

Reincarnating Religion
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Millions of Americans are leaving church. Fewer than half now belong to a congregation, down from two-thirds for much of the last century. One in four now say they never attend services, up from one in nine a generation ago. What are they doing instead? Taking a walk in the park, talking of love, or arguing politics. Going for a run, strumming a guitar, or sitting still in meditation. Meeting friends for brunch in a neighborhood café. Linger over coffee and the Sunday paper at home, turning on the game, or simply sleeping in.

Adrift from the churches of their childhood yet immersed in currents of cultural change now shifting the shape and course of American religion, unchurched young adults are also taking part in alternative communities of character and practice. These channel a new spiritual mainstream reaching from yoga and mindfulness classes through environmental groups and fitness clubs to personal-growth podcasts and wellness regimens.

Are these “religious nones” so different from their parents? Are they indeed spiritual but *not* religious? They are being true to themselves, they affirm, in leaving churches that fail to meet their genuine spiritual needs. Organized religion, they charge, too fervently pursues money, power, and partisan politics. It imposes too many rules and claims too much truth in the name of God. Churches may do good for others, they concede, but you need not go to church to be a good person or raise good children. So hold two-thirds of “nones.” Yet nearly half of churchgoers agree! Most say they are “*both* spiritual *and* religious,” and no less likely than their unchurched counterparts to experience a deep sense of wonder about the universe and feelings of spiritual peace and well-being.

At once mystical and monistic in embracing inner light and boundless unity in a multiplex world, this shift in sensibility marks an experiential, expressive, and individualized inflection of religiosity rather than a repudiation of religion. It unfolds in modern moral dramas of quicksilver selfhood in search of authentic fulfillment in intimate circles of friends in touch with each other and the moment. It raises questions not only for religious leaders but for all Americans. Are we all richer in spiritual self-awareness or poorer in moral community? More open-minded or empty-hearted?

For those outside the pews “spiritual” now serves as a contrast term to organized religion itself, opposing authentic selfhood and soulmates to hypocritical institutions. In the pews it underscores personal commitment to move above and beyond the low threshold of routine religious observance to uplifting spiritual practices of prayer, contemplation, study, service, and witness that range from charismatic tongue-speaking to mindfulness meditation.

Among some health-care professionals, spirituality is “the way individuals seek ultimate meaning, purpose, connection, value, or transcendence,” including organized religion but extending “well beyond to include ways of finding ultimate meaning by connecting, for example, to family, community, or nature.”* As spiritual awareness spreads across institutions, it inflects the meaning

of religious beliefs and rites in substance by multiplying and dividing the varieties of spiritual experience in practice, thereby shifting what “ultimate meaning” ultimately means.

Since World War II more parents have raised their children to “think for yourself” instead of obeying authority. Although younger Americans continue to “believe in God or a higher power,” they have grown more convinced that individuals should form their own religious beliefs independently of religious institutions.** They should find their own path to spiritual freedom and fulfillment instead of keeping the faith by upholding denominational loyalties and orthodox creeds.

In fact, visions of a free, fulfilling life at one with nature and joined with others in wholehearted love and joyous play pervade American society today. We move to its backbeat, whether plugged into Spotify at home or out with friends at a concert. We see its videos on our screens and in our daydreams. It surrounds our daily round, saturates our senses, and stirs our imagination. In the endless, fun-filled flow of advertising and entertainment, streaming music and social media, these images and lyrics declare our personal independence, project our pursuit of happiness, and urge us to become who we really are by living the life of our dreams with the ones we love.

At the same time, many “spiritual but not religious” Americans identify with a religious group, a third of them Protestant and a sixth Catholic. They still pray and commune with God on their own, most say, and they trust their spiritual awareness or personal faith will thrive beyond church pews among like-minded friends and fellow-travelers in the wider world. Will that prove true? According to surveys since 2000, belief in God and the afterlife has declined among the unchurched, although their frequency of personal prayer has held steady.*** Meanwhile churchgoers have come to pray more often, believe in God no less surely, and trust in the afterlife more firmly.

Why leave church? Unchurched young adults answer by citing too many rules, too much stress on money and power, and too little care given to meeting spiritual needs. They criticize organized religion for rehearsing the regulatory regimes of modern schooling, work, and the marketplace as social structures and moral dramas. Seen in this light, churches seek paying customers, fee-for-service clients, diligent volunteers, reliable donors, and loyal constituents instead of genuinely embracing persons as spiritual seekers and fellow pilgrims, intimate friends and kindred souls, if not beloved brothers and sisters. Churches reduce virtues learned by living example to rules of programmatic action calculated to get results or conceived to follow abstract principles.

In response, we must ask, “What good is congregating?” Why go to church or synagogue or temple? Americans congregate for all sorts of good reasons in all sorts of happy settings—backyard BBQs and birthday parties, school reunions and Rotary banquets, car shows and concerts, ballgames and ballets. Across frontiers of faith and doubt, we congregate, too, in the face of crisis and consternation, in order to confess and lament, to seek and repent, not only to give praise and thanks. We seek understanding and peace of mind in the midst of unknowing, and grace in the face of despair.

In this diverse drama we remake time and space. We come to our senses. We open our eyes and hearts to what it means to come out of biblical bondage and into the promised land, to

die on Christ's cross and rise from the tomb, to let go of self-centered suffering and follow Buddha's middle path. Through exile and uncertain passage we find our way together from the forceful facts of cause and effect, fire and flood, infection and mortality, to the heartfelt arc of human motive and purpose, at once wondrous and mysteriously made, born and reborn, long lost and now found. We congregate first and last not to feel better or come to know it all, but to find forgiveness and grace, to come to know better, and do our best to seek the good in common.

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*International Consensus Conference on Spiritual Care in Healthcare, "Time to Integrate Spiritual Care in Health Care," *The Lancet, Regional Health. Europe*, vol. 28, 2 (May 2023). doi: 10.1016/j.lanepe.2023.100648.

**George Gallup, Jr., and James Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

***See, for example, Aaron Gullicksen, "The Diverging Beliefs and Practices of the Religiously Affiliated and Unaffiliated in the United States," *Sociological Science*, 5 (2018): 361-379.