Spiritual but Not Religious

Engaging with an Emerging Demographic

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INTRODUCTION

"Christianity has an image problem."[1] These are the opening words of a book called *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* by David Kinnaman of the Barna Group and Gabe Lyons of the Fermi Project. This was written more than fifteen years ago (2007), but the status of Christianity within the North American landscape seems to have remained relatively the same; in fact, the image problem may have become more dire. The image problem, according to Kinnaman and Lyons, is that Christians are known more for what they are *against* than what they are *for*. Words like "hypocritical," "insensitive," and "judgmental" are commonly used words to describe Christians by non-Christians. These conclusions are drawn from years of research and collections of surveys throughout the US, as Kinnaman writes,

> I have spent the last three years studying these questions through extensive interviews and research. You may be astonished to learn just how significant the dilemma is—and how the negative perceptions that your friends, neighbors, and colleagues have of Christianity will shape your life and our culture in the years to come. Our research shows that many of those outside of Christianity, especially younger adults, have little trust in the Christian faith, and

1. Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 11. See also Haskell, *Through a Lens Darkly*, 19.

> esteem for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among outsiders. They admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and they reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians.[2]

Kinnaman's study was focused on American Christianity, so perhaps the situation differs in Canada and other so-called Christian nations. Sam Reimer, however, reflects along similar lines: "Many of the evangelicals in Britain and Canada whom I interviewed do not like how they tend to be perceived by non-evangelicals. Secular media often presents them as intolerant, homophobic, patriarchal, and narrow-minded (Haskell, 2009)."[3] Reimer admits that the negative image of evangelicals in Britain and Canada are related to the public perception of American evangelicalism, but nonetheless, it seems that the negative perception of Christianity in the Western world is not too dissimilar throughout, whether in the US, UK, or Canada. In fact, not only is there a negative perception of Christians and evangelicals in the Western world, but the level of intensity by which many non-Christians hold these views is significant as well.[4]

As a result of their years-long survey and research, Kinnaman and Lyons identify six primary perceptions that outsiders have of Christians. They are that Christians are:

1. *Hypocritical*. Outsiders state that Christians have an unrealistically high standard of life that they themselves do not seem to fulfill. They pretend to be perfect, but in fact they themselves do not reflect this perfect image that they project.
2. *Too focused on getting converts*. Outsiders sense that Christians care more about conversion than themselves, as if they are targets rather than people. They seem to neglect that many outsiders have tried church before.
3. *Antihomosexual*. Outsiders think Christians are bigoted and hate the LGBTQ (Lesbian–Gay–Bisexual–Transgender–Queer) community. They are more interested in *curing* them and using politics against them, rather than loving them.

2. Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 11.

3. See "Introduction" in Reimer, *Caught in the Current*. Cf. Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World*.

4. Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 12.

4. *Sheltered*. Outsiders see Christians as too naïve, seemingly unaware that life is complex and responsive to complexities with simplistic solutions and answers.
5. *Too political*. Outsiders view Christians as overly motivated by a political agenda, usually extreme right-wing conservatives (however, even if, in Canada, many Christians are not extreme right-wingers, public perception is what matters.)
6. *Judgmental*. Outsiders perceive Christians as easily judging, rather than loving others as they say they do and should.[5]

Again, while this study was conducted around 15–20 years ago, these views seem to remain consistent in North America, if not held more intensely since then. The following is anecdotal evidence, but even the conversations that I have had recently reflect a similar conclusion as from nearly two decades ago. I and some from my church have gone on (what we call) "God Talks," not quite evangelism but open discussions with people in the community about topics like spirituality, God, and religion. The typical conversation begins by approaching people in the public, and asking if they have a couple of minutes to answer three questions for an informal survey. The first question we typically ask is: Do you consider yourself a spiritual person? This often raises some interesting lines of conversation, depending on what the person says. We have witnessed many people (an estimate of about one-third to a half of those with whom we have conversed) who identify as spiritual but do not have a formal religious association. By this, they usually mean that they believe in some sort of *Higher Being* or *Higher Power*, sometimes referred to as the Universe, and that they sometimes or regularly meditate, pray, and/or engage in some sort of spiritual practice. However, these respondents have either abandoned any ties to religion or have never identified with a particular religion or tradition. Sometimes, this first question extends to a lengthier conversation, depending on how they answer it. The second question we ask is: Do you have any opinions about Jesus, and if so, what are they? There usually are three types of answers that most people give: (a) I believe in Jesus; (b) I believe he was a good man who taught some good lessons but wasn't the Son of God; or (c) Jesus was a myth. Depending on their answer, we may extend the discussion of Jesus to claims he made about himself and ask about what they think about these claims. What I have found is that many of the people whom we have spoken

5. Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 29–30.

with accept Jesus as a historical figure but have difficulty in accepting him as divine, God Incarnate. My conjecture is that acceptance of Jesus as such is linked to organized religion, so that hesitancy to accept Jesus as God may be related to hesitancy to accept the church. The final question we ask, if appropriate, is: Is there anything preventing you from going to a church, and if so, what might that be? There are a variety of responses to this question as well, but we have heard many times of negative experiences in the church, or simply that boredom has been a barrier for *seekers* to attend a church.

From both Barna's study and my own anecdotal experiences, it is clear that there is generally a negative perception of Christians among non-Christians in North America, even while many still hold to a belief in a Higher Power or Higher Being. This belief can be labeled "spiritual-but-not-religious."

THE SPIRITUAL-BUT-NOT-RELIGIOUS (SBNR) MOVEMENT

The words "spiritual" and "religious" are not necessarily synonymous as it may have been in previous generations. Those who consider themselves "Spiritual but Not Religious" (SBNR) can be described as people who are

> concerned with spiritual issues but choose to pursue them outside the context of a formal religious organization . . . 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.[6]

Robert Fuller noted, in 2001, that SBNR people generally have an interest—sometimes even a deep interest—in God and personal spiritual growth, but they also sense a tension between this interest and the interests of organized or conventional religion. Many SBNR people value intellectual freedom, curiosity, and exploration of spirituality but find religious institutions restrictive and even aversive to their spiritual goals.

Fuller also observes that before the twentieth century, the terms "spiritual" and "religious" were synonymous, but at the turn of the twentieth century, with the rise of intellectual developments such as the prestige of the sciences, modern biblical criticism, and cultural relativism, educated Christians found difficulty maintaining their unbridled fidelity to the religious institution. He concludes, "The word *spiritual* gradually came to

6. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 4.

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."[7] Fuller summarizes the findings of a study of 346 individuals and notes that those who identified as SBNR have encountered negative experiences in the church or with church leaders.[8] They may see church leaders as more interested in building their own organizations, hypocritical, or narrow-minded, rather than as promoting authentic and genuine spirituality and faith. Some, or many, have experienced various forms of emotional, sexual, and/or spiritual abuse by church leaders or adherents, or have witnessed others' abuse. So, while Fuller's observations initially point to an intellectual dissonance between spirituality and religion, the dissonance seems to really stem from a dissatisfaction and dissidence with the religious institution, those who represent it, and the ostensive lack of religious authenticity—or outright hypocrisy—in these spaces.

Christianity was not the predominant religion in the beginnings of the US, contrary to popular belief, let alone the basis for its establishment. Most of the founding fathers, such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, were notable deists, not Christians. There is the well-known anecdote of Thomas Jefferson, cutting out pages of the New Testament which he disagreed with, especially those in the New Testament that referred to miracles and retaining the essential teachings and life of Jesus.[9] These founding fathers could be classified as spiritual but not religious in the sense of holding to a form of Deism. But in as early as 1926, in a journal called *The American Mercury*, the then-president of the Rotary Club referred to the organization as inclusive, nonsectarian, and spiritual but not religious.[10] This may be the first extant occurrence of this phrase. While there were other references to being spiritual but not religious throughout the years, it was in the late-1930s and 1940s where the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Bill Wilson, described the organization as spiritual but not religious.[11] Even today, there is reference to God or a Higher Power in the steps to recovery that AA is widely known

7. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 5.
8. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 7.
9. See, e.g., Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 19–20.
10. Fuller and Parsons, "Spiritual but Not Religious," 18.
11. Fuller and Parsons, "Spiritual but Not Religious," 18.

for. By then, it appears that this identification of spiritual but not religious was brought into the cultural forefront. By the 1980s, the concept of being spiritual but not tied to a particular religion or organization had gained "cultural cache."[12]

The beginnings of Canada, on the other hand, were much more influenced by Christianity than the US. According to George Rawlyk, notable Canadian evangelical historian, Christianity significantly shaped Canadian life and culture from the early seventeenth century to the twentieth century, and that by mid-nineteenth century, Catholicism and Protestantism were much more influential in Canadian life than they were in American life.[13] Interestingly, Rawlyk saw a growing dissonance between the religious elite and religious commoners and saw more Canadians privatizing their faith and abandoning institutional Christianity. This abandonment of religious affiliation in Canada saw a slow and steady increase over the decades. According to the official Canada website, in 1985 about 90 percent of Canadians declared having a religious affiliation and about 43 percent attended group religious activities at least once a month, while in 2019 about 68 percent declared having a religious affiliation while about 23 percent attended group religious activities at least once a month.[14] According to a 2021 census by the government of Canada, 53.3 percent of the population identified as Christian, while 34.6 percent identified as having no religion or having a secular perspective.[15]

Considering these statistics along with the surveys and interviews summarized above, it may be reasonable to conclude that there has been a significant decrease in religious affiliation and involvement, especially in Christianity, and that at least a prominent reason for the decrease in religious affiliation or involvement may be due to the negative perceptions of the people who represent institutional Christianity, whether leaders or adherents.[16] It is interesting, however, that there are still a significant number of non-religious individuals who still hold on to the belief in some of the basic premises of religion, a God or Higher Power and some form of

12. Fuller and Parsons, "Spiritual but Not Religious," 18.

13. Rawlyk, "Religion in Canada."

14. See Cornelissen, "Religiosity in Canada."

15. See "Census Profile."

16. However, a study conducted by Linda Mercadante saw that many who left organized religion left due to social and political reasons, and still had fond memories of their religious upbringings ("Belief without Borders," 114–15).

spiritual practice (e.g., meditation, prayer, or journaling/reflection). Many who identify as SBNR state that they believed that religion held them back from true fulfillment: "They routinely considered religion nonessential, unimportant, or a practice that would thwart their spiritual growth."[17] Those who reported this found that organized religion stifled their personal growth and maturity. However, it is also interesting that in the US, one recent legal case rejected the SBNR identity as religious, after attempts to label it as such, but a response article in a law journal attempted to counter that ruling and argue for a significant overlap between an SBNR belief system and a religious system to warrant providing same legal protections for both.[18] In other words, according to Miller, an SBNR belief system qualifies as a type of religion.

POSTMODERN EVANGELISM

In light of this emerging phenomenon, how are Christians expected to fulfill the Great Commission effectively (Matt 28:19–20)? As a starting point, Christians ought to reevaluate how evangelism is to be effectively practiced in the current climate. In previous decades, methods such as the Four Spiritual Laws, apologetics-based arguments, and other related approaches may have once been effective in eliciting conversions. Revival meetings where evangelists would share the gospel and call for a response (sometimes called an "altar call") were popular. These methods, however, seem not to be as effective as they once were. As Linda Mercandante states (2021), "I don't expect that current forms of religion can be reenergized by the SBNR movement unless there are significant and dramatic changes."[19] Don Everts, Doug Schaupp, and Val Gordon also note that evangelism as they knew it (pre-1990s) no longer worked.[20] In desperation, Schuapp conducted thousands of informal surveys from recently converted Christians to find out what steps they took to go from non-Christian to Christian. Along with the other authors, they started asking the questions, (1) "How do people come to Jesus in our postmodern context," and (2) "How can Christians best help their friends on that journey?"[21] They found a common schema that recent converts experienced, five thresholds that take them from unbeliever to

17. Mercadante, "Belief without Borders," 115.
18. Miller, "'Spiritual but Not Religious.'"
19. Mercadante, "Belief without Borders," 122.
20. Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon, *Breaking the Huddle*, 9.
21. Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon, *Breaking the Huddle*, 13.

Christ-follower.[22] These thresholds, they observed, were fairly consistently experienced by these recent converts.

The first threshold is *from distrust to trust*. As the introduction to this paper noted, many non-Christians in North America have a distrust of Christians because they are perceived as hypocritical, insensitive, judgmental, and homophobic. Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon write, "Because of the amount of distrust that exists toward Christianity, the church, and Christians, it is paramount that trust be established between a non-Christian and at least one Christian."[23] Many recent conversion stories contain at least one Christian friend who was trustful enough for the convert to be open to inquiry. Thus, the prototypical "street preaching" and "hell-fire and brimstone" evangelism may not be as an effective method as it once may have been, even if there may be a place and time for such methods.

The second threshold is *from indifference to curiosity*. Trusting a Christian is merely a first step, but one can trust a Christian, yet remain indifferent about Jesus and faith matters. There are a variety of ways in which one can gain curiosity. A suggestion in which Christians can try to elicit curiosity about Christianity to a non-Christian is to tell stories of how God through the church has impacted its community and its people. For example, one might be speaking to his or her neighbor on a Monday to catch up on what each did during the weekend. The Christian can tell his neighbor about the outreach event that the church held, in which they handed out 200 hamburgers to people in the community, or about how 20 people decided to get baptized. As the neighbor continues to hear stories week after week about how impactful the church has been in its community, curiosity may start to build.

The third threshold is *from closed to change to open to change*. One can be curious about Jesus and faith and yet be closed to any sort of change. They may want to learn more about Jesus and the Bible, but a crucial factor is a desire to see some sort of change in their lives. Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon write, "We've found that unless someone is actually open to change, all our best apologetics and gospel presentations are falling on deaf (or happily content) ears."[24]

22. The following is a summary of Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon, *Breaking the Huddle*, 13–16.

23. Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon, *Breaking the Huddle*, 13.

24. Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon, *Breaking the Huddle*, 14.

The fourth threshold is *from meandering to seeking*. This may be the difference between passive searching to active searching. "There is a big difference between meandering toward Jesus (genuine interest but no urgency) and seeking after ultimate answers."[25] Some of these people may be found in churches today, where they may participate occasionally in worship and events, but lack a sense of urgency in their faith journey.

The fifth and final threshold to cross for conversion is *from lost to saved*. This is the moment (or series of moments) in which a seeker decides to become a follower of Jesus. "Non-Christians don't necessarily know how to cross this threshold, which underscores how important it is that they have Christian friends helping them as they journey along."[26]

Understanding these thresholds greatly aid in Christians evangelizing to their non-Christian friends. Identifying the threshold that a friend may be in helps to appropriately guide them to the next threshold. For example, if there is no trust established from the beginning, it is unlikely in our postmodern world (although not impossible either) that a non-Christian would jump to the fourth threshold of meandering to seeking. On the other hand, identifying that a friend is at the curiosity threshold will help the Christian guide this friend to the next threshold of being open to change. From this brief survey, it can be apparent that this approach reflects a relational evangelism approach, in contrast to a cold-call evangelism approach.

Another piece of insight for engaging in gospel conversations is to identify people's ultimate quests or motivations for seeking spirituality or religion. Fuller states that a "category we might use is one that would distinguish between people's quests for prosperity and their quests for purity. When all is said and done, these are two of the most powerful motivations to think or act religiously."[27] Some people seek spirituality or religion for material or immaterial prosperity in their current lives, to improve their lives in some way or fashion. Others seek spirituality or religion for spiritual growth, however one defines this. In some ways, these two quests may overlap, as both involve some sort of existential improvement. He also states, "Closely related to the distinction between quests for prosperity and purity are two additional issues. The first concerns whether persons understand sacred power as existing within the human self or outside the self."[28]

25. Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon, *Breaking the Huddle*, 15.
26. Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon, *Breaking the Huddle*, 15.
27. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 177.
28. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 177.

If within the self, there is no need for religion or a Higher Power. However, both SBNR and religious people seem to understand that "sacred power" resides outside of themselves, located in the transcendent. These may be questions one can also ask when engaging in evangelism.

CONCLUSION

Fuller estimates that about 20 percent of Americans (roughly half of unchurched Americans) fit into the category of SBNR (as of 2001).[29] He also cites a survey (although no reference is given) that about 54 percent of Americans believed that "churches and synagogues have lost the real spiritual part of religion."[30] If Fuller's statistics roughly reflect the current state of affairs of spirituality and religion, even in Canada, this is a significant portion of the population who identify as SBNR.

This can be interpreted as either negative or positive—or both. A negative extrapolation from this data is that the church continues to lose its Christian witness in the world. The church, its leaders, and its adherents ought to listen to the critiques of the SBNR community. A positive extrapolation is that there are swarms of people in our communities who still believe in some form of God and spirituality and ostensibly have a desire to connect with something greater and experience growth and maturity. There has not yet been a wholesale rejection of the spiritual world in these communities that accept the term spiritual. In this sense, there is a common element of transcendence between the SBNR movement, if we can call it that, and religion. And this is where the commonality of transcendence can be a suitable starting point for gospel conversations. This is why in my approach as identified above, my first question to a person is whether they consider themselves a spiritual person, and then allow them to further explain what they mean by that. The more I can find areas of agreement with them on transcendence, the more I can establish comradery with them, thereby increasing the likelihood of crossing the first threshold of conversion, *from distrust to trust*.

If the goal is to *win people to Christ* and draw them to the church, the solution is not to fight culture wars as some public figures do. Fighting culture wars may have a place in society (this is beyond the scope of this paper), but this approach does not result in SBNR people accepting

29. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 5.

30. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 5.

Christianity as their personal worldview—in fact, many of them are probably turned off by this approach. Fighting culture wars mostly affirms those who are already convinced of their arguments, much like an echo chamber. If the goal is to win people to Christ and draw them to the church, we must listen. We must listen to what they are saying, rather than wait for them to stop talking so that we can say what we have been trained to say; for example, the Four Spiritual Laws or the Road to Hell. We must listen by connecting with SBNR people in a genuine way, to listen for their hunger for a transcendent God, and then to gradually point them, moving from threshold to threshold, to the incarnation of that transcendent God, who loved us and crossed transcendent boundaries for us.

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