

# Spiritual, But Not Religious

Understanding Unchurched  
America



Robert C. Fuller

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# Unchurched Spirituality

## An Introduction

The United States is arguably the most religious nation on earth. Public opinion polls indicate that more than 90 percent of all Americans believe in some kind of Higher Power. Sixty-two percent belong to a church or synagogue.<sup>1</sup> Most of us tend to think about religion almost exclusively in terms of these religious organizations. Yet this is hardly the whole picture. Almost 40 percent of Americans have no connection with organized religion. Despite their unchurched status, however, most nonetheless claim to be strongly religious or spiritual on a personal level. Any attempt to understand contemporary American spirituality must therefore look well beyond the boundaries of the nation's churches.

The purpose of this book is to explore the history and present status of unchurched religion in the United States. This is not an easy task. It is one thing to acknowledge the existence of unchurched religion. To define, categorize, and understand it is considerably more difficult. We can with some precision determine how many people

regularly attend church and how many almost never do. But many individuals fall somewhere in between. To complicate matters, some church attenders are very liberal in their beliefs and find themselves attracted to a wide variety of unorthodox ideas and practices. Meanwhile, many who don't attend church continue to draw on their religious backgrounds when they find themselves praying or when they construct stories about their own personal spiritual journeys. One sociological study documented how freely Americans combine traditional and nontraditional elements in their personal spiritual practice.<sup>2</sup> Among those interviewed in this study was a thirty-eight-year-old teacher who was raised Roman Catholic but now attends Mass only a few times a year. Despite her spotty church attendance, she considers herself a deeply spiritual person. She daily sets aside at least an hour for meditation. She has a home altar that symbolizes her personal spiritual beliefs. On this altar are eighteen candles, an amulet attached to a photo of her grandmother, amethyst crystals used in healing meditations, oriental incense, a Tibetan prayer bell, a representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and some other traditional Catholic items. This one woman's eclectic approach to personal spirituality conveys how difficult it is to define or categorize unchurched spirituality. Although we know that between 38 to 40 percent of the adult population in the United States have no formal religious affiliation, we have much to learn about the role of unchurched religion in Americans' personal spiritual lives.

### **| Three Types of Unchurched Americans**

We must begin by recognizing that the unchurched aren't all alike.<sup>3</sup> Some aren't religious at all. About one in every seven Americans is completely indifferent to religion. We often call these people "secular humanists" because they reject supernatural understandings of the world and instead rely solely on reason and common sense. There have doubtless been nonbelievers in every era of human history. Yet there is reason to believe that the social and intellectual forces shaping modern life have combined to make religion increasingly less relevant to the lives of many educated people. One such force has been the ascendancy of science as a way of understanding our world. Scientific education makes it difficult for some people to believe in the supernatural or accept the "blind faith" that religion often requires.

Many of us have also been introduced to the results of modern biblical scholarship that illuminates the human authorship of the Bible (as opposed to accepting it as divinely revealed). And, too, most educated people are aware of the role that cultural conditioning plays in shaping our beliefs and attitudes. These modern intellectual forces have prompted many to become skeptical of religious doctrines that claim absolute truth. This secularization process is clearly evident in Western Europe where most educated persons consider themselves secular and less than 10 percent of the population regularly attend church. Far fewer Americans are this secular. Survey results vary depending on just how this category is described and how comfortable respondents feel about voicing their dissatisfaction with religion to a stranger. It is probably safe to assume that somewhere between 8 and 15 percent of the total population can be considered wholly nonreligious.<sup>4</sup> Because these people consider themselves neither religious nor spiritual, they are outside the scope of this book.

A second group of unchurched Americans consists of those whose relationships with organized religion are ambiguous. This group would include both those who belong to a church but rarely attend and those who often attend church but choose not to join. About 10 percent of the population attend church more than six times per year but are not members of any church. Some of them may refrain from joining a religious organization even though they believe in its basic teachings. Indeed, it is possible that some unchurched persons are actually more religious than many of those who do belong to churches. They may, for example, be put off by what they see as the hypocrisy of many church members or be too upset over a particular church policy (or clergy member) to feel like affiliating. Still others may have moved to a different part of the country and have not made the kind of friendships that would make church membership comfortable for them. Of course, others in this group may be only marginally religious, attending only on special holidays. Then there are those who sustain nominal membership in a church but attend less than six times per year. Although they are usually counted among the churched, many don't really believe the churches' teachings. They might be motivated to continue such marginal connection with a church due to their family background, out of concern with social standing, or simply because they are timid about making a final break from religion.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps half of those with ambiguous relationships to

organized religion should actually be considered as belonging to the next group, which will be the focus of this book.

There is a third group of unchurched people. Up to 21 percent of all Americans are unaffiliated with a church, but should nonetheless be considered religious in some broad sense of the term. The largest group of the unchurched, then, is concerned with spiritual issues but choose to pursue them outside the context of a formal religious organization. These Americans can be described as “spiritual, but not religious.” To be sure, those in this category are not uniformly interested in personal spirituality. Some are strongly influenced by modern secular thought and have only mild spiritual impulses. Others, however, are deeply interested in pursuing spiritual growth. Wade Clark Roof has estimated that somewhere between 9 and 19 percent of the total adult population in the United States are “highly active seekers, or people for whom spiritual and metaphysical concerns are a driving force.”<sup>6</sup> These seekers, although unchurched, are much more concerned with spiritual development than the vast majority of churchgoers. They view their lives as spiritual journeys, hoping to make new discoveries and gain new insights on an almost daily basis. Religion isn’t a fixed thing for them. They fully expect to change their religious beliefs regularly. Importantly, the terms they adopt in their effort to understand such things as the nature of God, the essence of the human soul, and the practices that promote spiritual growth are almost all drawn from spiritual philosophies outside of our dominant religious institutions.

It has become increasingly common for such people to describe themselves as “spiritual” rather than “religious.” They feel a tension between their personal spirituality and membership in a conventional religious organization. Most of them value curiosity, intellectual freedom, and an experimental approach to religion. They often find established religious institutions stifling. Many go so far as to view organized religion as the major enemy of authentic spirituality. Genuine spirituality, they believe, has to do with personal efforts to achieve greater harmony with the sacred. For them spirituality has to do with private reflection and private experience—not public ritual. Those who are “spiritual, but not religious” tend to agree with psychologist Abraham Maslow’s belief that there is a potential antagonism between the private realm of religious experience and the public realm of formal religious practices. Maslow warned of the

threat to vital spirituality “when people lose or forget the subjectively religious experience, and redefine religion as a set of habits, behaviors, dogmas, forms . . . at the extreme [this causes spirituality to become] entirely legalistic and bureaucratic, conventional, empty, and in the true meaning of the word, antireligious.”<sup>7</sup> This idea became widespread during the last few decades of the twentieth century. One survey showed that as much as 54 percent of the population has come to believe “that churches and synagogues have lost the real spiritual part of religion.” One out of every three adults interviewed in this survey endorsed the still more radical conclusion that “people have God within them, so churches aren’t really necessary.”<sup>8</sup>

### What It Means to be Spiritual, But Not Religious

A large number of Americans identify themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” It is likely that perhaps one in every five persons (roughly half of all the unchurched) could describe themselves in this way.<sup>9</sup> This phrase probably means different things to different people. The confusion stems from the fact that the words “spiritual” and “religious” are really synonyms. Both connote belief in a Higher Power of some kind. Both also imply a desire to connect, or enter into a more intense relationship, with this Higher Power. And, finally, both connote interest in rituals, practices, and daily moral behaviors that foster such a connection or relationship.

Before the twentieth century the terms religious and spiritual were used more or less interchangeably. But a number of modern intellectual and cultural forces have accentuated differences between the “private” and “public” spheres of life. The increasing prestige of the sciences, the insights of modern biblical scholarship, and greater awareness of cultural relativism all made it more difficult for educated Americans to sustain unqualified loyalty to traditional religious institutions. Many began to associate genuine faith with the “private” realm of personal experience rather than the “public” realm of institutions, creeds, and rituals. The word *spiritual* gradually came to be associated with the private realm of thought and experience while the word *religious* came to be connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal rituals, and adherence to official denominational doctrines.

A group of social scientists studied 346 people representing a wide range of religious backgrounds in an attempt to clarify what is implied when individuals describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” Religiousness, they found, was associated with higher levels of church attendance and commitment to orthodox beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Spirituality, in contrast, was associated with higher levels of interest in mysticism, experimentation with unorthodox beliefs and practices, and negative feelings toward both clergy and churches. Most respondents in their study tried to integrate elements of religiousness and spirituality. Yet 19 percent of their sample constituted a separate category best described as “spiritual, not religious.” Compared with those who connected interest in private spirituality with membership in a public religious group, the “spiritual, but not religious” group was

less likely to evaluate religiousness positively, less likely to engage in traditional forms of worship such as church attendance and prayer, less likely to engage in group experiences related to spiritual growth, more likely to be agnostic, more likely to characterize religiousness and spirituality as different and nonoverlapping concepts, more likely to hold nontraditional “new age” beliefs, and more likely to have had mystical experiences.<sup>11</sup>

Those who see themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” reject traditional organized religion as the sole—or even the most valuable—means of furthering their spiritual growth. Many have had negative experiences with churches or church leaders. For example, they may have perceived church leaders as more concerned with building an organization than promoting spirituality, as hypocritical, or as narrow-minded. Some may have experienced various forms of emotional or even sexual abuse. Forsaking formal religious organizations, these people have instead embraced an individualized spirituality that includes picking and choosing from a wide range of alternative religious philosophies. They typically view spirituality as a journey intimately linked with the pursuit of personal growth or development. A woman who joined a meditation center after going through a divorce and experiencing low self-esteem offers an excellent example. All she originally sought was a way to lose weight and get her life back on track. The Eastern religious philosophy that accompanied the meditation exercises was of little or no interest to her. Yet she received so many benefits from this initial exposure to alternative spiritual practice that she began ex-



perimenting with other systems including vegetarianism, mandalas, incense, breathing practices, and crystals. When interviewed nine years later by sociologist Meredith McGuire, this woman reported that she was still “just beginning to grow” and she was continuing to shop around for new spiritual insights. McGuire found that many spiritual seekers use the “journey” image to describe a weekend workshop or retreat—the modern equivalents of religious pilgrimages. The fact that most seekers dabble or experiment rather than making once-and-for-ever commitments is in McGuire’s opinion “particularly apt for late modern societies with their high degrees of pluralism, mobility and temporally limited social ties, communications, and voluntarism.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally, we also know a few things about today’s unchurched seekers as a group.<sup>13</sup> They are more likely than other Americans to have a college education, to belong to a white-collar profession, to be liberal in their political views, to have parents who attended church less frequently, and to be more independent in the sense of having weaker social relationships. Quantitative data about how those who are “spiritual, but not religious” differ socially and economically from their churched counterparts is helpful. But it is difficult to move to a more qualitative understanding. We don’t fully understand how unchurched Americans assemble various bits and pieces of spiritual philosophy into a meaningful whole. We are even further from understanding how to compare the overall spirituality of unchurched persons with that of those who belong to religious institutions.

### Putting Unchurched Spirituality in Historical and Cultural Contexts

An important first step toward understanding unchurched spirituality is to realize that it has its own traditions and recurring themes. Surprisingly, few scholars or journalists have been interested in providing a broad overview of America’s nonecclesial religious history. There have, however, been some excellent studies of a closely related topic—popular religion.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, a great deal of the religiosity I link with America’s unchurched spiritual traditions can surely be subsumed under this heading. But the category of popular religion is far broader than what I mean by unchurched spirituality. Popular religion comprises religious beliefs and practices that, while not officially sanctioned by church authorities, are nonetheless part of everyday

piety. Examples of popular religion include athletes praying on the playing field, the use of artifacts associated with Catholic saints to obtain prosperity, or traditions connected with family celebrations of Hannukah or Christmas. Most kinds of popular religiosity are in some way connected with formal religious institutions and are thought of by laypersons as acts of piety consistent with these traditions. In contrast, unchurched spirituality consists of beliefs and practices that originate wholly outside our dominant religious institutions. It is a distinct category and needs to be distinguished from “unofficial” beliefs and practices that laypersons nonetheless associate with the practice of organized religion.

It is also important to distinguish unchurched spirituality from secular interests. It is not sufficient for beliefs or practices to function *like* a religion for us to consider them spiritual. Many secular activities meet some of the social and psychological needs often associated with religion (providing a sense of meaning, fostering inner satisfaction, building community). Some people find that membership in a bowling league or service organization provides a total sense of meaning, identity, and purpose. Although such secular activities may function like religion, they lack a distinctively spiritual quality. The psychologist William James developed helpful criteria for distinguishing between a spiritual and a secular orientation to life. In James’s view, spirituality consists of attitudes, ideas, lifestyles, and specific practices based upon a conviction (1) that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance, and (2) that union or harmonious relation with this “spiritual more” is our true end.<sup>15</sup>

These criteria help us eliminate many secular interests and activities that can become all-absorbing yet lack any concern with a larger reality. More important, these criteria can help us identify beliefs and actions that are distinctively spiritual, even when they have no overt connection with organized religion. Spirituality exists wherever we struggle with the issue of how our lives fit into the greater cosmic scheme of things. This is true even when our questions never give way to specific answers or give rise to specific practices such as prayer or meditation. We encounter spiritual issues every time we wonder where the universe comes from, why we are here, or what happens when we die. We also become spiritual when we become moved by values such as beauty, love, or creativity that seem to reveal a meaning

or power beyond our visible world. An idea or practice is “spiritual” when it reveals our personal desire to establish a felt-relationship with the deepest meanings or powers governing life.

Spirituality, then, pertains to silent reflection or coffeehouse conversations as much as it does to what transpires during a formal worship service. People find spiritual inspiration not just in sermons, but also in books and seminars about humanity’s creative potentials. A great deal of modern spirituality exists outside religious institutions, and even church members now self-consciously supplement their church’s teachings by “consuming” books, articles, or lectures that are decidedly nontheological. Indeed, recent research indicates that a sizable percentage of church members have little loyalty to their churches’ theological traditions.<sup>16</sup> Put differently, many church members have a great deal in common with those who are “spiritual, but not religious.” As Charles Lippy observes,

While many persons will become involved with a formal religious institution at least while they are rearing children, most assume that no single group captures the whole of religious truth; hence they are more likely to have a practical rather than affective relation to a denomination or similar body. They will remain part of the group while it functions to give some semblance of meaning, provides an experience of community, or offers opportunities for social contact. But they will not retain long-term loyalty once the group ceases to function in these ways.<sup>17</sup>

A major thesis of this book is that unchurched spirituality is gradually reshaping the personal faith of many who belong to mainstream religious organizations. Consider, for example, the fact that 55 percent of all church members privately subscribe to some belief pertaining to the occult (e.g., astrology, reincarnation, fortune-telling, or trance channeling).<sup>18</sup> Church members are also among the millions who avidly read such spiritual bestsellers as *The Road Less Traveled*, *The Celestine Prophecy*, and the *Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* and strive to integrate concepts from these unchurched sources into their overall worldview. Church members differ from the unchurched, however, in that they must deal with the cognitive dissonance created by their “dual allegiance.” Most do so by compartmentalizing their “churched” and “unchurched” beliefs into separate categories. They might define their formal religious faith as dealing with issues con-

cerning the afterlife while defining their other spiritual beliefs as dealing with issues that arise in everyday life, such as reducing stress, keeping healthy, or sustaining optimistic attitudes. And thus, even though they continue to be members of a biblically based religious community, their lives are enriched by unchurched spiritual philosophies.

It is important to keep in mind that church members also occasionally avail themselves of unchurched spiritual thought and practices. This book will focus, however, on the roughly 20 percent of Americans who develop a vital spirituality exclusively on the basis of nonecclesial beliefs and practices. Those who are “spiritual, but not religious” differ from their churched counterparts in two important ways. First, they have usually become dissatisfied with institutional religion even before their exposure to unchurched spirituality. Such prior dissatisfaction makes unchurched spirituality more likely to become a sole, rather than supplemental, form of religious understanding. Second, those drawn to unchurched spirituality show a greater interest in personal religious experience. Unchurched forms of spirituality often have a pronounced mystical dimension, which meets the important spiritual need of having a felt-sense of the sacred. Many Americans are dissatisfied with our materialistic culture and yearn for an existentially significant spiritual path. To the extent that unchurched forms of spirituality are able to generate an aura of mystical excitement, they are to this same extent likely to be embraced as attractive alternatives to existing religious institutions.

The history of unchurched spirituality in America is as long and textured as that of the nation’s denominational churches. In fact, those who today might describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” are heirs of a historical and philosophical lineage that goes back as far as the colonial era. Colonial Americans were especially eclectic when it came to their beliefs about the supernatural. While less than one in five belonged to a church, most subscribed to a potpourri of unchurched religious beliefs including astrology, numerology, magic, and witchcraft. By the Revolutionary War this supernatural curiosity was often combined with the free-thinking rationalism advocated by intellectuals such as Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. And, by the early nineteenth century, groups such as the Universalists and Freemasons sewed new seeds of religious unrest. The result was an outcropping of

several new metaphysical philosophies. Swedenborgianism, Transcendentalism, and mesmerism caught the attention of middle-class Americans whose intellectual progressivism and mystical hunger made them impatient with the seemingly encrusted piety of established churches.

By the late nineteenth century conditions were ripe for the full flowering of metaphysical religion in America. First spiritualism, then the New Thought or Mind Cure movement, and finally Theosophy refined the occult-leaning vocabularies of the century's earlier metaphysical "isms." These new metaphysical movements created an enduring tradition in unchurched American spirituality. Perhaps their most important legacy was introducing middle-class clientele to a wide range of "exotic philosophies" including Eastern religions, Native American traditions, and pagan teachings. Only a small minority of Americans have been interested in studying these exotic teachings in their own right. Instead, most have approached these novel systems with an agenda already defined by the nation's unchurched spiritual traditions. The same, too, might be said of middle-class interest in alternative medicines and popular psychologies extolling the powers of the hidden self.

Other scholars have produced in-depth studies of the various movements and philosophies that will be covered in this book. Nowhere have I tried to add new information about these groups. What I have attempted to show is how these diverse spiritual interests are linked as part of a larger historical tradition. My goal is to illuminate the common themes that constitute a "tradition" of unchurched spirituality in America. All evidence suggests that this tradition will have a continuing influence on American religious life. For this reason I am also interested in assessing the overall role of unchurched spirituality in American culture. It is, I think, appropriate to ask whether these unchurched spiritual traditions are capable of promoting a balanced spirituality. Most of the world's highly regarded spiritual traditions have tried to strengthen both our capacity for receptivity (i.e., contemplative awareness of our innerconnection with a wider spiritual universe) and our capacity for agency (i.e., moral action that makes us effective agents of wholeness-making in the surrounding world). Unchurched spiritual systems have an uneven record in promoting these dual spiritual concerns. They are, after all, frequently transmitted by persons who lack the training and theolog-

ical sophistication that many church leaders bring to these same tasks. And, too, their lack of a strong institutional base makes it difficult for them to help people sustain their spiritual enthusiasm or to connect persons together into a cohesive community. But we must also recognize that there are millions of Americans for whom church religion is no longer a viable option. These persons find themselves so emotionally or intellectually disenfranchised from institutional religion that they are not choosing between conventional and alternative spirituality. They are instead choosing between alternative spiritual philosophies or going without any spiritual outlook whatsoever. A good many of those who find themselves “spiritual, but not religious” have fought their way to a set of beliefs and practices that enables them to reject a purely materialistic view of life. To this extent, our unchurched traditions have enabled a sizable percentage of Americans to achieve as mature a spiritual orientation to life as can be reasonably expected in our contemporary world.