



Finding Faith

THE SPIRITUAL QUEST
OF THE POST-BOOMER
GENERATION

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

RELIGION, IT SEEMS, is everywhere in the news. Whether abroad in various war zones like Afghanistan or Iraq or in persistent crisis situations such as between the Israelis and Palestinians, religion plays a central organizing role in the events taking place there. At home, religion plays a role in seemingly everything from presidential elections to immigration (we're now seeing T-shirts and bumper stickers that ask, "Who would Jesus deport?"), to such issues as gay marriage, abortion, and the teaching of intelligent design as science in public schools. America, most polls show, is one of the most religious nations in the world, with upward of 90 percent of the population claiming to believe in God, and anywhere from about 20 to 40 percent of the population, depending on the poll and its methodology, claiming to regularly attend religious services. Further, religion in America has undergone a public revival of sorts since the 1980s, from the rise of the Moral Majority and the religious right to more recent efforts at federal funding for faith-based social welfare programs. This suggests that religion has taken a much more pronounced role in the everyday life of American society that is likely more extensive than most people realize, and perhaps a greater role than many people would desire.

However, despite the role that religion plays in the personal lives of individual Americans and increasingly in the public sphere, there continues to be both a lack of understanding about the importance of religion and a lack of knowledge about the particular beliefs of different religious groups, and how these

may motivate their actions in culture and society. Boston University religious studies professor Stephen Prothero has recently written a best-selling book about the average American citizen's stunning lack of knowledge about religion in general, and even about basic tenets of their own religious faith (2007). Prothero frames this as both a domestic civic problem and as a problem for international relations. As a domestic problem, he argues, it is virtually impossible to understand much of American history without understanding the role of religion and the particular beliefs that motivated such historic movements as abolitionism, women's rights, and civil rights. He argues further that in order to participate as a knowledgeable citizen in current debates about, for example, abortion, family values, intelligent design, and the like, it is necessary to understand the religious perspectives of those on each side of these issues. As a problem for international relations, he argues that we are doomed to misunderstand major international conflicts unless we understand the ancient differences between, for example, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. University of Southern California religion and media scholar and journalist Diane Winston has similarly pointed out that in the press, reporters often miss the significant role that religion plays in a particular story that may seem otherwise unrelated to religion. Winston argues that this isn't necessarily because journalists are hostile or suspicious toward religion, but that they fail to really understand how important religion is in the various stories they pursue. Winston argues that journalists "need to 'get' religion; not just its sociopolitical significance but also its ideas and beliefs—if they want to faithfully cover today's world" (2004; see also Beckerman 2004 for a similar argument).

On the other hand, other recent best-selling books that are much more hostile to religion have essentially called for a less tolerant view toward religion, at least in public life, and suggest that if religion were eradicated, the world would be a much better

place as a result. Oxford University evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, in a book with the less-than-subtle title *The God Delusion* (2006), has argued that the belief in God is essentially a “misfiring” of human mental processes that has no survival value in the evolutionary process. It is essentially a genetic—or his term, memetic—mistake, albeit for Dawkins a particularly costly one, in that in his view any good that religion has done throughout history is far outweighed by the evil and violence it has sponsored and motivated. Similarly, Sam Harris (2005; 2006) has written two recent books in which he suggests that if religion were subjected to modern rational and scientific standards, it would lose power and eventually cease to exist, because it is an irrational, primitive holdover that modern societies have simply tolerated, much to their detriment. Harris was initially motivated by the events of 9/11, and ultimately concludes, with Dawkins, that the world would be much better off without the influence of religion, as it has motivated far more evil than good in the world.

Our approach would be more in tune with Prothero and Winston rather than Dawkins or Harris, since despite what Dawkins and Harris argue, and regardless of whether they are right or wrong about the ultimate truth of religion, the point is that religion isn't going anywhere anytime soon. As such, both individuals and nations must come to at least a basic understanding of different religious perspectives and how these motivate the actions of their adherents, since religion continues to be one of the most fundamental organizing schemas that individuals and groups have for their lives and their actions in the world. As Prothero has put it, “religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil” (2007, 4). While this book is not about how different religious groups and individuals may order their actions toward any particular public or political issue, it is about how

different groups interact with, understand, and frame the relationship between the larger culture and their religious beliefs. We would suggest that if we can understand how groups such as we present here approach religion, it may provide a window onto other issues in terms of how and why they act in particular ways in a variety of different societal spheres, such as culture, politics, and morals, whether personal or social.

As important as it is to understand religion in the context of national issues and international relations, particularly in an increasingly globalizing world in which one's neighbor can as easily be Muslim or Hindu as Jewish or Christian, it is also important to understand how particular religious communities and traditions are currently responding to various cultural challenges and opportunities that they identify as confronting them. Although this book is framed around issues of Post-Boomer religious beliefs and, in particular, focuses on Christian groups, we believe that it is also helpful to think of the approaches/perspectives presented here as places where new and emerging forms of religious expression will start and then filter into entire religious institutions and belief systems. That is, all religions need to both maintain the faith of their young people and keep them in the fold, as it were, in order to remain viable—they can't survive on converts alone. Indeed, recent research suggests that the twenties-to-forties age range is particularly problematic for all religious faiths in terms of attracting and maintaining young believers (Belzer et al. 2006). In fact, many groups have had trouble doing this over the last twenty to thirty years, although others have been fairly successful. The point, however, is that efforts to attract and keep the younger generation committed to their faith and involved in their congregations will inevitably bring about changes in the larger religious institutions.

This approach allows us to imagine what the future of religious groups may look like (and we would encourage studies of other religious traditions to see if the schema we have developed

here might work, say, within Judaism or Islam) as they confront the challenge of making their faith relevant and accessible to the younger generations of believers. Also, we believe with Prothero, Winston, and even Dawkins and Harris that, as religion is one of the most important and, per Prothero, “volatile” variables in a globalized world, understanding how different groups approach their religious beliefs by implication provides a way for us to understand their approach to such larger issues as the kind of participation they encourage in the common culture, in the political and electoral process, and on larger social-moral issues, such as abortion, gay marriage, euthanasia, or other similar issues.

A related implication of our study is in how people are currently constructing identity and how they perceive and respond to legitimate authority. Post-Boomer conceptions of what counts as legitimate authority differs in significant ways from those of their parent’s generation, and as such may signal coming change in the institutions in which Post-Boomers are active. Much of this is certainly embedded in the emerging global capitalist system, where one can construct an identity from a seemingly endless supply of consumer goods, as well as in the effects of the digital revolution on how we create, appropriate, and disseminate knowledge. This then ultimately determines who controls knowledge, and thus who has authoritative knowledge, which in turn implicates how individuals work within organizations and the kind of authority they see as legitimate within the organizations in which they are active, and that they might establish in the organizations they may create. This is important for both religious institutions as well as nonreligious institutions. That is, if individuals can construct almost any identity they might desire, and can create knowledge and legitimacy on their own without having to rely on more traditional means of authority, such as established organizations with their own systems of hierarchies and authority, what might that mean for the

future of such societal institutions as politics, religion, and the family? It is conceivable, to bring this back to our specific interest in this book, that as Post-Boomers bring their own sensibilities about identity and authority into religious organizations, these organizations may undergo significant changes in authority structure and in what counts for legitimate knowledge and belief in the years to come.

These issues however are beyond the scope of this book and only serve to point up both the importance of understanding the next generation of religious believers and how their desires and demands may change the face of religion in America. Thus, in the remainder of this chapter, we want to lay out our basic understanding of how generations work and the particular life experiences that have been formative for Post-Boomers. Further, we will argue that Post-Boomers don't fit what we find in the literature on spirituality, and then introduce a new typology that we believe helps account for different types of approaches to spirituality. Finally, we will argue that a dominant theme that we find expressed in various ways across the typology is a new, emerging form of spirituality that will have a significant impact on how religion is understood and approached in the future.

POST-BOOMERS

Much has been written in recent years about the purportedly unique outlook of different generations in society, from the alienated "Generation X," to the more institutional friendly "Generation Y," to the ambitious "Millennials," and so on. As the expansion of generational labels has increased, the explanatory power of these ever more finely cut generational groupings has decreased, making it difficult to understand the essential differences between them. Further, these approaches, whether from members of these generations or from observers, treat each differently labeled "generation" as a monolithic entity that responds to different social and cultural stimuli in the same way

across the entire group (on these themes see, e.g., Coupland 1991; Strauss and Howe 1991; Howe and Strauss 2000).

In contrast to these approaches, we present a more simplified generational conception that we believe holds more explanatory power, and that provides a better interpretive frame for understanding the ways that Post-Boomers are pursuing their spiritual needs and desires. Rather than trying to wrangle out the subtle differences between how one age cohort acts or is characterized as compared to others, we locate the experiences of Post-Boomers in significant social and cultural developments that they experienced in their formative years and then develop a typology of different responses to these cultural influences in their spiritual quest. Thus, just as the formative experiences of Baby Boomers were colored by such things as Vietnam, the “sixties,” and in general a dramatic increase in their opportunities for individual expression, all of which resulted in a variety of responses from within that generation, so Post-Boomer’s formative experiences were colored by developments unique to their time and place in history and we should expect that they would have a variety of responses to these experiences as well, rather than having a singular response to challenges of a changing culture (see Mannheim 1952 and Schuman and Scott 1989 for this basic framework on generations).

Although we have previously delineated several formative and shared experiences of Post-Boomers that have helped to shape their understanding of the world and how they approach their religious beliefs and commitments (Flory and Miller 2000), we would like to point out two that are of particular importance here, and then suggest two more as being particularly formative to the worldviews of Post-Boomers. First, perhaps the most obvious experience of Post-Boomers is that they are the children of the Baby Boomers, who went through the revolutions of the 1960s, and then raised their children accordingly. Of particular importance in this regard is the questioning of institutions

in general that Boomers passed on to their children and a concomitant emphasis on the importance of pursuing one's personal journey, often without the benefit of any institutional affiliations (see Bellah et al. 1985).

A second cultural influence of the past several decades is subtler, but perhaps even more powerful. The world has become a global village. Post-Boomers grew up being exposed to multiple worldviews through media, schools, and in their own neighborhoods. For example, we expect that urban areas are populated with many different types of people, including immigrants from across the globe. However, this is also true in most suburbs today. What might be expected to be monochromatic suburban enclaves turn out to be fairly multicultural in reality, as urban and suburban areas are increasingly becoming one massive, sprawling geographic area, and immigrants are increasingly moving to suburban areas where there are jobs and good schools for their children. This increases the likelihood that children will grow up not only with friends of different races or ethnicities, but of different religious beliefs as well. Tolerance and acceptance of difference is thus a value for Post-Boomers, as their lives have been informed by many different perspectives and cultural understandings throughout their formative years.

Further, and related to globalization, the revolution in digital technology has provided access to multiple cultures and worldviews at the click of a button. This exposure has the potential to radically relativize our understanding of truth, or at least to reveal the social construction of belief and value systems. The current digital revolution has democratized access to information and images, and made that access interactive rather than passive. That is, digital technology, computers, cameras, cell phones (with cameras), and photography and filmmaking software are now relatively inexpensive and in widespread use. Further, rather than being passive observers of the products of these digital tools, people are now active participants in documenting

their experiences and producing, reproducing, and manipulating images, disseminating ideas (through blogs and podcasts), sharing music, and the like. Thus music, television shows, and movies are all swapped through digital networks and uploaded to various websites, often with their content manipulated along the way. Digital cameras allow just about anyone to be able to make a movie, create a photo essay or exhibit, or just provide a more graphic way to display or sell goods (on the nature of the new digital media, see Manovich 2002; Stephens 1998; on the effects of digital media, see Burnett 2005; Hansen 2004; Ryan 2003; Tapscott 1998). Media theorist Douglas Kellner has argued that “a media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities.” It is this new media culture, Kellner argues, that shapes worldviews, defining “what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil” (1995, 1).

A third formative influence is the failure and hypocrisy of corporate, political, and religious institutions to act ethically and in more than the most crass self-interest as they have pursued their own ends, often at the expense of their own employees and the public. Perhaps most obvious are the sex-abuse scandals among the priests in the Catholic Church, and also among evangelical ministers, where various sex scandals involving both heterosexual and homosexual activity have been uncovered. But there are also the many bribery and sex scandals of famous politicians, and of course corporate scandals that have ultimately brought about the failure of large corporations, costing people their livelihoods and their retirement savings, just so a few people at the top can enjoy even greater riches and status than they already do. As a result, Post-Boomers evidence a distrust and cynicism of large-scale institutions in that they are perceived to be completely self-interested and able and willing

to manipulate public opinion in the service of their own selfish goals.

A final influence is what many have framed as the results of “postmodernism” in society. This is related to globalization and the resultant exposure to multiple worldviews and religious belief systems through friends, media, and educational institutions, and has led to the classic response, “whatever.” That is, there seem to no longer be any universal truths, that what is true for one person may not be true for another, and it is all based on one’s own experiences, whether through religion, lifestyle, ethnicity, or “whatever.” This of course makes it difficult to maintain any sort of consistent religious belief system in one’s life, and ultimately presents a significant challenge to religious institutions not only in terms of their own truth claims, but insofar as it becomes ever more difficult to attract and keep people in the fold.

POST-BOOMER SPIRITUALITY

These formative experiences have significant implications for Post-Boomers’ approaches to religion and spirituality. Whether they are characterized as cynical toward or supportive of institutions, Post-Boomers do not tend to accept them unquestioningly. In our interviews and visits to different congregations and events, we have found that although Post-Boomers are willing to participate in religious institutions, they carefully choose the types of institutions within which they participate, they are more interested in the relationships and community that they find there than in the institution itself, and they can be somewhat fluid in their institutional commitments, often participating in more than one institutional setting at the same time.

Further, despite the fact that they live in a symbolically saturated culture, Post-Boomers have had as their primary religious experience a symbolically impoverished environment. Churches look like warehouses with little if any religious imagery, and

worship is organized around passive audiences that might raise their hands in praise to God but rarely if ever interact with each other or the sacred in any form other than a sterile, cognitive recognition of the Other. In contrast, and often in reaction to this model, we have found that there are many within the Post-Boomer generation who are actively seeking religious experience in different ways from their parents' generation, from reinvigorating ancient symbols and rituals within their own religious traditions to borrowing from other traditions and even creating their own rituals and symbols in the service of an embodied spiritual experience.

Beginning with Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* (1985), the dominant theme within the sociological study of spirituality in the United States has been the individual in pursuit of her or his own, often idiosyncratic, spiritual journey, especially as epitomized by "Sheilism." This individualist theme has continued in such studies as Wade Clark Roof's investigations of Baby Boomer religion (Roof 1993; 1999; see also Carroll and Roof 2003) and Robert Wuthnow's studies of small groups (1994) and of spirituality since the 1950s (1998; 2001). Taken together, these studies suggest that, particularly since the 1960s, spirituality has become decoupled from religion, with many people pursuing their own private, individualistic, and noninstitutionalized form of spiritual fulfillment where the individual quest for meaning takes precedence over membership in, or commitment to, the religious community.

More recent work, however, has begun to show that there is more to the story of spirituality in America. Historian Leigh Schmidt (2005) has shown that the individualistic strain of spirituality that Bellah traces to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and the American transcendentalists has often included a commitment to public involvement, usually to progressive social and political goals, and can thus provide a model for linking spirituality and public involvement in the modern

context. Similarly, Gregory Stanczak (2006) has identified an “engaged spirituality” where the individual has a personal spiritual commitment that includes active engagement in both transforming individual lives and larger social, civic, and religious institutions, and argues that an engaged spirituality functions to “permeate the boundaries” between the private/personal and the collective, and allows for “creative innovation for negotiating between private experience and public action or between spiritual transcendence and social praxis” (20).

The forms of spiritual quest that we describe in this book are more similar to the latter examples than the former, particularly in terms of Post-Boomers’ commitment to a religious community within which they seek a physical experience of the sacred and actively live out their faith through participation in their congregations and in service to the surrounding community. Thus, this *embodied spirituality* is both personal and social—Post-Boomers seek individual spiritual experience and fulfillment in the community of believers, where meaning is both constructed and directed outward in service to others, both within the religious community and in the larger community where they are located.

This experiential, community/other-oriented spirituality makes sense in the context of what others have written about those we are calling Post-Boomers. For example, Richard Florida, in his study of “the creative class,” which would include most Post-Boomers, certainly all we interviewed, emphasizes their pursuit of various experiences, not as spectators and not as in prepackaged experiences (such as tours, Disney, etc.), but as a product of their own creation (2002, 166–70, 182–87). Florida frames this desire as “experiential consuming,” where “active, participatory recreation over passive spectator sports” is favored, and includes what he calls the “indigenous street-level culture—a teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros where it is hard to draw the line between participant

and observer, or between creativity and its creators” (166). Similarly, different studies of the interactive nature of digital technology and image representation/production show that the observer, or better the co-creator or even re-creator, can participate in the creation, re-creation, manipulation, and dissemination of various digital media (see Hansen 2004; Ryan 2003; Tapscott 1998).

A NEW TYPOLOGY

Typologies of different forms of religious action in the world, such as Weber’s soteriological typology of mysticism and asceticism (1993: 166–83), or H. Richard Niebuhr’s five-part *Christ and Culture* typology (2001), which places different types of action on a continuum of resistance to cultural influences or accommodation to them, fail to capture the new empirical realities outlined above. For example, in contrast to what we might expect based on, for example, Niebuhr’s typology, that Post-Boomers would represent a variety of types of either resistance to or accommodation with the larger culture, we have found that regardless of the particular way that Post-Boomers express their religious commitments, they are both, in Weber’s categories, world rejecting and world affirming, and in Niebuhr’s categories, they both resist and accommodate elements within the larger culture.

In contrast to these types of approaches, we have developed a typology of four emerging forms that exemplify the Post-Boomer spiritual quest, each a form of response to the challenges and opportunities they perceive to be represented in the larger cultural currents. The different forms, or types, that we describe present a more complex relationship between religious groups and their socio-cultural environment that we think is best expressed as a new typology of religious action.

Our first type, “Innovators,” are those who represent a constantly evolving, or *innovating*, approach to religious and spiritual

beliefs and practices. Many of these are newer, less established groups that are affiliated with the “emerging church” movement, while others are established churches and ministries that are innovating within their own traditions. These groups, whether emerging or more established churches, organize their approach (in contrast to what they see as an overly institutionalized and inwardly focused church), so as to focus on building community within the religious group and to engage in various ways with the larger culture. These churches are innovating by introducing various forms of ritual and symbol into their worship services and by introducing new forms of religious and community life that emphasize commitment and belonging, as well as service, within the religious congregation and to their host city.

Our second type, “Appropriators,” refers to those churches and ministries that seek to provide a compelling and “relevant” experience for participants, both for those in the audience and for those who are performing in the service or event. In this, both churches and independent ministries seek to create these experiences through imitating, or *appropriating*, trends found in the larger culture and ultimately popularizing these through their networks into a particular form of pop-Christianity that is primarily oriented toward an individual spiritual experience. Appropriators tend to be situated within the mega/seeker church ideology, whether actually a part of a mega church or not. In fact, in many ways, each of the other three types we discuss in this book are at least in part responding to the form of Christianity represented by the mega/seeker model—a bureaucratized and consumption-oriented, franchised form of Christian expression and belief. Thus the mega/seeker church is the primary source, although Appropriators are found beyond those particular locations, and include Christian musical groups, consumer-oriented enterprises sponsored by and at churches, as well as retail stores and para-church ministries. But it is the desire for relevance and producing a culturally acceptable product

mirroring the trends in the larger culture that drives this form of religious response to culture.

The third part of our typology is made up of what we call “Resisters,” referring to what are primarily Boomer-initiated efforts intended to appeal to Post-Boomers by focusing on the recovery of “reason” and thus *resist* the incursion of postmodern culture within Christianity, hoping to reestablish the place of the written text and rational belief as the dominant source for Post-Boomer spirituality and practice. Resisters evidence several interrelated patterns within their perspective that represent different fronts in their continual efforts to identify and resist the various incursions of the larger culture that threaten the integrity of what they understand as historic Christianity. Each of these should be understood as both defensive and offensive patterns of response to the perceived threats, intended to provide resources for believers to defend against bad or improper beliefs in one’s personal life, as well as more broadly within the church, and as strategies to fight for a particular religious and ideological perspective in the larger culture.

Our final type are the “Reclaimers,” individuals who are all, in one way or another, seeking to renew their experiences of Christianity through the history, symbolism, and practices of ancient forms of Christianity, such as are still found in the liturgical traditions, particularly the Episcopal, Orthodox, and Catholic churches, thus *reclaiming* the ancient symbols, rituals, and practices of these traditions for their own spiritual quest. These are converts, either from other, nonliturgical forms of Christianity or from nonexistent or lapsed faith commitments. In this, the particular attractiveness of these traditions are the symbols, rituals, practices, and even smells of these churches, as well as the small congregational communities of believers that they represent, the connection to a larger historical tradition within Christianity, and the perceived authenticity that these traditions provide.

METHODS

The research for this book was done over two years, and was initially based on some of the findings in our *GenX Religion* book, in particular the experiential dimension of GenX religious activities, their entrepreneurial skills at establishing new and culturally savvy organizations, the extent to which their religious identity is rooted in the religious community, and their emphasis on the “authenticity” of one’s life, outlook, and religious faith as being a primary component of how they view themselves and each other. In this, we utilized several key informants that we had met either through our research for that project or as a result of our presentations and publication of the book and then began to follow the leads they provided us to both individuals and groups. As we visited and interviewed these initial contacts, we pursued a “snowball” sampling plan in which we asked them about other groups or individuals that they were aware of, and with whom we might interact. In addition, we sampled the Internet presence of the groups that we were contacting, and used a type of digital snowball sampling by following links on their websites and blogs to groups that they were referencing. This resulted in ten (physical) site visits and approximately one hundred interviews, all digitally recorded, both audio and video, and a significant sampling of a wide variety of Internet sources, from personal blogs to websites for different Christian groups. The sites we visited were located in different urban areas throughout the United States, focusing primarily on southern California, but also in St. Louis, Chicago, and New York.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

In what follows, we devote a chapter to each of the four emerging types that we have identified, and have structured each chapter in the same way. In each of the chapters that describe the four parts of our typology (chapters two through five), we

first describe an event or experience we had while doing the research that exemplifies the different characteristics of each type. Next we contextualize each type by providing some history and background to its development, and then we describe the characteristic approach and practices of each of the types. Finally, we provide a summary and conclusion that raises questions about different elements of the way that the type frames itself, or is pursuing its particular ends. We would note here as well that we have included a few representative photographs of each type within their respective chapters so as to provide a visual sense of what these types look like. The only exception to that is our Resisters chapter, where we have included no photographs. Our reasoning is that since Resisters are so adamantly resisting against an image-driven culture, it seems counter to their efforts for us to represent them visually.

In the concluding chapter, we compare and contrast each of the four parts of our typology, pointing up their commonalities, despite their obvious differences, and argue that we are seeing the emergence of a new religious type that we are calling “Expressive Communalism,” in which Post-Boomers are seeking spiritual experience and fulfillment in community and through various expressive forms of their spirituality, both private and public. Expressive Communalism can best be understood in contrast to two classic theoretical types of religious behavior, Max Weber’s “inner-worldly asceticism,” in which the individual eschews emotional and sensuous enjoyment in favor of a rationally ordered life, and Robert Bellah’s “utilitarian individualism,” in which the individual seeks both material success and personal fulfillment. In contrast, in Expressive Communalism we find that Post-Boomers are seeking spiritual experience and fulfillment in embodied form through community, and through various expressive and experiential forms of their spirituality, both in their personal lives and in public, expressed in some way of “living out” their faith. In this, the individual finds personal

spiritual fulfillment through a physical experience—whether visual, aural, or physical—primarily in the context of the religious community; however, the primary goal is not necessarily individual fulfillment, but living out, or embodying, their spiritual commitment publicly in the larger community through various types of service activities and cultural engagement with the community.