

SPIRITUAL SYNTHESIS:

How We Can Believe Differently and Still Come Together

By

Maryjane Osa, PhD

INTRODUCTION

Do you think of yourself as spiritual, but not religious? You may have been brought up in a mainstream religion, but consider yourself “lapsed.” Relatives who regularly go to church shake their heads and mutter that it’s a shame you have “fallen away.” Or you could be someone who never had much of a traditional religious upbringing but find that you do have spiritual inclinations. Perhaps you have attended personal development workshops and read books on spirituality, yoga, or meditation. You may really like Oprah . . . or Phil Jackson.

The “spiritual but not religious” phenomenon is a documented and growing trend in American society. It even comes with its own acronym: SBNR. People from all sorts of backgrounds are identifying with this description. Some spent their childhoods going to church and Sunday school; others are from nonreligious backgrounds but have become interested in spirituality because of their involvement in yoga, meditation, or alternative medicine. And there are those whose traumatic experiences or illnesses have led them to search for answers that were not available from Western psychology or medicine. Today almost one-third of Americans embrace a personal spirituality but keep organized religion at arm’s length.

Whether your starting point was yoga, a twelve step program, or Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) meditation, your journey of self-discovery has undoubtedly brought you to many interesting places. But you may not be equally taken with all of the stops on your itinerary. You may think: “Yoga and breath-centered meditation feel great, but chakras and karma sound weird.” Or, “I don’t know how I would have gotten through chemo without acupuncture but I have my doubts about Reiki.” Your confusion about the effectiveness and compatibility of different teachings and techniques is completely understandable. And any reservations you may have are magnified by the lens of the mass media.

Journalists are more skeptical about spiritual teachers and techniques than they are about government claims that the reviled despot-of-the-moment will deploy weapons of mass destruction if we don't act now. Why is that? Why is the compunction to discredit yogis, holistic practitioners, and mindfulness proponents stronger than the urge to reveal the truth about powerful figures in government and industry? Is it because spiritual seekers are an easier, more sensational target? Or because the safe choice for mainstream journalists desiring career advancement is to ridicule spirituality as "woo woo"? Whatever the motivation, when the topic is non-traditional spirituality, the mainstream press' starting assumption is that metaphysics is bunk and those who involve themselves in it are charlatans and rubes. "Vaporheads," in David Brooks' famously fatuous utterance.

That more of you are trying out different, non-traditional spiritual practices and opening up to new beliefs indicates that there is something important and real going on. Unfortunately, journalistic cynicism and even scholarly objectivity create impediments to understanding this phenomenon. The fact that people derive various individual benefits from personal growth is what is driving the upward trend toward the New Spirituality. The predominant value and the positive results for those in this movement are experiential and subjective. This is a problem for "objective" or "neutral" commentators. Social scientists can't devise appropriate measures; reporters are on the outside looking in.

The impulse of scholars and journalists to explore this cultural undercurrent, to figure it out, to know what it all adds up to—is valid. But without actually participating, without practicing yoga, meditation, affirmations, mindfulness, or affirmative prayer, it is impossible to "get" what is going on.

Scholars and journalists are rewarded by their institutions for exhibiting professional objectivity. Adherence to conventional norms is the basis for a positive career trajectory. What do you think would happen if a reporter opened his mind to the teachings of Abraham/Hicks, for example, and found he could use the law of attraction successfully in his own life? Can you imagine a *New York Times Magazine* article on Esther Hicks where the author writes, "Abraham's teachings are valid and useful. I am attracting what I want and my life is so much better now!" Think his editor would run *that* in the paper as soon as possible? Not very likely.

From the hype in magazines, newspapers, and on the internet, it is hard to know whether a cultural trend is real. Even when the information seems plausible and the outlet reliable, mass media often don't have the luxury of fully contextualizing their stories. In the case of the New Spirituality, this difficulty is compounded by the fact that so many books for the SBNR audience highlight unique life stories— and it is impossible to draw general conclusions from testimonials. So we need to look at these developments from a sociological perspective, to see how this phenomenon is related to broader changes in our society.

I am a sociologist, not a journalist. Like many of you, I consider myself to be spiritual but not religious. I've been listening to the tapes, reading the books, attending seminars and classes, and studying classics like the Tao Te Ching for quite some time. I am a participant in the New Spirituality movement and belong to a local New Thought center. This puts me in a unique position. While my spiritual journey informs my thinking, I have not abandoned scholarly habits of mind (imbued through decades of academic research and writing). With the experience of an insider and the analytic disposition of a social scientist, I am prepared to explore the phenomenon of the New Spirituality from the outside-in and the inside-out.

In Chapter 1, I explore popular ideas of what it means to be spiritual as opposed to being religious. Who are the SBNR folks? What does spirituality mean to them? Why has this become an alternative to religion? We see how easy it is to become confused by so many different versions of “self-help” by listening to Joanne's story. She is a restless spiritual seeker who found a community on-line and whose experiences demonstrate the challenges facing SBNRs today.

To provide historical context, I show that our ideas about religion and spirituality have changed significantly over time. In 19th century America, the terms “spiritual” and “religious” were thought of as interchangeable personal qualities. In contrast, today many consider spirituality and religiosity to be polar opposites. Most people I interviewed consider “religious” to imply uncritical acceptance of scripture-based beliefs, irrespective of scientific findings. However, “spiritual” is now shorthand for being open to mystical experiences, seeking personal growth, and following an individual path to the divine. From recent public opinion polling and research, it is also clear that SBNR is a social reality— not just an internet meme.

In the concluding section of the chapter, I offer some ideas about what I think is driving this phenomenon. While aspects of SBNR might be viewed as a continuation of earlier

movements, what we are seeing now is a true social-cultural change. Society's changes are emerging from the spiritual practices and experiences of hundreds of thousands of individuals. Participation in spirituality is increasing and the scale is massive. Rather than harkening to a future "New Age," participants in the New Spirituality are learning how to live their bliss now.

Every trend has a counter-trend. Every movement has a backlash. In Chapter 2, I examine arguments put forward by the mainstream press, the secular left and the religious right that aim to marginalize the New Spirituality. I show how elements of the SBNR phenomenon are caricatured in the press. We see how the attempts to discredit New Spirituality are evidence of the latter's social critique. [. . . .]