social cohesion” and is the “epitome of collective life,” (2008[1912]: 47). Like Durkheim, most of the spiritual but not religious people I spoke with pointed out the strong interdependence between individuals of a specific religion which creates a strong community.

Though many of them did not personally want a religious community, several of the interlocutors individually explained the benefits of having a community centered around religion. Jordan, a senior in college, explained to me how their grandparents had recently become very active in a religious community, and how that was beneficial to them in their old age. Taylor, the college student who created a spiritual oasis in her mind, explained how she would never wish to abolish organized religions as they are “culturally rich spaces” for people to form a community. She also expressed her gratitude for being raised religious, pointing out how it gave her a vocabulary with which to engage in her beliefs and the beliefs of others, even though she personally does not identify with religion.
Like Muriel, another mom who identified as spiritual but not religious named Heidi also decided to raise her children going to church despite her identity as not religious. As shown before by Muriel’s draw to a church with a good youth program, and her emotional account of how her church community supported her family when her husband’s mother passed away, Muriel sees the church as an important community and support system for her family. Similarly, Heidi explained why she brought her family to church despite her opinions on the divisiveness of religion saying, “I wanted my kids to have role models. That was part of what really kept us there [at the church] for as long as it did. It wasn't what was being told to us, but it was that community and who was in it. I find that that's harder for my kids to find this on the spiritual side.” Heidi, like Muriel, finds religious institutions to be divisive and corrupt. However, both women emphasize the importance of community in religion, and shared a desire to provide this for their children. Both Heidi and Muriel, by wanting to raise their children in a religious community despite their negative attitudes about religion on the whole, show how many interlocutors viewed community as the most important aspect of religion.

“Religion Is About Control”

Though she raised her children in a church, Muriel was very eloquent in expressing what she viewed to be the negative aspects of religion. She explained the attitude she saw religions take in her experience:

It's you know, “We have a list of rules that make us better and separate from you.” And if you look at the founding of Jewish faith, a lot of Leviticus in the Bible is really their rules of how you live, how you eat what you wear, and it was to divide them from what they considered pagan. You know, you're establishing a new religion, you have to be different. You have to prescribe to something different that’s new from where you came. … It's just confining in that, “We're going to separate ourselves out and we're going to define ourselves with these rules and beliefs.”
The second most discussed aspect of religion in the interviews was the role of rules, and specifically the role of rules in creating conformity, control, and division. This gets into the more negative view many interlocutors tended to take in regard to religion. Most of the people I spoke with were either raised Christian (Catholic or some sect of Protestantism) and went to church (Taylor, Eva, Muriel, Kate and Mae), or had Christian or spiritual parents but never went to church (Jordan, Heidi, Elizabeth). One interlocutor, Becca, was raised on a Native Peoples reservation and learned about spirituality from an older woman in her area. In this way, her practice as a clairvoyant was heavily influenced by Native Peoples practices, though she did not consider this to be a religious education. In fact, Becca had the biggest disdain for religion of any interlocutor. Interlocutors described religion as demanding conformity in addition to the performance of certain rituals like praying at a certain time or washing one’s hands in a certain way. Mostly, interlocutors spoke of the rules within Christian traditions, however they also indicated that they viewed rules as demanding conformity within all organized religions. These rules were spoken about as very rigid, perfectly depicted by when Mae, who described her church community as her ‘people’, took on a demanding and parental like voice while, at the same time, wagging her finger to explain to me how religions say, “This is how it has to be,” in regard to certain rules. Maurice Bloch (1974: 55-81) explores the structure of religious rituals and their relation to authority. He finds that ritual and the language used in ritual is formal and repetitive, and thus restricts the choice of participants. Therefore, he concluded that, as Webb Keane so concisely states “ritual cannot primarily function to make statements. Rather, it is coercive: once participants have entered the ritual frame, they are committed to a pre-ordained sequence of events. The only alternative is the extreme act of rejecting the very premises of the ritual” (cited in Keane 2004: 439). My interlocutors generally seem to agree with Bloch’s
conclusions, finding the rituals and rules of organized religion to limit choice and assert authority. The interlocutors I spoke with did not present the rules and rituals of religion as well-meaning guidelines to encourage a harmonious community. Instead, they view them as utterly controlling and confining. Keane touches upon this, stating how often ritualized performances “downplay the agency of the living human participants” (Keane 2004: 442). As Elizabeth, who was not raised religious, told me “Religion is a form of control, guilt and shame for them to get your money and control you with.” Therefore, to many interlocutors, choosing to follow religion is somewhat synonymous with giving up one’s own agency and choice.

While every person I spoke with discussed rules and conformity in relation to religion, several also explained to me their view on how different religions possessed different levels of control and conformity depending upon how many sets of rules they have. For example, several people described Catholicism as the most controlling religion with the most rules, but certain indigenous or Eastern religions as less controlling, and thus a “better” form of religion. Muriel, in deciding where to bring her children to church, refused to raise her kids Catholic as her husband had wanted. Though she was not raised Catholic, she developed a negative view of the church which she indicated was most likely due to the scandals of the Catholic church which were highly publicized. She explained how she saw Congregational churches as more “open minded,” and thus a better fit for her spiritual but not religious self. Muriel also explained that Leviticus in the bible shows the rules which Jewish people had to follow, also indicating that she believed Judaism to be fairly controlling. On the other side, Heidi, a mother in her late 40s, expressed to me her appreciation, and self-described obsession, with Native Peoples’ culture and religious and spiritual practices. She expressed how she found them to be more freeing, closer to nature, and a form of belief “we should all get back to.” In other words, several participants
view religion as existing on a spectrum, with certain religions being more controlling than others. In this way, the interlocutors tend to see religions which they view as “freer” or “open minded” as the “better” forms of religion and seem more sympathetic to these religions and their followers. This seems to relate to the American cultural values of choice, as described before, and seeing institutions which many rules have too as limiting or controlling.

The existence of rules in religion was also seen as the main reason as to why many participants mentioned that religion was something that could be taught or passed on generationally. Eva, an inquisitive college student who was raised Roman Catholic, explained how “in religion there are set prayers you have to memorize, and they're set routines and you're supposed to go here and wear that. And when you have rules, it’s easier to teach.” By expressing the limiting aspect of rules (“you’re supposed to go here and wear that”), Eva does not view the rules of religion in a positive light, but rather a tool which allows religion to be taught to the next generation. In her freshman year of high school, around the time she made confirmation with the church, Eva realized that the religion she was raised in did not resonate with her. When she brought this up to her family, they were not supportive of her spiritual exploration outside of the church. She explained to me the idea that the religion a person follows could merely be a product of where and to whom they were born. While making note of how critical she sounded, likely due to her personal experience with religion and her family, Eva expressed how she often thought “like you're only blank because you were born in this geographical location or because you're born to this family.” Here, Eva expresses her opinions, echoed by several other participants, of how religion can be forced upon and often not chosen by young children. This idea of having religion forced upon a child from birth and merely due to chance shows a general discomfort many participants had with people not being given choice in religion. This plays into
greater cultural discomfort with lacking individualism or the perceived opportunity of making choices for one’s self. Therefore, while rules allow religion to be passed on generationally, interlocutors tend to view this inheritance of religion as taking away choice and agency.

Mae had a complicated relationship with religion. Though she grew up in a loving Congregationalist church community which she referred to fondly as “her people,” she found religion to be somewhat confining. Spirituality makes more sense to her now, and as she continues to grow in her spiritual identity, she has become more at peace with going to church simply to engage with her church community. Even still, though, she does not identify with religion itself. One of her main frustrations is that religion and its rigid rules separate people.

I feel like, a lot of times, we all get in places where we find something that's so beneficial for us and then we want to tell people about it. We say, “This is exactly how you do it.” But like, it's not the same for every person. And so, we want to say, “This is how you pray to God,” and “This is how you are Catholic,” and “This is how you are a Republican.” But that's not how everyone thinks about things. And so even though you have the same basic core beliefs, we don't all want to go about it the same way, and so putting rules on things splits us because we say, “I don't do it that way,” and “I don't want to do it that way,” and “That's not how it works for me.”

Here Mae explains how rules are put upon religion with good intent but have a negative impact due to her belief that everyone interacts with religion and its meaning-making practices individually. Building upon American cultural values of individualism, Mae seemed truly disheartened by what she viewed as the divisive reality of religion and its basis in rules. Throughout our conversation, she expressed to me the beauty she saw in religion, yet her continued disappointment in certain aspects such as separation and divisiveness. Muriel and Heidi also distinctly described religion as “divisive.” Muriel went on, “It's you know, ‘We have a we have a list of rules that make us better and separate from you, we're going to separate ourselves out, we're going to define ourselves with these rules and beliefs.’” To these three women specifically, religion, whether purposefully or not, actively separates people into those
who follow the religion, and those who do not. This separation is viewed negatively, as something which tears communities apart instead of bringing them together. This seems to combine into a view of religious communities as exclusive. In this way, religion is viewed by several interlocutors as divisive because it separates people based on adherence to religious rules.

“Most Nation-States Haven’t Killed As Many People as the Catholic Church”

The ceiling of Becca’s office was covered in dream catchers of all different shapes, sizes, and designs. The lighting was dim, and the deep colors of the room created a very calming atmosphere. As she signed the consent form for our interview, I complimented her signature.

“Thank you,” she looked up at me out of the corner of her eye, “left handed.”

She finished signing and slid the form back to me over the table. “Ah, there's another religious thing, to Catholics I come from the armpit of the devil. Like mythology teaches, and that's why the nuns used to tie kids’ hands behind their back and or beat your hand till it blistered or bled.”

Becca, now a fairly renowned clairvoyant, grew up on a Native People’s reservation in New England and identified as an “Indian woman”. She was not educated about Native Peoples practices by her family, but by an older woman in the town. It was with the help of this older woman that she developed her gift of clairvoyance. Having experienced prejudice from people in organized religion, especially the church, Becca had the most negative view of religion of all the people I spoke with. “Churches, they used people like me as examples and burned us alive.” With anger in her eyes she explained a past when churches accused women who were thought to be able to communicate with spirits of being witches. “They would come and burn you even if you didn't have a gift to see.” She did not find this violence within organized religion to be a thing of the past, though. She explained a story she had heard, “In 1921, a nunnery in Canada
burnt. When they were tearing the remains down, there were hundreds and hundreds of dead babies in the walls. These nuns had babies by the priest, and they killed them and plastered them in the walls.” She studied my reaction and leaned back in her chair. “I'm not judging them, …but it turns me off to want to trust such people.”

Becca’s personal experience and stories regarding religion’s past and present has led her to hold strong beliefs about religion as a violent institution. Though she spoke most frequently about her hatred of Christianity, Catholics in particular, she indicated a general distrust of all religions. This distrust of all organized religions seemed to stem from her hatred of Christianity. The story of the nunnery in Canada, shows how physical punishments were doled out to those who did not follow the arbitrary rules, as seen by her example of being left handed, and the violence against people who possessed the gift of sight. She also expresses how these punishments were inflicted upon rule followers and the most innocent members of society. Her story of the nunnery is particularly jarring because of this. Placing this not as a news story or historical event, but instead within the context of the interview as a story which reveals Becca’s understanding of the church, we see how Becca views religion as a wicked institution which takes violence upon the most innocent members of society. In this story, nuns who followed religious rules and devoted their whole life to following the church were repeatedly raped by a man who was supposed to represent purity and religious law. Even more haunting, innocent babies were killed in order to keep such violent and unspeakable acts secret.

Taylor also explained the violence of religion explaining, “Well my background is Catholic, so it's an institution with a lot of crappy background and you know, we have burned more people at the stake than any other religion that I know of. … Granted, most nation states haven't killed as many people as Catholics have.” Taylor as one of the youngest interlocutors
and Becca as the oldest interlocutor both brought up violent histories as reasoning for their distrust in organized religion. This shows how this idea of religion as an institution capable of inciting violence spans across ages and supersedes generational gaps, making it a commonly held attitude I was struck by.

Becca’s story also reveals anger towards what Muriel and Heidi called the “hypocrisy of the church.” By this, they described religion as an institution which preaches peace and kindness but is violent and cruel in reality. Just as Becca revealed the hypocrisy of the priest in her story, Muriel was greatly impacted by the hypocrisy she saw in her Congregationalist church growing up.

“I could see the hypocrisy in my church of people who said do the right thing and to be good.” She went on to tell me of a couple who were very important in the church community and seen as good religious people. The couple took in two foster children, and one of the children died by a brutal suicide. After this, it came to light that the couple was wildly abusive to the children they fostered. Muriel’s voice shook with anger as she recounted this horrible story. And what frustrated her even more, was that the wife would not let Muriel’s sister teach Sunday school because she lived in a house with men she was not married to, and that was seen as a sin. “So, I saw the assessors having affairs, and I thought, ‘This isn't what religion is supposed to be.’”

This explanation of hypocrisy reveals a belief which Becca and Muriel both held about religion, that one can be a good religious person, but still be a bad person on the whole. Therefore, in their understanding of religion, the institution itself does not encourage people to be kind and peaceful. Instead, it allows people to commit terrible acts. The severity and implications this view of religion had on Muriel and Becca cannot be overstated as it completely shaped their entire understanding of organized religion. The fear of violence and hypocrisy seen as allowed in religion, and specifically the church, according to several interlocutors – namely Becca, Muriel, Taylor, and Heidi – seemed to stem from a distrust in power structures or corrupt people being in charge. As Heidi expressed, “You really have to fall under the leadership of who is in charge.
I look at the different personalities that have come through and I think everybody meant well, but their leadership qualities definitely changed the tone. So, you imagine what can happen from well-meaning people in a small town, imagine the power and divisiveness on a larger scale.”

With Becca’s story concerning the bad priest, Muriel’s story of the violent couple, and even Taylor’s description of people being burned at the stake, it can be seen how each story reflects badly upon religion not because of what is taught by the religion, but because of wicked people who may be allowed power through the structures of organized religion, and specifically the church. Interlocutors seemed to use examples of the church to explain what they saw as universal negative aspects in all religions due to their exposure to mainly Christian institutions growing up. Therefore, it becomes apparent that many interlocutors did not distrust the actual values of religion. Rather, it is the structure of organized religion that they took issue with. This would make sense based upon commonly held mistrust among the boomer generation of organized structures like the government and religion due to widely publicized scandals and wars.

**Conclusion**

This chapter examines the overarching views of religion as expressed by nine spiritual but not religious New Englanders, five of whom were raised Christian, three of whom were not raised religiously, and one who was raised in Native People’s spiritual practices. This gives greater insight into why someone would embrace being spiritual but not religious by revealing negative feelings towards religion. According to the interlocutors, religion can certainly be an important source of community. All interlocutors except for Becca, who had personal negative experiences with religion, expressed an understanding that religion was necessary for certain people. These eight people all spoke of the importance of community in religion, building upon Durkheim’s idea of social cohesion. Muriel and Heidi both recognized religious communities as
so important that they both decided to raise their children in a church despite their general disapproval of organized religion.

However, these interlocutors also seen to understand religion as a divisive institution with rigid rules. All interlocutors spoke critically of all forms of religion. It is important to note that many of the particular examples which people used to explain their beliefs had to do with Christianity. However, many interlocutors indicated that they held these opinions about all forms of organized religion. It would be very interesting to see if spiritual but not religious people raised in different religions would hold these same opinions. Rules, division, violence, and hypocrisy were the most spoken about negative aspects. As Bloch and Keane discuss the role of ritual in religion as taking away agency and choice of religious participants, most interlocutors directly or indirectly expressed their frustration with the rules and conformity of religion. Even Mae, who tended to have a more understanding and positive view of religion, expressed frustration with this. Mae, Muriel, and Heidi went further to express how they viewed religious rules as divisive. The frustrations expressed by the people I interviewed seem to reveal their discomfort with organizations they viewed as capable of taking away agency and choice.

Finally, religion was described as violent or vicious by five interlocutors. Four of these, Becca, Muriel, Heidi and Taylor, explicitly told stories about the violence of the Catholic church. However, it becomes clear in their telling of these stories that what they view as violent is not necessarily the beliefs of religions themselves, but the people who are granted power through the structures of organized religion. In this way, they seem to be most fearful of the organized and hierarchical power structures which exist in religion. This reveals a deep distrust in organized structures not necessarily limited to religion.
Understanding how the nine people I interviewed view religion is essential in understanding why someone may embrace being spiritual but not religious. Through my interactions with them, I created a definition of religion uniquely tailored to their opinions and stories. Though not a broad definition of religion on the whole, this chapter reveals how the interlocutors understand religion. Also, by understanding religion as their “other,” or something which has been othered by them, this chapter gives insights into what values and actions interlocutors do not wish to embody or take part in. Therefore, this chapter serves a double purpose; it allows us to understand how spiritual but not religious people see religion, while at the same time showing us what they view as ‘other’ and thus do not wish to associate with. However, understanding opinions about religion is only one aspect to understanding why someone may be spiritual but not religious. The next chapter will examine how interlocutors view spirituality, and what role it plays in their lives.
Chapter 4

“Spiritual”: Understanding Spirituality and Its Daily Role

One day when Taylor was eight years old, she was praying in front of a statue of Mary with her mother in front of a Catholic church in their neighborhood. Suddenly, she became overwhelmed with the uneasy feeling that she was performing prayers for a religion she did not feel resembled her young self. At that moment, she decided that she was done with organized religion.

Taylor looked up at her mother and said, “Mom, I’m done. I feel like I’m part of a Jesus fan club.” Her mother laughed, taking in how utterly blasphemous it was to have this conversation in such a religious space. She looked down at Taylor.

“You know, I’m kind of done, too.”

After that, Taylor and her mother left the church and began their own journeys of spiritual growth and discovery. Taylor is now a college student who embraces being spiritual but not religious. She traces the beginning of her spiritual journey back to that moment when she was eight and decided to turn away from organized religion.

This scene captures the essence of being spiritual but not religious. Here, Taylor chose not to identify with religion, and went on to explore spirituality. But what is spirituality? And why did my interlocutors specify that they embrace being spiritual instead of simply calling themselves “not religious”? In this chapter, I will explore these questions based upon answers given to me by nine spiritual but not religious interlocutors. In understanding how interlocutors describe the important role of spirituality in their lives, I will also build upon the previous chapter in exploring why a person may choose to embrace being spiritual but not religious.
The definition of religion which I offered in chapter 3 has a limited scope of understanding as it came from a small cohort of subjects who reject the concept of organized religion as a whole. Therefore, this definition can be classified as an etic (outsider) understanding, and therefore it is limited in its utility to provide insights into phenomena falling outside an institutional setting. However, I believe the definition of spirituality presented in this chapter is more applicable to the experiences of many who live spiritual but not religious lives. This approach offers an emic (insider) definition, given by the people who identify themselves as “spiritual.” Based on interviews with nine interlocutors, this chapter argues that spirituality is an individual and personalized lived worldview and individual practice of meaning-making, which is fluid, free, and open and thus subject to constant change and transformation. To give a deeper understanding of this explanation of spirituality, I will first explore how the concept of spirituality is highly individualized and personalized by my interlocutors. Then, I will explain how fluid and free this concept can be in the lived experiences of my subjects. Finally, I will explain how spirituality is not fixed, but is in fact a constant and daily meaning-making practice that gives insight into ideas that many interlocutors discuss about an existence beyond the individual or material self, body, and lifetime. This was spoken about in terms of “energy,” “spirit,” “soul,” or a belief in a “greater power.” These aspects create an understanding of spirituality as an individual meaning-making structure which also serves as a lived worldview. Therefore, this chapter provides insight into why a person may not wish to specify that they are spiritual instead of simply calling themselves “not religious”.

“Everyone’s a Snowflake”

Jordan shifted in their chair as they tried to formulate an answer to my question.

“It’s kind of weird for me to talk about because I don’t talk about this often with people.”

Jordan is a thoughtful and inquisitive college student who rejects social norms and expectations.
They grew up in a split religion household, with one parent who identified as Catholic and the other who actively disliked religion on the whole. “When people identify as being religious, there’s a lot more community around that specific religion and practice around the belief. I didn't have that growing up. So, a lot of that was replaced by more individual practice and a lot of introspection and that kind of thing.”

Noticing their discomfort at their loss for words, I asked Jordan, “So how does it feel to try to put your beliefs into words now?”

“I just feel like I keep reaching a wall and I’m just not sure how to get past it. But it's strange because I feel like I know what I want to say, but I can't say it.”

This loss for words at how to describe their spirituality was a theme I found to be fairly common among my interlocutors. All but one of them expressed a difficulty to or a desire to not find the words to express their spiritual identity. Though I will delve into the significance of that in the later chapter, this also shows how deeply personal the subject is for most people. By personal, I mean that it is private and belongs to only one person. In this way, personal could also connote that it is something which a person holds to be very dear. Jordan felt like they could not find the words to accurately express their spirituality, despite often thinking about it. This shows how their spirituality is not something they discuss with others. Different from religion, which interlocutors view as a group activity, the people I spoke with regard spirituality as something so personal that it is not often spoken about with others. For many interlocutors including Jordan, their first time really speaking about their spirituality aloud was during their interviews with me. This further reveals how private and personal their spirituality is.

Furthermore, Jordan went on to explain how they wanted to keep their spirituality to themselves for fear that the interpretation of others may corrupt their spiritual ideas and beliefs:
I like to think about things and process things on my own, but I don't want other people to interfere with that. I tend to be very vague in talking about my beliefs because it's mine and no one can take that from me. I mean, there's some pride I guess in coming up with things yourself based on what you learn and read and see and hear. So, I wouldn't say something like that would be interpreted as selfish, but I would more consider it as a comfort, … like my own personal comfort.

“So, it’s like you're protecting it?” I asked them.

“Yeah, exactly,” they went on. “But there's also like the idea that I don't want other people to make their own assumptions or interpretations based on my thing, like I don't want to get corrupted.”

Here, Jordan’s desire to not share their beliefs with others shows how spirituality is very individual. The term individual seems to take on two meanings here though. The first is that spirituality is individual because it is unique. Jordan explained in their interview how their spiritual beliefs are a result of their own lived experiences and things they had learned, read, seen, and heard. In this way, their beliefs are individual in the sense that they are unique to their own experiences. Taylor, the college age woman who left the church at the age of eight, also described spirituality as individual and unique, saying, “Everyone's a snowflake. You know, we're all unique in our own belief systems.” In this way, spirituality is unique to each person’s lived experiences and backgrounds. This idea of everyone’s spirituality being like a snowflake draws strong parallels to how Robert Bellah and colleagues speak about Shelaism as a personal belief system outside of one organized religion (1985: 221). Sheila Larson, the person with which Bellah and his colleagues spoke, felt that her own belief system was so unique and catered to her life. Similarly, many interlocutors view their spirituality as unique to their life and experiences.

Spirituality is also individual in the sense that it is practiced individually. Jordan’s fear of others corrupting their beliefs is a great example of this. Because they see their spirituality as
something so unique to them, Jordan does not wish to share their beliefs with others for fear that their beliefs could be corrupted. In this way, they want to keep their spirituality just for them, or something to be practiced individually and not with others. Similarly, Muriel explained that her faith was “one on one with the universe,” showing that her spirituality was an individual practice. This contrasts with the group or community practice of religion. Therefore, spirituality can be seen as a personal and individual practice as it is both unique to each person and practiced but individually, and not with a group or community.

In being individual and personal, interlocutors also seem to understand spirituality as a personal practice and way of understanding their unique life circumstances. Spirituality is both something they “do” individually and not in a group through practice, and also something through which they may individually understand their unique life and experiences. In this way, through asserting its individuality, interlocutors show how spirituality may be a lived worldview, or a personal interpretive way of actively understanding their lived experiences. This individual lived worldview also allows for meaning-making, as will be described later in the chapter.

**“There Are No Lines”**

Interlocutors also described spirituality as fluid, free, and open: fluid in that it is not fixed, free in that it has no rules, and open in that it is open to all. Seven interlocutors brought up fluidity and the freedom to change as a very important aspect of spirituality. Jordan described this by saying that their beliefs were “subject to change at any moment and in any way.” Six other interlocutors said things similar to this during their interviews. In saying this, the interlocutors conveyed that their spirituality is not fixed. Because it is not fixed, spirituality was also spoken about as being in a state of constant growth. Elizabeth, the psychic medium, explained:
I learn through the clients that I see daily in my office. I learn through reading and exploring the world traveling. So, I find that spirituality and its practices are constantly showing us stuff, and that never ends. And I don’t think it should, you know. We’re constantly knowing more about ourselves every day. I'm 45, and I’m like, well, that's new. It never stops. It’s always going. And I think if we have that mentality, there's an acceptance that life is constantly showing us what we need to know, at any age.

By learning new things every day through her practice as a psychic medium and her daily life, Elizabeth shows that she is constantly growing in her spirituality. She explains that this is due to the fact that people are always learning new things about themselves and others. Several interlocutors seem to believe that they come from a place of not knowing and are thus constantly learning throughout life. As they learn more throughout life, they are open to growing and changing in their spirituality. In this way, spirituality connotates a general acceptance of not knowingness for many, and many interlocutors described a general striving to learn and grow throughout their lives. In this way, their spiritual practice is never stagnant as it is always changing with them.

Eva explained that spirituality is also fluid in that it is not fixed to anything or anyone. Drawing from her Roman Catholic upbringing, she explained in her interview that spirituality is “the polar opposite of Roman Catholicism where you literally have the structural administration. Spirituality is completely fluid and there are no ties binding anybody.” Eva went on to assert “It's very millennial. We are like ‘okay I’m just going to float around and pick up little pieces.’” This idea of “picking up little pieces” from different religions, cultures, or spiritual practices was fairly common among interlocutors and described by some interlocutors as “cherry picking.” This idea of floating around and taking what they like from different practices or ideas suggests that people who “cherry pick” never have to commit themselves fully to one idea or belief. Eva also describes how spirituality is not tied to a physical structure or any other people. This builds
further upon its role as an individual practice. According to Eva, not being fixed to anything or anyone, in addition to not being fixed in a set of beliefs, allows for spirituality to be truly fluid and thus subject to constant change and growth.

In the beginning of the interview, I explained to Mae how some respondents did not wish to use a specific word or phrase to describe their spiritual identity. She looked at me with a smile and said, “There are no lines to stay inside.” Later in the interview she explained how spirituality, to her, was all about “questioning everything and realizing that there are no limits and no boxes. That’s one of the really cool parts that spirituality allows room for that religion doesn't always, necessarily.”

While many interlocutors view religion as rule oriented, exclusive, or divisive, they see spirituality as free and open. Within the context of the interviews, describing spirituality as “free” means that it has no rules. When Mae explains the “lines, limits, and boxes” that don’t exist within spirituality, she is painting a beautiful contrast between spirituality and religion. These lines, limits, and boxes can be seen as different ways to describe rules, which she views as limiting. Similarly, when I asked Elizabeth about the difference between spirituality and religion, she said that the difference was about “freedom versus restriction.” Contrasting how many viewed the rules in religion to be restricting, spirituality was seen as free, or without rules or hierarchy of power. Muriel described how spirituality is “very freeing because it doesn't have rules and prescriptions,” and how this “frees you up.” She took this one step further by explaining that in being free, spirituality allows you to be a “better and truer version of yourself.” She attributed this to “not trying to be what they say you should be,” instead “you’re trying to be the best you can be.” In this way, Muriel views the freedom associated with spirituality to be helpful in making someone a better person. In describing spirituality as free and explaining how
this freedom allows people to become better and truer versions of themselves, interlocutors build upon cultural ideals of choice in America. In this way, interlocutors seem to show how spirituality fits more neatly into their lives than organized religion because of their desires for freedom, choice, and the elimination of rules.

Similar to being free from rules, spirituality was seen as open and accepting of all or non-discriminatory. As described before, interlocutors tend to view religion as divicine, meaning that the institutions actively create a separation between people. Interlocutors described how religions create this separation by splitting groups into those who follow the rules of a particular religion and those who did not. Spirituality was seen as opposite to religion in this regard as many interlocutors described spirituality to be accepting to all people and free of divisive rules. As Elizabeth said, “It’s the law of allowance with spirituality. Like, we really allow people to be who they need to be.” This acceptance seems to be based largely on the fact that spirituality is free of rules or hierarchy. Therefore, there is no way to separate rule followers from non-rule followers with spirituality because the rules simply do not exist. Elizabeth explained:

No matter where you came from, and how you were raised, whatever got you here, we're happy you're here. We don't look at what you're wearing or how you were raised. We just accept you, and there's something really powerful about that. Whether you're male, female, dog, cat, tree, you're accepted. No matter how you walk through life and how you got here, you're here. So, there's an acceptance with spirituality that is very loving, without judgment.

In this way, Elizabeth describes spirituality as non-judgmental in that anyone, no matter where they came from or how they have lived previously, may be spiritual. By painting this as a distinctly important trait of spirituality, she also further implies that this acceptance is not present in organized religion. What is also interesting is that here, Elizabeth uses the pronoun “we” to describe spiritual people. In this way, she seems to be implying that all, or at least most spiritual people, hold a common belief in acceptance of others— “whatever got you here, we're happy
you're here.” However, since spirituality is highly individual and personal, proposing that all spiritual people are accepting of others in their belief implies that despite its unique nature, spiritual people may have shared principles or beliefs. However, if these principles or beliefs, such as freedom and acceptance, do exist, they are most certainly not enforced by an organization or group of people.

“A Lot of My Spirituality is Naturally Baked Into My Life”

Eva was one of the first people whom I interviewed for my research, so when I asked her to explain to me how she practiced her spirituality, I was somewhat expecting her to describe specific rituals or actions. I had expected the practice of spirituality to look like what I had seen in mainstream media or on Instagram, with crystal practices, sage burning, or devoted time to yoga or meditation. Instead, Eva explained to me that her spirituality wasn’t ritualistic or practiced in a set time each day or week.

“I think that a lot of my spirituality is naturally baked into my life,” she told me. She went on to explain how, often, she didn’t even recognize when she was practicing her spirituality or even think, “Ah yes, that was a spiritual thing for me.”

“If you're a spiritual person, then you carry that with you day to day.”

“So, would you say that spirituality governs your daily actions?” I asked.

“Yeah. But I think it also seems more to me like your daily like internal stuff. Like the way you think and the way you plan and prepare. But religion does seem more action oriented. So, spirituality is more constant, more embedded in everything you do. But religion is like, you're going to sit down and pray.”

This description of spirituality as a constant daily internal practice and ever present way of understanding the world, and not a set of rituals or prayers, was expressed by all nine
In this way, we can understand spirituality as a constant internal practice and type of lived worldview; it is both a way of viewing the world and a constant practice of living in it. I had not expected this lack of ritual; I thought that people would explain how they set aside time each night for meditation, or how once a week they read their tarot cards. Instead, each interlocutor explained to me how spirituality was something they practiced constantly and how it affected their every daily action; it was not a set of specific actions. Though some people described certain spiritual actions, such as taking a long shower, doing yoga, or meditating, they still understand their spirituality as a part of their daily life. This was often described in the interviews as being “mindful” or “centered” in the present moment. Though many view their spirituality as naturally occurring in their actions, some interlocutors explain that they sometimes must actively work to practice their spirituality. For example, Heidi expressed “it's not something that always happens naturally.” She went on to explain that sometimes she could get angry or upset in her interactions with others, and during these times she would actively have to take a step back and focus on practicing her spirituality in order to calm down. Practicing her spirituality in this case may look like being mindful, re-centering, asking how she was meant to learn and grow from this adverse interaction, or understanding she could choose to let go of this anger or stress. In this way, spirituality is not action oriented in the way interlocutors explained religion to be. Instead it is a constant practice and way of understanding the self, others, and the world around them.

Several interlocutors described how they used their spirituality in their daily interpersonal interactions. Despite being used in interpersonal interactions though, spirituality is still seen as personal and individual. In using spirituality in such interactions, spirituality seems to be more of an internal and personal practice of reflection used in conversation with others. It is
not practiced aloud between the two people and is thus not a communal activity. Still, this shows how spirituality may involve social interactions. Heidi, Eva, Ann and Mae all described how they practice their spirituality in their interpersonal communications. In such situations, these women use their spirituality to reflect on their interactions, asking what they should take as a lesson from the interaction, or how they should be in control of their reactions to certain circumstances. Eva explained how she uses spirituality in her interpersonal interactions:

It’s just being in tune with where people are coming from, and tone of voice and behavior. And kind of just being a little bit more inquisitive and intuitive about that... That's when I'm way better at practicing my intuition and kind of being able to sense what's going on with other people. I think that for me, spirituality is kind of like looking beyond what I am having immediately in front of me and being like, “Well, why are these people like acting this way?” Or like, “Why is this happening?” I'm kind of just being a little more analytical into other people's behaviors and sensing where people are coming from.

Here, Eva explains how she uses her spirituality to understand certain situations or the behaviors of others. However, all of her spiritual work here is done internally and acts more as a mode through which she may reflect upon the interaction. This shows how spirituality may act as a lived worldview or a lens people look through to actively understand or, as will be explained later, make meaning of interactions or life experiences. Therefore, Eva shows how daily spiritual practices can involve interacting with others, while still being an individual and internal process.

While mostly an internal and constant practice and worldview, some interlocutors believe that spirituality may be practiced through the internet. Five of the nine people I interviewed—four of which were in their early twenties and one was in her forties—explained the role of the internet in the practice of spirituality. Heidi, a mother of three, explained her use of certain websites or online readings in the spiritual journey of herself and her children. She specifically expressed interest in Suzy Miller, a former pediatric speech pathologist who now teaches people via websites and webcasts about how children with autism are actually carriers of messages from
the spiritual realm. Heidi believes that the nature of the internet makes it an easy and accessible platform through which she can access spiritual materials and readings.

Different from online blogs or sites, Eva, Mae, and Kate all explained to me how they practiced their spirituality via Instagram. “There is such a hole of spiritual Instagram,” Kate explained to me. The term “hole” here refers to a deep well of information in relation to spirituality. Kate is a soft spoken woman in her early twenties. Though she was not raised going to church, Kate enjoys researching different religions and spiritual practices. Eva, Mae, and Kate all follow Instagram accounts with a lot of spiritual quotes, art, or practices such as numerology or astrology. Eva also explained that she sometimes watches YouTube videos of people explaining certain aspects of their spirituality. These women clarified that they don’t believe or follow all of what Instagramers or youtubers say about spirituality. Instead, they more like engaging with spirituality online in order to explore other opinions and ideas. If they end up finding something interesting, they may then incorporate aspects of it into their lives and internal practice. In different ways, interlocutors of different age groups practice spirituality online.

“It’s All About Meaning-making”

In his definition of religion, anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains how religion allows people to make meaning of events in their lives. He explains that a main function of religion is to make sense of the seemingly meaningless suffering and pain inevitable in human life by “relating man’s sphere of existence to a wider sphere” (Geertz 2008 [1966]: 68). Similarly, my interlocutors view spirituality as a process of making meaning. As Taylor said, spirituality is “all about meaning-making.” This meaning-making takes place both in interpersonal or daily interactions, but also in a more intangible belief of existence beyond a person's singular and material body or lifetime.
One way of making meaning is through reflection and personal understanding of interpersonal interactions. This idea of connecting with others reveals a general belief in something greater than one’s individual self. Several interlocutors use their spirituality daily to make sense of their interactions with others, or even their general daily feelings and emotions. Interlocutors also possess belief in more intangible forces such as the existence of “energy,” “souls” “spirits,” “a greater power” and life and existence beyond death. In this way, spirituality allows people to understand their feelings and the feelings of others, while also providing some greater meaning to those conclusions and life events in general.

One very popular way of making meaning was through the idea of “energy”. Six interlocutors brought up “energy” in their interviews, and though slightly different in nuances, they all hold similar understandings as to what energy is and what it does. All six believe that energy is something which all people both possess and use. In this way, it is a tangible thing which is both a part of the body, and also something that can be used, usually to either heal or hurt people (e.g., “healing energy” or “bad energy”). Because people are seen to hold energy, several interlocutors make meaning of interactions with others through their understanding of energy possession. Heidi explained how she and her children “believe that people carry energy with them as well. And so sometimes your energies may not match. So, when people don’t make us feel good around them, a lot of times, their energy is just not on the same level as us.” In this way, Heidi actively uses her understanding of energy to make sense of why certain people don’t get along.

In the same vein, several interlocutors understand energy as being a part of everything, meaning that all things hold a certain energy. Elizabeth explained to me her detailed understanding of energy and how it takes different forms in physical and nonphysical objects.
There’s high vibrational energy that is moving at the speed of light, and then there’s very dense energy. So, if we were to break that down, I would tell you that the table that we have in front of ourselves is a very dense energy so I can touch it and feel it. But if you were to put a microscope to this, there are even particles and space between those particles that are constantly moving, but they’re moving very, very slow. If we take the higher end of that, our thoughts are an energy form, but we can’t touch them. Yet they’re very real to creating things in our life and manifesting. So, everything holds its own vibration energy and has its own variation of energy and vibration. So, energy is just constantly moving and transforming. It never disappears, it just transforms. So, for instance, when somebody passes away, their physical vessel may disintegrate and be buried or be burned, but the soul’s energy just transmutes and never leaves. It just changes form to a higher vibration.

Here, Elizabeth explains how she uses her understanding of energy to make meaning of several things such as how words and thoughts are so impactful yet intangible, and what happens to the soul when a person dies. In this way, Elizabeth makes meaning through her belief in energy as a force which everything is made of and contains.

At the end of my interview with Heidi, I asked, “Is there anything you think I should know about for my research?” I asked this question at the end of each interview, and always found the responses to be extremely fruitful and insightful. Heidi thought for a second, and then began to tell me of her grandmother who just turned 100.

“In the last 16 months, she has started talking about people or spirits in her room. And the reason I bring it up is because my mom doesn’t understand. I think that when energy or people start to come [to visit], it doesn't mean that you're going to pass any time soon but that you’re preparing.”

She explained how she believed that her Grandmother was seeing spirits in preparation for her death, and subsequent transformation into a spirit. In this way, Heidi seems to believe that spirit visitation is a precursor to the inevitable human transformation into a spirit. She said that her mother, a religious woman, was scared at this idea and feared Heidi’s grandmother’s
impending death. But Heidi’s grandmother, despite being visited by spirits, was extremely relaxed and felt no fear at these occurrences.

“I told my daughter, note that there is no fear around it. She's not scared of anybody being in there.” Heidi explained to her daughter that Heidi’s grandmother was not afraid of transitioning to the “other side”, as was a part of the natural cycle of the soul. “My kids don't even have a fear of it. They just know that this is just a natural evolution, and this is your soul contract, and this is what she is meant to do.”

Like Heidi, many interlocutors use their spirituality to make meaning of death. According to Clifford Geertz, religion is used to make sense and meaning of pain and loss (Geertz 2008 [1966]: 69). By making meaning of death, the interlocutors show how spirituality provides meaning-making abilities which are equally as strong as the ones provided in religion. Heidi’s interaction with her daughter and mother concerning her grandmother’s future death reveals that her spirituality provides a clear understanding of life cycles. She also shows how she understands death in a way that is meaningful and not frightful. Her mother, a religious woman, fears the death of her mother (Heidi’s grandmother). However, Heidi and her daughter are calmed by the spirits who had visited Heidi’s grandmother because they view the process of death as natural and beautiful.

As seen before, Elizabeth also uses her understanding of energy to make the meaning of death. She believes that the “soul” of a person never truly dies, but just takes a different form during death. This provides answers to a question many people seek answers to: what happens when we die? Though many religions provide answers to this question, the interlocutors show that spirituality also provides answers and meaning to death and dying. However, these two understandings of energy and the soul are not the only ways in which interlocutors make
meaning of death. In fact, Jordan does not use ideas about energy or spirits to understand and make sense of death at all. Jordan instead explained to me that death was something which they viewed as predictable and was therefore calming to them. They also viewed death not as an end, but a “process of transitioning realms.” Jordan does not make meaning of death through “energy” or “spirits,” but instead finds death to be meaningful as a unifying aspect of human life, and a process of transition.

In this way, spiritual but not religious people possess strong meaning-making structures through spirituality, though these structures may look different to each individual person. Therefore, we can see that these meaning-making structures are actively created by people, and not prescribed and fixed like they might be in many religions. This relates to how Wendy Cadge, Lynn Davidman, and Talcott Parson explain how religious identity can be ascribed or achieved (Parsons 1982:111, Cadge & Davidman 2006: 25). Similar to how people may not view their identities as ascribed, the interlocutors do not appear to have ascribed meaning-making structures. Instead, they craft such individual structures according to their own understanding of the world, and thus are crafted according to their individual lived worldview.

As seen with the complex belief systems about energy and human existence beyond death, many of the interlocutors appear to make meaning of their lives according to a belief in an existence which superseded the material and singular body or lifetime. While the understanding of what this existence is or looks like, most interlocutors are unified in the belief that people’s impact, actions, and existence are not constrained to the individual and singular material body and its life on earth. Interlocutors used the terms “energy,” “spirit,” “soul,” or “greater power” in addition to a belief in existence beyond death to convey this during the interviews. This existence is intangible and ineffable, so interlocutors struggled during the interviews to fully explain what
these forms of existence actually look like. Five interlocutors possess a belief in “spirits” and “souls,” both of which were seen as intangible forms of beings. The soul seems to be an invisible force which resides within each person. Elizabeth and Heidi both explained how the soul of a person, which resides in the physical body during a person's life, exists beyond death, often as a spirit. Similarly, spirits are forms which exist beyond death, meaning they either exist as non-human entities which are never born and never die, or that they belong to people whose physical bodies have died. Though intangible, many interlocutors believe that living people are able to communicate with such spirits—in fact two interlocutors, Elizabeth (Psychic and medium) and Becca (clairvoyant), possess the ability to perform such communication.

Five interlocutors also believe in something which they call a “higher power.” Eva described this “power” as giving a “rhyme or reason to what's going on in the world and why my life ended up the way that it did.” This power is also intangible, invisible, and ineffable. Mae even explained that some religious people used the word “God” to describe this higher power. This power often helps interlocutors make sense of why things happen the way they do and provides meaning and validity to life events. However, this “greater power” does not have a more specific name according to the five interlocutors who discussed it and as this “power” is incredibly ineffable.

Interlocutors believe these forces to be completely intangible. For example, Elizabeth frequently discussed the “non-physical” during her interview. She views it as both a place, and a state of existence. In this way, she would refer to things existing in a “non-physical” realm, such as spirits or energy. However, she would also explain spirits and energy as being non-physical themselves. Whether the term connotes a place or a state of existence, Elizabeth and several other interlocutors show how important this intangibility and lack of physical or material
representation is in their belief structures. In this way, through the terms “energy,” “spirit,” “soul,” and “greater power,” as well as descriptions of existence beyond death, interlocutors show how they make meaning of their lives through intangible and ineffable forces. Through this, interlocutors also make sense of their belief in an existence beyond the material and individual body or lifetime.

The processes of meaning-making which the interlocutors possess valuable provide insight into why a person may specify that they embrace being spiritual instead of simply calling themselves “not religious”. Religion, as defined by Clifford Geertz, allows people to make meaning of their life events, including those which may include seemingly useless pain or suffering. Understanding this to be an important aspect of religion, it is possible that when a person describes themselves as “not religious,” others may assume that that these people do not possess complex meaning-making structures which supersede what is tangible in order to create meaning of pain and suffering. With these complex meaning-making structures – which are individual and unique to each person—being such an important part of spirituality, it is possible that interlocutors feel the need to assert their spirituality along with their non religiousness in order to convey their possession of meaning-making frameworks to themselves and others.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is to define spirituality as described by my interlocutors, and in doing so, also give insights into why a person may specify that they are spiritual instead of simply calling themselves “not religious.” Based on interviews with nine people who identify as spiritual but not religious, the concept of spirituality can be understood as an individualized and constant, internal lived worldview and practice of meaning-making. This meaning-making often stems from a connection with energy or a belief in existence beyond the individual and material body and self. Often described as “energy,” “spirit,” “soul,” or a “greater power,” these forms
of existence beyond the material self are intangible and ineffable. People also use spirituality in their daily lives to be mindful and centered, or to reflect upon their interactions with others or personal thoughts and feelings. Spirituality may also be used to understand death and dying.

It is important to note that while this definition shows spirituality and religion as distinctly different entities, a few interlocutors seem to believe that spirituality does not always have to be totally separate from religion; the two may be intertwined in some cases. Throughout the interviews, several interlocutors used a variety of metaphors to describe how in certain ways, spirituality and religion cross and intersect. Elizabeth explained how spirituality is like an open university, but religion is a specialized classroom. She also explained that spirituality is a vase, and religion is what some people pour into it. Mae said that spirituality is a big box, and religion tells a little story about it. Muriel views spirituality as the essence of what religion is built upon. Similarly, Taylor explained that spirituality is the spirit of religion. Eva said that religion channels spirituality. In this way, interlocutors seem to believe that spirituality and religion can cross and intersect, while still being distinctly separate entities. This is despite the fact that many seem to characterize spirituality as the opposite of religion. However, all interlocutors did agree that a person can be one and not the other, thus affirming their existence as being spiritual but not religious.

With a more concrete understanding of how a person can be spiritual and not religious, in the next chapter I will explore what it means to be spiritual but not religious in terms of identity and values.
Chapter 5

Identity, Ineffability, and Questioning: Exploring the Identities and Values of Spiritual But Not Religious People

The past three chapters have focused on why people are embracing being spiritual but not religious in 21st century America. Chapter two focused on reasons why interlocutors explicitly reject organized religion, and chapter three focused on what being “spiritual” means for the interlocutors. In this chapter, I will bring the two aspects (being not religious and being spiritual) together to explore the core values and sense of identity of those I interviewed. Therefore, in this chapter I will explore: what are the core values and identities of these spiritual but not religious people? Is the phrase an identity in itself? Do people who embrace being spiritual but not religious have any shared values? In my best attempts to answer these questions, this chapter explores the aspects of being spiritual but not religious described as most important by the nine people I interviewed. The first of these aspects is that the phrase “spiritual but not religious” is not a concrete and defined identity in itself, but rather a phrase which refers to a broad grouping of spiritual people who exist outside of religion. Instead of being an identity, the phrase “spiritual but not religious” is actually most often used to distinguish certain people from others.

However, many interlocutors also share certain values they possess through embracing spirituality but not religion, and several of these values are shared among those I interviewed. These common values do not give much insight into the individual practices and experiences of each person. However, several interlocutors brought them up as important subjects during their interview, making such themes notable. The first notable theme is a general shared desire to not define or label individual spiritual identities. Similar to wishing to be free of the doctrine, rules,
and authority of organized religion, seven interlocutors wish to be free from any confining labels and definitions of their spiritual identity. For some interlocutors, this desire to be free of labels spreads to other identities, mostly regarding gender and sexuality. Another aspect discussed in many interviews was a general commitment to questioning. By questioning, I mean that many people I question things often taken for granted or as absolutes, such as social and cultural norms and authority. In examining these themes, I do not wish to make sweeping generalizations of such a broad group of people. Instead, I hope to shed light upon themes and commonalities which interlocutors described as important throughout my interviews.

In this chapter, I will first explain how spiritual but not religious is not an identity. I will then explore how the phrase is used to create relational identities and create distinctions between people. Then, I will delve into the first theme which was discussed as important by seven interlocutors – a desire to not label or define their spiritual identity. This commitment to being free from labels and definitions of their spirituality seems due to the ineffability of spirituality and the view of definitions as limiting and fixed. In this section, I engage with Webb Keane’s explanation of ineffability and insights from Judith Butler’s performance theory. Then, I will explore the importance of questioning in being spiritual but not religious. Though the phrase “spiritual but not religious” does not appear to be a concrete identity, certain themes frequently which interlocutors discussed throughout the interviews – not labeling or defining their identities, and a commitment to questioning – give insights into what it may mean to be a part of this broad grouping of people which has grown so rapidly in the past three decades.

“That’s Like Saying My Identity Is So Generalized”

Taylor was the first person I interviewed. Before the interview, I tried to clear my head of expectations of what she might say or how our conversation would go, though I was unable to empty my mind completely. When I asked her how she defined her spiritual or religious identity,
I was a bit surprised to hear that she did not wish to define it. I asked “So, do you identify at all with spiritual but not religious?” She sat back in her chair and thought for a second.

“I think because the phrase ‘spiritual but not religious’ is so vast, it can’t encapsulate so many folks’ identities. It’s hard to say that that’s my identity because that’s like saying that my identity is so generalized.” She paused for a moment and smiled, “I’m just a spiritual being in flux. I’m confused and that’s my identity right now.” With that, Taylor laughed.

“Spiritual but not religious” is a phrase which describes a broad group of people who consider themselves to be spiritual, but who do not identify with religion. Wade Clark Roof was one of the first academics to identify a group who rejected religion but embraced spirituality in his 1993 research, though he referred to this group as “highly active seekers” (1993: 80). However, scholars mostly use the phrase “spiritual but not religious” in their research (as seen by Zinnbauer et. al 1997, Marler and Hadaway 2002, Fuller 2001, Lipka 2017). Additionally, Linda Mercandataade uses the acronym SBNR to describe spiritual but not religious people in her book _Belief Beyond Borders_ (2004). However, neither the acronym SBNR nor the phrases “spiritual but not religious” or “highly active seeker” resonates as a distinct identity to those with which I spoke. Instead each individual interlocutor possesses their own achieved, unique, and personal spiritual identities.

During her interview, Taylor explicitly stated that the phrase “spiritual but not religious” is not a concrete and defined identity which unites people or gives insights into the group’s beliefs and practices. Here I mean that when asked to describe their spiritual identity, none of the interlocutors used this phrase to define their identity. As Taylor explains, the phrase itself is “so vast that it can’t encapsulate so many folk identities.” Because the phrase is so broad, Taylor does not feel comfortable labeling her identity as “spiritual but not religious,” because that would
falsely imply that her identity is broad and generalized. Because my interlocutors emphasized such specific and nuanced explanations of how they interacted with their spirituality, they found that a phrase as broad as “spiritual but not religious” could never really serve as a meaningful identity. People may describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” in order to distinguish themselves from others, but they do not use the phrase to define their identity. This is likely due to the fact that, as Taylor pointed out, the phrase is so broad, and spirituality is so individual.

Though not an identity in itself, interlocutors use the phrase “spiritual but not religious” to distinguish themselves from others. Courtney Bender shows how a person's decision to identify themselves as “religious’ or ‘spiritual’ is largely dependent on the social context that she is in” (Bender 2007: 5). In this way, Bender shows how the terms “spiritual” and “religious” are used to distinguish someone from other members of society in certain social contexts. Similarly, interlocutors most commonly used the term “spiritual but not religious” to distinguish themselves from other religious or spiritual groups. When recruiting interlocutors, I asked each person if they would describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. I was the one who presented this phrase as a convenient shorthand which I had heard people use in describing themselves during social interactions. While I was aware that this phrase was likely indicative of much more complex identities, I initially thought, incorrectly, that the phrase may be an identity in itself because people use it so often. If a person responded “yes” to being spiritual but not religious, I asked if they would be comfortable participating in an in-person interview. I did not provide a definition of what “spiritual but not religious” was, because I wanted to hear how interlocutors described this category or grouping. Therefore, interlocutors situationally identified themselves with the prescribed characteristic of “spiritual but not religious” according to their own personal understanding of the phrase.
However, when I asked them to explain their spiritual but not religious identity in the interview, no one used those precise words to describe their identity, and many explained how “spiritual but not religious” was in fact not an identity. Instead, they explained to me their individual and complex spiritual identities. In this way, every one of my interlocutors used the phrase “spiritual but not religious” to distinguish themselves from others and set them apart from religious people or organized spiritual communities. They saw this phrase as being a better description of themselves than other phrases like “religious” or “spiritual.” However, none viewed this category as fully descriptive of their identity, and instead used it mostly to distinguish themselves from other groups of people. Muriel further explained how she often only used the phrase “spiritual but not religious” because it “is an easy thing to say to stop people from asking more questions.” Muriel also explained how she only used the phrase “spiritual but not religious” in interactions with others when she was trying to distinguish her beliefs from other spiritual or religious groups. In this way, Muriel perfectly exemplifies how this phrase is not an identity itself but is used to distinguish the self from other spiritual or religious groups.

“We Exist in the Undefinable”

When I asked Taylor to describe her spiritual identity at the beginning of the interview, she explained, “I think a big tenant is that a lot of us just don’t define it. I think that is a big part of this quote ‘grouping’ is that we exist in the undefinable, because shit is complicated.” She laughed. At first, I thought that the desire to not define her identity was maybe unique to Taylor, but when I conducted an interview with Eva, she expressed a similar desire.

“I hope this isn’t throwing off your research,” Eva looked at me somewhat apologetically as if she expected me to be disappointed by what she was about to say. “But I never quite think of my spirituality in terms of labeling. I don’t have a name for it. When I was in high school and gaining a mind of my own, and I thought ‘Catholicism doesn’t really relate to me and I don’t
really resonate with it,’ I really went through a period of trying to pigeonhole myself into a bunch of different things, but none of those felt exactly right. So, I usually don’t use descriptors or labels I guess.”

Being some of the first people I interviewed, Taylor and Eva clarified one of the most important yet surprising themes among most of my interlocutors: the desire to not define or label their individual spiritual identities. Though all interlocutors initially labeled themselves as spiritual but not religious in agreeing to be interviewed for my research, none described their identity with this exact phrase. In fact, seven interlocutors expressed an active desire to not define or label their identity. This can be seen as a rejection of ascribed identities. Talcott Parsons explains that identities may be “achieved” or “ascribed” meaning that they require active performance, or they are assigned to a person as soon as birth (Parsons 1982: 111). Wendy Cadge and Lynn Davidman further explain that a person can have a mix of both “ascribed” and “achieved” identities in terms of religion (2006: 1-37). With this in mind, interlocutors appear to fiercely reject ascribed identities. Taylor and Eva’s explanations (as well as the explanations of fives) show how, within the spiritual but not religious grouping, there may be a common desire to not define or label individual spiritual identities. This desire to reject ascribed identities and labels in general may be due to two things: the ineffability of spirituality, and the idea that definitions are limiting and fixed.

When I asked Becca, a clairvoyant who grew up on a Native People’s reservation, how she would describe her spiritual identity, her thoughts and frustrations flowed out of her like the water in the small fountain she kept in the corner of her dimly lit office.

“You just can't describe this,” seemingly at a loss for words, she looked around at the dream catchers hanging from the ceiling. “Do you know what it's like to sit here and walk
through you and go to your bedroom and see everything? I can go through your mind if I need to and see something in your dorm or your class. I can walk through your life while I'm talking to you, and you don't even know that I just left my body. Do you know how scary that's been for me?” She seemed frustrated at her inability to explain what her spirituality felt like and how it affected her on a daily basis. However, she was also quite certain that she could never describe her spirituality with words; no one would ever fully understand her spirituality except her. In this way, she seemed to view her spirituality as utterly ineffable.

Ineffable describes when an idea or thought cannot be fully explained with words. It usually refers to something that is almost too powerful or intense to describe with human language. In his piece “Language and Religion,” anthropologist Webb Keane explains how many religious people believe that “human language is an innately limited imposition on the ineffable or infinite” (Keane 2004: 439). Here, Keane explains the view that religion is ineffable and thus unable to be fully defined with words which are limited in their nature. Similarly, interlocutors believe that their individual spiritual identities are ineffable, or too powerful to be explained with limited human language. When Becca asserted, “You just can’t describe this” and then went on to try to explain her spirituality through feelings and experiences, she was expressing the ineffability of her spirituality. She did not answer my question about her spiritual identity with a concrete phrase or definition, but instead tried to paint a picture of it through feelings and experiences. Therefore, Becca shows how spirituality can affect someone on a daily basis and be felt deeply, but still be unable to describe with words. Mae also views spirituality as something which “supersedes definitions” or categorization. The word supersedes gives the impression that her spirituality is something so powerful and great that it cannot be explained with a simple
definition. Muriel further explained the ineffability of spirituality saying, “Words almost become meaningless. The more you try to define it, the farther away you are from the essence of it.”

“So, you think that trying to define spirituality is maybe even doing a disservice?” I asked.

“Yah, it waters it down,” she said definitively.

Here, Muriel speaks to what Keane says about language being an “innately limited imposition” (Keane 2004: 439). By saying that words “water down” spirituality, she shows how spirituality is something so powerful, that trying to define it with limited language can actually make it seem less grand or all-encompassing than it truly is. Therefore, she expresses the ineffability of spirituality through her belief that definitions do a disservice to individual spiritual identities by not being able to capture their importance and significance.

At the end of my interview with Jordan, I asked them if there was anything else they wanted to share with me.

“Just that my identities are definitely not fixed.” They went on to explain how they used to try to put their different identities – gender, sexuality, and spirituality—into different boxes during high school. “I don't know where I got the idea that I had to conform to these certain labels. At this point, I don't really label anything and I'm happy with that. That makes me feel good because I feel like I'm not restrained to a specific thing. Things are always changing,” they laughed. “Maybe tomorrow, I might disagree with half of the things I said right now! Everything is just constantly in flux.”

To clarify what they meant by this point, I asked, “So would you say that not having labels is a really big part of your identity?”

“Yah, for me that’s really significant.”
Here, Jordan explains how not labeling or defining their spiritual identity is very important for them. This is not simply due to the ineffability of individual, spiritual practices, though. Jordan, who describes a rejection of labels in all of their identities, explains how they don’t want to label their spiritual identity because “everything is constantly in flux.” They do not wish to label their spiritual identity, or any identity for that matter, because they experience their identities as fluid, while they view definitions as fixed. In this way, Jordan touches upon the other reason why seven interlocutors reject labeling their spiritual definition—individual spiritual identities are fluid, and definitions are not. Placing a fixed definition upon a fluid identity is a pointless and misplaced endeavor.

According to Judith Butler’s performance theory, identity is not an inherent thing which results in people’s actions, but something which is actively created through specific culturally defined performance. Butler outlines this theory in her book Gender Trouble to explain how people are not born possessing a gender identity, but instead must make gender by performing gendered acts which are outlined by a culture. In this way, she claims that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender. ... Identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990: 60). Using Butler’s theory, we can see how interlocutors create their individual and unlabeled spiritual identities by actively rejecting ascribed and fixed labels. In this way, they believe that spirituality, like gender according to Butler, should not be a fixed or inherent identity, but rather something which is continuously made.

When asked about why she did not want to define her spiritual identity, Muriel further explained her active desire to keep her spiritual identity fluid by not placing a fixed definition upon it. She expressed, “Once you fix it [your spiritual identity], you’re putting it in the death
state.” To Muriel, fixing one’s identity means confining it to a specific definition and rejecting the possibility of changing or growing over time. Muriel also explained her belief that once something is given a fixed definition, it is doomed to die. Here it seems that what she means by ‘die’ is that it will no longer have a place in her life or give meaning to her due to its fixed nature. Muriel seems to find meaning in fluid things, and therefore a fixed identity may appear to Muriel as unable to continuously provide her life with meaning. Here, she seems to suggest that the alternative to growth is death, and therefore, she strives for continuous growth and identities which reflect this change and growth so as not to ‘die,’ which is synonymous with ceasing growth. In this way, Muriel clearly explains her strong aversion to defining her spirituality due to the fixed and deadening nature of labels and definitions.

Furthermore, many interlocutors expressed that their spiritual identity was not “free” unless undefined. For example, when I asked Eva whether she sometimes wished she had a definition for her spiritual identity, she explained, “I think it’s pretty freeing, not having a label. It’s something that I’ve become really happy about. I’m not having a limiting mindset, and I’m just being open to whatever happens or whatever new ideas come across my way.” Here, Eva explains how she does not wish to have a label on her spiritual identity because this allows her to be freer and more open to new ideas. As explained before, many described this association of freedom with spirituality as a very important aspect of spirituality. Therefore, in not defining her spirituality, Eva is keeping her individual spiritual identity truer to a general understanding of spirituality (as discussed in the last chapter) because she is actively trying to sustain its “freedom” by rejecting labels. By ‘a general understanding of spirituality,’ I am referring to the ideals and daily role of spirituality as described in the previous chapter (spirituality as a broad, individual, daily practice of meaning-making). In this way, interlocutors not only explain the
negative aspects of definitions and labels, but also the positive sides to rejecting labels, with the most positive aspect being freedom. This seems related once again to American cultural ideals of the importance of choice and freedom.

This desire to not label was not just present in the interlocutors’ spiritual identities, but also in many other identities for several interlocutors. For example, both Jordan and Eva questioned the need for labels in terms of gender and sexuality. Eva asked, “What does anything mean? What does it mean to be a man and woman if society is the one creating gender?” Eva further went on to explain how she often wondered if she identified as a woman in the way she did because that’s who she truly was, or because it was forced upon her by society. This shows how Eva’s desire to stray from fixed identities is not just limited to her spiritual identity. This also relates back to how identities, specifically gender identity, are not innately present, but must be created through performance as described by Judith Butler. Jordan explained how they did not like labels or conformity in any aspects of their identities. Discussed in the previous scene, Jordan does not see any of their identities as fixed. In this way, they firmly express that they do not identify with a label for their gender, sexuality, or spirituality. Four other interlocutors also expressed a general desire to be “non-conformist” and reject definitions given by authority or society in other aspects of their lives. In this way, it could be possible that people who fall broadly into a spiritual but not religious group not only reject labels and definitions when it comes to their spiritual identity, but also commonly regarding other identities – such as pertaining to sexuality or gender – as well.

This could point to a general desire of spiritual but not religious people to be unbound in all aspects of their lives. Most interlocutors reject being bound by doctrine or the ideology of organized religion. Similarly, they do not want to be bound to a specific spiritual identity, and
many do not want to create fixed definitions for their other identities. In this way, several interlocutors express general commitment to being unbound in their identities. This makes them appear freer and more individual, both of which are ideals which were very important to many of the people I spoke with.

“Age of Questioning”

About halfway through our interview, Eva expressed her belief that “people are in an age of questioning. They don’t want to fully commit themselves to one thing or another because they’re aware of so many more options than there used to be.” This idea that people are living in an “age of questioning” was echoed by Muriel who said that this questioning was coming off of the “age of Aquarius” which she grew up in. By speaking about questioning as an important part of society, these women reflect how important the act of questioning is in their lives. Besides Muriel and Eva, four other interlocutors explained how questioning was important in their daily life. Though this questioning was described as taking many forms, the two most common things interlocutors questioned were authority and social norms. This questioning can be seen as a tool used to understand several aspects of the interlocutor’s identities which, like their spiritual identities, exist outside of the confines of authority, norms, and expectations.

One of the most important things that interlocutors question is the norms and expectations of their culture and society. This was often described by interlocutors as “nonconformity.” Jordan and Eva discussed this most frequently in their interviews. Jordan seems to hold this general commitment to questioning as something important to them in all aspects of their identity. This commitment questioning and nonconformity is likely a reason they as a Goth. One day a few years ago, Jordan was listening to punk rock in their room. Though they had heard the music before, in that moment they really listened to what the lyrics were saying and thought, “This makes sense to me. They’re critiquing society and society’s standards,
and I like that, that's really validating.” After that, Jordan began joining Goth groups on Facebook and became active in the Goth community. They described this community as “a group of nonconformist, because within the group, everyone is non-conforming.” In this way, Jordan’s identity as a Goth in addition to their being spiritual but not religious seems to stem from a general commitment to non-conformity and questioning norms. Similarly, Muriel fondly expressed her belief that spiritual but not religious people have general “conformity and commitment issues” in many aspects of their life. Four interlocutors discussed nonconformity and questioning of social and cultural norms as important aspects of their life, making it an important form of questioning for them.

Similarly, interlocutors seem to actively reject fixed and ascribed identities through this act of questioning and being nonconformist. Eva described how she came to understand her disbelief in religion by asking, “Why am I Catholic? Maybe I’m not.” Eva questioned her sexuality in the same way, asking, “Why am I straight? Maybe I’m not.” It is striking how similar the syntax of these questions and answers are. This shows that a very similar process of question formation may help Eva understand not only her spiritual identity, but other identities – which defy social norms – as well. In this way, Eva seems to question identities which she was made to believe were inherent and fixed. In doing so, she uses questioning to reject these identities and assert the fluid, ineffable, individual and achieved identities which she actively creates for herself. Therefore, the act of questioning may be seen as a way in which some interlocutors reject fixed identities and social norms.

During her interview, Muriel frequently compared her distrust of religious institutions to her distrust of the government. After she had talked for a while about the sex scandals of the
Catholic church and her frustrations with the war in Afghanistan, I asked her, “Do you think your distrust in political organizations and religious organizations are linked?”

“Well, I think it’s a coming of age,” she explained

“What do you mean by that?”

“I think Vietnam was a huge awakening, and people started to understand that you couldn't always believe that your leaders had your best interest at heart.” She went on to explain how the corruption in the government along with corrupt religious leaders like Jim Jones helped lead to her generation’s questioning of all forms of authority in the age of Aquarius. “People started questioning it all.”

Like Muriel, several interlocutors explained how important it was for them to question authority, whether it be religious leaders or the government. This was fondly described by Mae as a desire of people who embrace being spiritual but not religious in their daily lives to “fight the power.” This oppositional attitude seems to stem from a general distrust in rules and authority as well as a strong desire to reject such doctrine and rules. Similar to how most spiritual but not religious interlocutors reject the confines of rules in religion, or the power of religious authority, four interlocutors, including Muriel, possess a general distrust of authority. This distrust encourages interlocutors to critically question all forms of authority, but mainly the church and the US government. By invoking wars like Vietnam and Afghanistan, Muriel expresses a broad distrust in all powerful organizations. In this way, her questioning of authority is not limited to religious leaders. Additionally, Muriel reveals that questioning is an important tool which can be used in fighting against corrupt powers. While Mae revealed a general desire to “fight the power,” Muriel provided a method with which to fight; questioning. In this way, similar to how most interlocutors do not accept the rules or doctrine of religion, many see
questioning authority as an important way to reject the confines of rules and power seen by many as corrupt.

When I asked several interlocutors if they wanted to pass on their spirituality to their children or the younger generations, they all said no. However, six interlocutors explained that what they did want to pass on was their commitment to questioning. This shows just how powerful the act of questioning is in the lives of the spiritual but not religious people with whom I spoke. When I asked Eva about whether she wanted to pass on her spiritual identity to a younger generation, she responded:

In terms of passing down my specific spirituality or religion, I would say no. My spirituality is very personal to me. However, I do have a much younger sister and something that I do want to pass on to her is to question where your spirituality comes from and really think about what your own approach is. I think that people can just blindly follow something because the organizers are in front of them, and they can’t question it and think about what they really want. Just keep an open mind and constantly question and be amenable to different ideas.

Here, Eva explains how her personal spirituality is not able to be passed on because it is so unique and individualized to her and her life. Six other interlocutors shared this view, and many pointed to the fact that it was impossible to pass on a specific individual spiritual identity because spirituality lacks rules or rituals which can be taught to children. Additionally, the lack of labeling regarding peoples’ spiritualities poses a problem in passing it on. However, Eva still wishes to pass on an encouragement of questioning to the younger people in her life. In this way, encouraging questioning is more important to Eva than trying to pass on her specific spiritual beliefs. This further shows how important the idea of questioning authority and norms is to many interlocutors.

Similarly, Jordan responded that they wanted to pass down questioning and “the idea that people have the freedom to decide for themselves.” They further explained that they
wouldn’t want to pressure anyone into believing anything but would make sure that they would be “allowed to make their own decisions and that nobody should affect their decision making or their belief or practice.” In this way, Jordan shows that questioning allows people to make decisions for themselves. This relates back to previously discussed greater cultural ideals about the importance of choice and being able to make decisions for one’s self.

**Conclusion**

In interviewing nine people who embrace being spiritual but not religious in their daily lives, I learned a great deal about what being spiritual but not religious means in terms of identity and values. One of the most important aspects in understanding what it means to be spiritual but not religious is that the phrase is not a unifying or concrete identity in itself. Instead, “spiritual but not religious” is a broad grouping of people, and within this group, each person possesses their own personal and individual spiritual identity. Spiritual but not religious is not an identity, but rather a shorthand phrase which allows people to distinguish themselves from other spiritual or religious groups and is indicative of a much more complex and individual spiritual identity. Furthermore, interlocutors explained the importance of rejecting any labels for their spiritual identity and their commitment to questioning which was present in many aspects of their lives.

Perhaps the most important take away about the nine spiritual but not religious people with whom I spoke, is how individual they all are. From not wanting a unifying definition for their spiritual identity, to their desire to make sense of things for themselves without pressure from outside forces, the nine interlocutors I spoke with were true individuals who resisted the confines of labels, doctrine or ideology. Though they shared ideals and beliefs in common, their commitment to individuality makes it impossible to glean any sweeping generalizations about spiritual but not religious people. However, this inability to define or generalize this broad group
of individuals is significant on its own. As Taylor explained, this broad “group” is possibly best defined by their inability to be neatly defined and their existence beyond the confines of definitions and labels.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Understanding Snowflakes and Asking Further Questions

Throughout this thesis, I have explored answers to the questions: Why are so many people describing themselves as spiritual but not religious here and now, in 21st century America? Why might someone embrace being spiritual but not religious? What does it mean to be spiritual but not religious? What identities and values does this label convey? In exploring literature on spirituality in America interviewing nine people who embrace being spiritual but not religious, I have come closer to understanding answers to these questions, as outlined in the previous chapters. Yet, this research only begins to scrape the surface of the extremely vast and nuanced topic of spirituality in America.

I originally set out to examine how people who embrace being spiritual but not religious form community in the absence of organized religious groups. However, due to the interests of my interlocutors in talking about issues of meaning making, individuality, and ineffability, I quickly changed the focus of my research. In allowing interlocutors to lead the discussion on understanding what it means to be spiritual but not religious, I gained a deeper understanding of how their unique spiritual beliefs help craft their understandings of life, the self, and their relation to others. The interlocutors possess complex structures of meaning making which they individually craft through understandings of “energy,” “souls,” “spirits,” or a “greater power.” Additionally, many use their spirituality to be “mindful” or “present” during social interactions, encouraging a deeper understanding of their interpersonal connections. These forms of meaning making are similar to those presented by Clifford Geertz, who discussed meaning making as an important aspect of religion. However, the interlocutors distinctly make this meaning through
their spirituality, illuminating the meaning making abilities of individual belief structures which lie outside of the confines of organized religion. This type of meaning making through spirituality seems to be one important reason why people may not want to describe themselves as simply “not religious” but also clarify that they are spiritual. It seems that through this meaning-making process which spirituality provides, interlocutors are able to separate themselves from organized religion, while still having strong meaning-making structures within which they can exist.

Many of the people with whom I spoke also possess a strong desire not to label or define their spiritual identity. Though many interlocutors generally embrace calling themselves spiritual but not religious in social interactions and to differentiate themselves from other spiritual or religious groups and communities, this phrase does not serve as a unifying identity for the interlocutors. In fact, most interlocutors do not even wish to label or define their individual spiritual identity. This seems due, in part, to the ineffability of spirituality and the fixed nature of labels. A rejection of labels also reveals possibly the most identifying characteristic of the people with whom I spoke, and that is their individuality and uniqueness. Within the context of their embracing spirituality but not religion, individuality represents both the personal and independent practice of spirituality, as well as the uniqueness of each person’s spiritual beliefs as tailored to their own life and experiences. This is beautifully summarized by Taylor, who eloquently stated that in terms of spirituality, “everyone’s a snowflake”.

Building off of Taylor’s beautiful quote “everyone’s a snowflake,” perhaps we can best come to understand what it means to reject religion and embrace spirituality through the metaphor of snowflakes. Snowflakes are unique and individual, and though they may clump together in piles of snow, they maintain their uniqueness—no two snowflakes are ever the same.
Like snowflakes, each informant holds their own individual and unique form of spirituality which acts as a kind of lived worldview through which they may make meaning in life. Their individuality does not exclude them from being members of a society who maintain deep interpersonal connections and active ties within their culture and society. In fact, many interlocutors use their spirituality to understand interpersonal social interactions. However, like snowflakes in piles of snow, they maintain their individuality in all circumstances and reject any labels or definitions which would form them into what they view as a homogenous group. But snowflakes do not remain in their frozen crystalized structure forever. Instead they melt, and re-enter the water cycle, constantly changing throughout their journey from solid, to gas, to liquid and so on. So too do interlocutors assert the importance of the fluidity of their spirituality, leading to many of their rejection of labels for fear of stagnation and a fixed state. Interlocutors describe their fluid spirituality as constantly changing as they too change throughout their lives. These changes were often described as their “spiritual journey,” drawing a beautiful parallel to the journey snowflakes take through the water cycle. In this way, perhaps the best way to capture the nuanced individuality and fluidity of how the interlocutors described their spiritual beliefs outside of religion is through the metaphor of unique and individual snowflakes.

Looking Forward

As every student of anthropology understands, there is no permanence within a culture or society -- there is no total answer to any question, only findings which provoke further questions. Similar to how snowflakes never remain in a fixed state, our understanding of others, cultures, societies, and the world around us are always changing as we all continue to change. My interlocutors may understand this better than many people, as they accept how fluid are identities, concepts of self, and structures of meaning-making. And so, while my research provides notable understandings of what it means to be spiritual but not religious, it is important
to continue asking questions and examining spirituality within America as attitudes and understandings are always subject to change and growth. As Jean L. Briggs states in her ethnography *Inuit Morality Play: The Emotional Education of a Three-Year-Old*, “there are always new angles from which data can be analyzed. One question leads to another…” (1998: 210). While she is referring back to her study of how children make sense of the world around them through their relationships with others, the sentiment applies to all social science research. There are always new angles to explore and further questions to ask -- no body of research is exempt from being subject to change and growth. So, perhaps the best way to conclude my research is by presenting further questions I have collected throughout my time speaking with nine people who embrace being spiritual but not religious.

The first question I ask is related to my initial research question: if more people are rejecting religion and embracing individual spiritualities which they do not wish to label, what does this mean for the future of how Americans form community? How might this change our understanding of how communities are formed? While interlocutors were much more excited to speak about other topics, understanding how people form community or why people do not wish to form community is important for understanding structures within American society. Furthermore, with people rejecting labels and definitions of their spiritual identities, will more Americans begin rejecting labels in other aspects of their identities? How might this change the way future generations make sense of the self and belonging to groups?

Something which has also been on my mind during this research, is how a growth in people embracing spirituality and rejecting religion affects marginalized groups in America who may find empowerment and necessary community within their religion? Is this rejection of religion exclusive of marginalized groups? Most of my interlocutors were white middle class
Americans who did not rely on organized religion for community or empowerment. It is then important to consider religious structures which have provided communities with a place of gathering and empowerment, such as Black churches, Jewish synagogues, and Muslim mosques in America. Though Christianity was originally forced upon enslaved people from the African continent, through a series of reclamation processes, Black Americans created a form of Christianity which was beautifully and uniquely theirs. Black churches have served as meeting places during the civil rights movements and subsequent struggles as well as important sources of community for many. Considering this, how can we understand the rise in “not religious” Americans in relation to communities in which religion serves as an important source of empowerment and togetherness?

Lastly, in what ways will technology play a role in spirituality and religion? Several interlocutors described their online practice of spirituality. Furthermore, with the recent COVID-19 outbreak, many religious institutions have begun holding their services online. As technology continues to become more advanced, how might technology affect people's practice of religion and spirituality? Or might technology not play a role in personal practice?

The inability to fully understand or discover one fixed understanding of peoples’ beliefs or culture is inevitable. It is therefore important to continue to explore new questions and avenues of understanding within all aspects of life. Especially as more Americans turn away from religion and embrace spirituality, I urge people to ask new questions, explore different angles, and above all, listen to the individual and profound voices of others.
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