Article

Religious, but Not Spiritual: A Constructive Proposal

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Abstract: Often the debates in philosophy of religion are quite disconnected from the empirical data gathered in the sociology of religion. This is especially the case regarding the recent increase in prominence of those identifying as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) within an American context. In the attempt to bring these two fields into productive conversation, this essay offers a constructive account of the SBNR in terms of what they reject (i.e., their status as "not religious") and also what they affirm (i.e., their identity as "spiritual"). In brief, the suggestion is that the SBNR do not reject theism or even common "religious" practices, but instead reject a particular mode of "religion" that is grounded in an authoritative and insular social presence. Alternatively, the SBNR at least seem to affirm a notion of "spirituality" that is broadly consistent with the idea found in historical Christian traditions. After surveying the empirical data and offering a new phenomenological analysis of it, the essay concludes with a suggestion that we need a new category—"religious, but not spiritual" (RBNS)—in order best to make sense of how the SBNR signify in relation to specific hermeneutic contexts and sociopolitical frameworks.

Keywords: phenomenology; philosophy of religion; spiritual but not religious; critical theory of religion; sociology; spirituality

1. Introduction

The rise of the "nones", people who identify as "spiritual, but not religious" (SBNR), and the religiously "unaffiliated" is one of the great sociological and demographic shifts in American religious practice and social identity in recent decades.[1] However, despite garnering significant attention from social scientists and even some scholars in religious studies, this reality has not received enough consideration within philosophy of religion. There are certainly several legitimate reasons that might explain this lack of engagement. First, it is all too rare that mainstream philosophy of religion even considers any sociological data about religious identity and practice. Instead, the vast majority of work is focused on the cognitivist dimensions of religion in order to assess the truth of the doxastic claims that have traditionally been taken to unify communities of "faith". Second, even texts and thinkers who do engage matters of religious practice and social organization tend to do so at speculative levels rather than historically specific ones. Although I recognize the importance of philosophical inquiry into the truth-status of religious beliefs, I support the speculative endeavor that philosophy of religion enacts, and I have no desire to minimize the disciplinary distinction between philosophy and sociology, I do think that more engagement between these fields would help to facilitate better work in both of them.

One philosophical tradition that is an especially fecund site for considering such sociological data is New Phenomenology. As a thoroughgoing commitment to a rigorous investigation into that which is given (in its mode of givenness), new phenomenology is perhaps best understood as a patient interrogation of what it means to receive the world in the way that we do. Accordingly, new phenomenology opens important spaces for asking what gets "revealed" about religion, society, and personal identity in the demographic shifts toward SBNR as a more commonly claimed category. However, new phenomenology is decidedly hermeneutic in its approach and style. As such, a new phenomenological description of SBNR helps to illuminate the need for a constructive hermeneutic assessment

of how best to interpret such revelation in ways that help us better understand where we are and where it is that we seem to be going. By bringing hermeneutic and new phenomenological attention to such concepts, we are better able to make sense of the work being done by the sociological categories themselves as not simply descriptive data, but normative frameworks.

In this essay, I will seek to offer just such a constructive analysis by first looking at the way in which the categories of "religion" and "spirituality" are situated within complicated assumptions that form the sociocultural context for their signification—both in the philosophical literature and in broader society. Then, I will turn to the data about the SBNR and offer a new phenomenological reading of what the SBNR are affirming (*spirituality*) and also what they are rejecting (*religion*).[2] My proposal is that in contrast to the "spiritual, but not religious", we need the category, "religious, but not spiritual" (RBNS) in order to better appreciate the emergence of the SBNR in a specifically American context. By looking at something of a case study within the U.S.—prominent strands within white Evangelicalism—I will claim that RBNS signifies the state of identifying as "religious" while abandoning some of the key "spiritual" dimensions that have defined Christianity as expressed both in biblical texts and also in recent history.

2. Categories Matter: On Philosophy of Religion and Social Identity

One of the frustrating realities in traditional philosophy of religion is the way in which the category of "religion" is so often taken for granted within the discourse. Extremely rarely will one find a textbook in philosophy of religion beginning with this all-important question regarding the very domain of philosophy of religion as a discrete discourse. Instead, most books begin by jumping directly into one of the historically significant debates within that discourse: properties and attributes of God, arguments for classical theism, or the problem of evil, etc. Yet, all of these debates already assume, quite problematically, that "religion" is stable enough to bear these specific debates as hallmarks of key aspects of religion worthy of philosophical examination.

Without wanting to challenge the importance of those traditional areas of inquiry within philosophy of religion, I do think that it is crucial that philosophers of religion draw more heavily upon work in sociology of religion and critical theory of religion that interrogates the categories of "religion" and "spirituality" as decidedly fraught due to the traces of historical struggles for recognition that they bear.[3] The literature in this area is expansive, but in the attempt to highlight a general trajectory well worth exploring, let me just offer a few especially important examples. When it comes to the meta-philosophical issues attending the practice of philosophy of religion, consider Kevin Schilbrack's (2014) compelling case against traditional philosophy of religion as too narrow (i.e., Christian at the exclusion of other religious traditions), cognitivist (i.e., focused on belief at the expense of practice), and insular (i.e., engaged only with other philosophical voices but not drawing on broader work in the academic study of religion). Schilbrack's critique depends on the idea that it is so often assumed that "religion" is exemplified by Christian belief (or relevantly similar sorts of phenomena in other cultural traditions). Yet, as Schilbrack contends, there are good reasons to resist such a *prima facie* conception and, instead, be open to the diversity of historical data that might call us to reframe "religion" in alternative ways. In this way, Schilbrack's general approach draws heavily on thinkers such as Russell McCutcheon (1997), Timothy Fitzgerald (2000), Craig Martin (2014), and Jonathan Z. Smith (1982) who all trace the ideological frameworks internal to which what gets to count as "religion" is conceived, articulated, and enacted. More globally, scholars such as Richard King (1999) and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) have compellingly demonstrated that particular assumptions about "religion" have led to the construction of "world religions" as particular legacies of colonial imaginations.

None of this work in critical theory of religion means that traditional philosophy of religion is necessarily misguided in the sense of mistaking truth for falsity, etc., but simply that it is rarely self-reflective about the hermeneutic framing and social stakes of

its own discourse. By taking more seriously the question of how to conceive of "religion" as a category in the first place, and then interrogating what would even count as "data" internal to that category, is an important aspect of honest assessment of the scope and task of philosophy of religion. So, rather than claiming the "end" of philosophy of religion, as some scholars have done (see Trakakis 2008), I am calling for a greater awareness of the ways in which philosophy of religion has so often unfolded without paying enough phenomenological and hermeneutic attention to the basic categories being deployed in its own analyses. The result is not an abandonment of traditional philosophical concerns, but a more expansive approach to how those concerns are situated within historical contexts that are, themselves, shaped by prior assumptions.

One of the areas in recent philosophy that has done quite a bit of work thinking about the category of "the religious" is hermeneutic and deconstructive "new" phenomenology—and it is this general approach that I will be tacitly drawing on in what follows. Scholars such as Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, and Jean-Luc Marion, as well as related thinkers such as Gianni Vattimo, Emmanuel Falque, Jean-Yves Lacoste, John Caputo, and Merold Westphal, have all offered engagements with the idea of "the religious" as distinct from related conceptions of "the ethical" or "the aesthetic". Importantly, however, some of this work has considered "the religious" as a second-order description that may or may not have any direct relation to the determinate historically located global "religions". Indeed, famously, Derrida calls for an idea of "religion without religion" such that "the religious" could be a structure of experience—as instantiated in such phenomena as promises, gifts, and justice—that is no longer merely an adjectival form of religion, as such. Even though others, myself included, have pushed back on Derrida's conception and attempted to restore an idea of "religion with religion" (see Simmons and Minister 2012), such critical replies often tend to depend on a tacit conception of what determinate "religion" even is. More critical awareness is needed even in those philosophical discourses, like new phenomenology, deconstruction, hermeneutics, existentialism, and critical theory, that have ostensibly been the most attentive to the issues at hand. This essay is an attempt to move in that direction by considering what is "going on", as it were, in the categories deployed in the sociological data.

With this general description of the philosophical landscape in place, my attempt here to rethink the categories of "religious" and "spiritual" is not meant to be a thoroughgoing intervention into these meta-philosophical debates about the form and function of philosophy of religion. Instead, what I am offering is more of an encouragement for these debates to be aware of the ways in which ideas such as "spiritual but not religious" are sociological descriptors that are increasingly significant to the ways that philosophical discourse needs to conceive of its own project. For example, what people claiming to be "religious" hold up as hallmarks of their identity may not be the same things that people who are SBNR are rejecting when they turn away from the "religious" descriptor. With that in mind, I want to offer some tentative definitions of "religious" and "spiritual" that I think are commonly assumed in our contemporary historical and hermeneutic context. In so doing, I think that we can begin to bring better philosophical tools to bear in order to make sense of the incredible rise of the SBNR in the U.S. in recent decades.

3. Commonplace Hermeneutics

Often what philosophers mean by "religion" is already a much more abstract and speculative conception than that deployed in more common parlance. That said, let us begin by thinking about what we talk about when we talk about "religion" and "spirituality". In what Heidegger would call the "everyday" realties of social discourse, I propose that "religion" is used to indicate organized historical communities of belief and action focused on some sort of divinity or god(s).[4] Alternatively, 'spirituality' is understood to refer to individual practices of connection and wholeness that may or may not be anchored in any explicit belief in such divinities. For example, one could be "spiritual" by attempting to cultivate a mindful approach to the interconnectedness of all living things. Or, one could

be "spiritual" by believing in the importance of loving-kindness as a way of life that yields commitments to social activism, say.

It is this general, mundane, average-everyday, sense that is conveyed by Google images search results. When you search "religion", you get lots of images of determinate historical communities that have been designated "religious," and the identifying symbols of those communities. When you search "spiritual", you get lots of images of people doing yoga, standing on mountains, and looking at the sunset on the beach. Without wanting to give too much credence to such search results as counting as "evidence" here, I do think that they are illuminative of the broadly phenomenological expression of "religion" and "spirituality" as social commodities that indicate particular frames of reference and take specific phenomena as meaningful.

Even if one might take some issue with my descriptions here about broad social assumptions, the point is that any sociological attempt to gather data on religious identity, practice, belief, or emerging trends always operates according to some such set of tacit hermeneutic assumptions. In other words, for anyone to self-identify as SBNR, it is crucial to understand that they are already working with a definition of "religion" such that they are rejecting it as appropriate to their own self-designation. Yet, and this is a crucial realization: as we will see in the sociological data on the SBNR, things such as belief in God, embodied practices such as prayer, and feelings of well-being and attachment are all commonly found in the SBNR and so must not be reflective of what counts for them as "religious" phenomena. However, this might come as a surprise for people who self-identify as "religious" due precisely to similar beliefs and practices.

If both the religious and the SBNR are largely still committed to belief in "God" (of some sort) as indicated by the data, and both the religious and SBNR are engaged in some practices traditionally labeled as "religious", then the distinction between the two groups may have less to do with such beliefs and practices and more to do with the way that being "religious", at least within some particular historic/cultural frameworks, has come to indicate a very particular set of sociopolitical commitments, rather than theological ones. In order to explore this possibility, let us turn to the sociological data on the SBNR in order to get a better picture of who it is that we are talking about.

4. Who Are the SBNR?: What the Data Shows

In 2019, the Pew Religious Forum published data from several longitudinal studies that showed striking and sustained trends in the decline of people who identified with Christianity in the U.S. The takeaways from that data are significant: from 2007 to 2019, the percentage of U.S. adults who identify as "Christian" dropped from 78% to 65%, and during the same timeframe, those who identified as "nones" went from 16% in 2007 to 26% in 2019 (Pew 2019). This general decline in religious affiliation is also reflected in transformed practices. In 2007, 54% of U.S. adults claimed to attend church at least monthly, but in 2019, that percentage had dropped to 45%. In raw numbers, nones have added 30 million to their ranks since 2007, numbering 68 million in 2019 (Pew 2019). To be engaged in "philosophy of religion", as opposed to what we might term "philosophy of the doxastic dynamics of classical theism", requires that we attend to such sociological trends in religious affiliation, identity, and practice.

So, who are the nones, and in particular, the SBNR? According to the Pew Forum's "Religious Landscape Study" (Pew 2021), the SBNR community crosses a variety of demographic groups in extremely telling ways. When it comes to age, 25% are between 18 and 29, 38% are between 30 and 49, 30% are between 50 and 64, and only 7% above 65. Regarding generational makeup, 30% are millennials, 33% are Generation X, and 31% are Baby Boomers. The gender and race details are such that 53% are men and 47% are women, while 67% are White, 16% Latino, and 10% African American. As concerns socioeconomic status, 42% make less than $30,000 per year, 21% make between $30,000 and $49,000, 25% make between $50,000 and $99,000, and only 12% have an annual income of more than $100,000. Educationally, the SBNR, as a whole, are not extremely well educated.

Only 8% have graduate degrees, while 17% graduated from college, 34% attended some college, and 40% have only a high school diploma or less. Moreover, 24% are married, 14% are partnered, 26% are divorced or separated, 8% widowed, and 30% never married (Pew 2021).

Although it might seem that the SBNR would eschew all determinate traditionally "religious" practices and beliefs, that is actually far from the case. What becomes clear from the data is that the SBNR do not reject theism, say, but merely the presentation of theism as found in historical religious traditions and institutional expressions. For example, 67% are "absolutely certain" in their belief in God, 24% are "fairly certain", only 2% are "not very certain," and 5% "do not believe". It is important not to miss this point: more than 90% of the SBNR affirm some form of theism.[5] Importantly, this demonstrates that the rejection of the "religious" moniker does not equate to an atheistic or even agnostic identity (though such identities are definitely on display). This is an important point to the new phenomenological analysis that I will offer in what follows, and so worth special emphasis here. SBNR are *not* "not religious" in the sense of not believing in God. Instead, they are "not religious" in contrast to some other notion of "religion" that needs careful articulation—hence the role that I propose philosophical hermeneutics and new phenomenological analysis can play in making sense of what is being revealed/given in the self description of SBNR. In the same vein, the SBNR are *not* "not religious" because they have abandoned all traditional embodied habits associated with "religion". In particular, 57% engage in prayer or some other sort of meditation daily, 12% weekly, 6% monthly, and 22% never.[6] Strikingly, 73% report a feeling of spiritual peace and well-being at least weekly, 12% monthly, 4% yearly, and only 8% claim only seldom or never to experience such a feeling. Despite such frequent affects, practices, and beliefs that one might quite plausibly understand as "religious", 69% of the SBNR say that they seldom or never attend religious services, and 76% say that they seldom or never participate in "prayer, scripture, or religious group meetings" (Pew 2021). From this striking distinction between the self-professed rejection of "religion" and yet the continued affirmation of and participation in practices historically understood as "religious" phenomena, what the SBNR are rejecting shows itself to be more a matter of the particular form that "religion" takes. As indicated by the lack of official attendance in religious group meetings, we might say that the SBNR are explicit in their rejection of active participation in historically identifiable religious communities. That is, the SBNR pray often, but rarely go to prayer meetings. They belief in God, but rarely attend religious services. They feel spiritual well-being, but do not associate that feeling with an affiliation with religious institutions.

Again, when considering this data from a philosophical perspective, it is clear that much of what is being rejected when the SBNR claim to be "not religious" is not some most of the traditional hallmarks of religious, and specifically Christian, identity, but instead the sociocultural manifestations by which such identity has been presented as an historical reality within specific hermeneutic contexts. As such, the data presents substantive obstacles to the ease with which the categories of "religious" and "spiritual" are often deployed in both philosophical discussions and also popular discourse. David Foster Wallace (2009) and Martin Heidegger (1996, p. 19), among many others, have compellingly suggested that we are most likely to take for granted that which we consider to be most "obvious". Indeed, if x is obvious then x is not in need of critical scrutiny—precisely because x is obvious. Yet, this way of thinking about things is entirely backwards from what philosophy, and specifically new phenomenology and hermeneutics, attempts to cultivate in our lived engagement with the world.

5. "Not Religious"

At its most basic, new phenomenology is a patient receptivity to the "givenness" or "revelation" of the world and subsequently a careful hermeneutic reflection on our place in it.[7] As such, new phenomenology can help us to see what is given/revealed in the data about SBNR and help to illuminate the assumptions operative in the basic sociological

categories themselves.[8] The first thing to note is that living in a social context in which "religion" means this or that will have a big impact on the way that one relates to the idea of *being* "religious". Accordingly, philosophical attempts to stabilize the category of "religion", notwithstanding, it is naïve to assume that what "religion" is taken to name is the same in all contexts. This is part of what the critical theory of religion helps us to understand. What counts as "religion" is always counted according to sociocultural logics that change across time and culture. So, to ask about SBNR in the U.S. requires thinking carefully about the way that "religion" has not only been understood, but performed, in the general timeframe when the data on SBNR has been collected. Even if we can identify, as I tried to do above, the mundane notions of "religion" and "spiritual" that operate in our social contexts, it is important to go deeper than these notions in order to get a better sense of how these ideas receive fuller expression at particular times in history. Again, only by attending to such a hermeneutic framework of social life can we understand the phenomenological signification of "not religious" as a discrete rejection of something determinate, rather than a merely speculative gesture toward something that remains abstract.

"Because over 92 percent of religiously-affiliated Americans currently identify as Christian", Caroline Kitchener writes, "most 'spiritual-but-not-religious' people come from that tradition" (Kitchener 2018). Given this predominance of Christian backgrounds, and considering the context of recent U.S. social history, then, I want to offer something of a case study of just one form in which "religion" might be prominently understood by the SBNR: white Evangelicalism. My point in turning to white Evangelicalism is not to suggest that all the SBNR come from that specific identity, but instead that it can helpfully illustrate a possible way of making sense of what the SBNR reject and accept in their self-designation.

It is important to note that "Evangelicalism", itself, is not an easily unified category. It can be articulated as a theological set of commitments, a political orientation, a set of traditional denominational communities, etc.[9] Despite this complexity, it is at least worth thinking through the possible connections between the rise of the SBNR on the one hand, and the rise of the political prominence of white Evangelicalism (as expressed in related ideas/groups such as the Religious Right, Christian Coalition, and Moral Majority). And, to be especially focused on where we find ourselves currently, we should attend to the various ways that the last four years of American history, and especially the link between Trumpism and at least large segments of white Evangelicals, have had significant impacts on what counts as "religion" in the U.S.

Let me stress, again, that hermeneutic commitments do not emerge *ex nihilo*. Hence, it is important to understand that the dominant mode in which white Evangelicalism gets expressed in contemporary society is a result of a decades-long developments in social narratives that directly impacted what one was claiming when one claimed to be "religious".[10] Where we now find ourselves, though, is in a space where being "religious" in America often gets (mistakenly) confused with/understood as being simply synonymous with these dominant modes of white Evangelicalism. To avoid possible overstatement, I am not suggesting that this is actually what "religion" means, surely that would be a vulgar reductionist suggestion, but instead that it is what often gets presented in the media and popular discourse, and also frequently rejected *in toto*, as "religion" pure and simple. As so presented, it deserves special consideration as we seek to understand what it means for the SBNR to be "not religious".

White Evangelicals only make up approximately 25% of U.S. adults and yet continue to demonstrate an outsized influence on U.S. politics, which results from a variety of factors including swing-state demographics, electoral college calculations, and the consistency of political messaging within predominately white Evangelical communities (see Husser 2020). It is this increased political influence that makes white Evangelicals such an interesting case study for a new phenomenological consideration of the SBNR. Even though there are lots of possibilities here for why SBNR might seek to distinguish themselves from notions of "religion" that are on display in some strands of white Evangelicalism—and it is

dangerous to generalize in ways that stretch the available evidence—let me offer just a few *possible* reasons.

Consider, for example, that a recent study shows that 27% of Evangelicals believe the most extreme, and widely refuted, conspiracy theories of QAnon, which is the highest percentage among any religious group in the U.S. (Jenkins 2021). The willingness to affirm conspiracy theories, it turns out, extends much more broadly within white Evangelical Republicans than is found within non-Evangelical Republicans. For example, 74% of white Evangelical Republicans believe that there was widespread voter fraud in 2020, as compared to only 54% for non-Evangelical Republicans. Similarly, 67% of white Evangelical Republicans believe that there is a "Deep State" that was working to undermine the Trump administration, compared to 52% among non-Evangelical Republicans (Cox 2021). Such commitments to narratives that are not only unsupported by evidence, but actually refuted by it, might be explained in a variety of ways, but one of the most important factors is what we could identify as a social insularity that characterizes much of white Evangelical life (again, at least within certain dominant strands of the movement). As just one example of what such insularity might look like, it is striking that 73% of white Evangelical Republicans said that "a lot of" their friends were voting for Trump, which is striking when compared to only 49% of non-Evangelical Republicans saying the same thing (Cox 2021).

As Aikin and Talisse (2019) have demonstrated, group polarization works in epistemic communities such that less diversity of views represented among a group fosters a normalization of more extreme views within the group. In other words, when people only talk to other people who generally agree with them, the whole group will rarely moderate itself, but in fact collectively slide toward the extreme versions of the broader views held in common.[11] Rather than encouraging each other toward the epistemic (and democratic) virtues of humility, honesty, receptiveness to critique, and attempts to humanize those with whom one disagrees, groups that encourage and facilitate "echo-chambers" regarding their own views, and then seek to undermine the rationality or moral status of those who would offer criticism, are likely then to foster practices that actively undermine such virtues. Although it would be an overstatement to suggest that all white Evangelicals are actively engaged in behavior that facilitates group polarization, the data certainly indicates that it is a troubling trend beginning to appear within large percentages of people who self-identify within such communities.

Speaking to the related dangers of exclusivism, insularity, and authoritativism, in 2011 the Barna Group published a study of reasons why young people were leaving church (Barna 2011). Interestingly, almost all of the reasons illuminate characteristics that have only grown in social prominence in recent years. The six reasons given by the Barna Group are:

1. "Churches seem overprotective".
2. "Teens' and twentysomethings experience Christianity as shallow".
3. "Churches come across as antagonistic to science".
4. "Young Christians' church experience related to sexuality are often simplistic, judgmental".
5. "They wrestle with the exclusive nature of Christianity".
6. "The church feels unfriendly to those who doubt" (Barna 2011).

Notice that most of these reasons speak to the epistemic isolation frequently found in Christian communities, whether Evangelical or not, and the specific ways in which this has, if not directly leading to judgment and dismissal rather than engagement and hospitality, at least kept open room for such exclusionary tendencies to gain increased traction. Interestingly, and in direct resonance with the reasons people are leaving churches, the SBNR are largely opposed to the ideas of judgment and condemnation that so frequently characterize much of the exclusivist characteristics of what passes as "religion" in the U.S. For example, only 30% of the SBNR believe in hell, although 52% believe in heaven (Pew 2021). Relatedly, 78% of the SBNR believe that right and wrong depends on situational contexts and 62% say that scripture is not the word of God (Pew 2021). Pay attention to the resistance to the authoritarian tendencies of religious objectivism here. In light of our

earlier suppositions, it again seems that the SBNR are not rejecting religion, as such, or even theism, or Christianity, more specifically, but particular versions of organized religion, especially Christianity, and maybe specifically dominant strands of white Evangelicalism, that function as authoritative in ways that minimize epistemic responsibility and social engagement with diverse others. My suggestion here is consistent with the way that John Sanders (2020) describes the predominance of "authoritative" religion, in contrast to "nuturant" religion, in American public life. The SBNR seem to have the "authoritative" conception of religion in mind when they affirm their identity as "not religious".

Although, as Sanders warns, we should not confuse white Evangelicals with all of Christianity, and we should not confuse Christianity with all religions represented within the U.S., it is not a stretch to suggest that for many who identify as SBNR, the phrase "not religious" is an attempt to disassociate themselves from the *authoritative* "religious" expressions that sometimes are led to believe in conspiracy theories, resist scientific evidence (consider that white Evangelicals are a significant portion of the people refusing to get the COVID vaccine—see Dias and Graham 2021), and display troubling views of those outside their own community.[12] If one confuses "religion" for these particular social expressions of organized religion, the idea of being "not religious", while still believing in God and engaging in prayer, begins to seem much more understandable. Indeed, in light of what "religion" has looked like in some segments of American polity in recent history, it is no wonder that many have come to see "religion" as a polarizing force that potentially works against the shared social hope that underwrites the idea of democratic life.[13] It should come as no surprise, then, that between 45% and 53% of the SBNR claim that "religion is mostly harmful" (Barna 2017a).[14]

6. "Spiritual"

I have suggested that the SBNR are plausibly rejecting specific historical manifestations of organized religion, as exemplified by prominent strands of white Evangelicalism in the contemporary U.S., that then get confused with "religion" as such. However, just understanding what the SBNR reject is not enough for a full picture of the SBNR. Instead, we need to know what it is that they affirm in their claim to be "spiritual".

Just as the mundane notion of religion is merely a starting point from which then to consider specific historical manifestations of cultural traditions termed "religious," the mundane notion of "spiritual" is merely a broad designator that does not do much critical work. Instead, what it means to be "spiritual" is something functioning internal to a particular hermeneutic framework at a specific time. That said, there are many different ways of making sense of "spiritual" depending on one's cultural background. Yet, as the sociological data shows, the rise of the SBNR in the U.S. seems directly to be occurring at the cost of people identifying with a very specific Christian identity (though this specific rejection then gets expanded to a critique of "religion" more broadly). That is, the SBNR in the U.S. are surely receiving inspiration from a wealth of sources, but their percentage increases are directly tied to the percentage decreases in active participation in Christian church communities in the U.S. As such, it is reasonable to assume, and here I am engaging in a bit of evidentially indicated constructive speculation, that some of what is subsequently understood as "spiritual" would also find roots in those Christian traditions from which the SBNR have (to some extent) also emerged and now distinguish themselves. That said, I am not suggesting that the SBNR have somehow consciously held onto originary Christian spirituality. The phenomenon of "spirituality" on display in their self-conceptions is much broader than that and owes to a variety of possible influences (including problematic orientalist conceptions that linger in American popular culture–see, e.g., Jain 2014). Nonetheless, as we will see, there is still much in the spirituality of the SBNR that resonates decidedly, though not exclusively, with some dynamics of historical Christian spirituality. By tracing some of those possible connections, we are better able to see how there might be reasons to think that the SBNR actually provide resources for

critically assessing some aspects of contemporary "Christian" religious life as problematic even on its own terms.

So, as a way of trying to speculate about what the SBNR are standing *for*, and not simply standing *against*, it is worth phenomenologically attending to what we might locate as the "spiritual" core of much of Christianity that *may* function, often invisibly, as the background conception in the SBNR's own self understanding. There are a variety of options for how to articulate this, but in the broadest terms, I want to suggest that Christian "spirituality" is a name for the depth-dimension by which one's relation to oneself and others is humbled by the awareness of (God's) transcendence. In other words, in general ways, Christian religion is anchored in the spiritual recognition of one's own finitude, vulnerability, and dependency. Yet, similar to Immanuel Kant's notion of the dual effect that occurs in the feeling of the sublime, this acknowledgement of one's own status is not merely negative. Rather, one's created finitude is conditioned by God's investment in history. One's vulnerability is framed in relation to God's love. One's dependency is occasioned by God's relational intimacy. Søren Kierkegaard poetically expresses the essence of Christian spirituality when he notes that it is an "upbuilding thought" to realize that "in relation to God we are always in the wrong" (Kierkegaard 1987, pp. 340–54).

The New Testament is full of examples of the idea of what I am identifying here as "spirituality" as an embrace of one's own lack of self-sufficiency. Let me give just two such textual examples that serve as a helpful archive upon which to draw phenomenologically and hermeneutically in thinking about the SBNR. First, consider the story of the "rich young ruler" (Mark 10:17–27). Here, we find a man who approaches Jesus with a self-assured sense of his own importance. He has kept the commandments since he was a kid. He has done it all right. He has achieved the external social targets that signify one's devotion to the way of Christ. Yet, Jesus's response is not what we might expect. Rather than celebrating how good the young man is, Jesus rebukes his arrogance in thinking that Christian religion is a matter of external status. Instead, the requirement given by Jesus is explicitly framed in terms that challenge the "rich" young ruler's sense of self: sell everything and give it to the poor. The idea here is not that all Christians should sell their possessions, but instead that they should embody lived humility so that their "spiritual" awareness causes them to see the world differently. We might say that Jesus presents the Christian religion as a matter of a kenotic spiritual "optics". Going to church, believing in God, engaging in prayer, and identifying as a Christian is not enough. The passage here in Mark invites a spiritual awakening that suggests a "religion" fails on its own terms if it forgets this lived humility as a constitutive aspect of what it means to claim such an identity.

As a second example, consider the parable of "the Good Samaritan" (Luke 10: 25–37). Although this parable is often deployed in social discourse as a generic stand-in for moral excellence, the specifics of the story are quite illuminating for our purposes here. First, the story is motivated by Jesus claiming that the two most important commands are to love God and to love your neighbor. In response, Jesus is asked who counts as "the neighbor". As with the story of the rich young ruler, the person asking this question was seemingly striving to justify his own righteousness by limiting the scope of his responsibility in ways that made it easier for him to do what is required in ways that could be externally recognized. However, Jesus does not respond in the mode of a philosopher-scientist, but instead in the mode of a poet-pastor. He tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

It is here that the second point worth highlighting emerges. The parable explicitly locates the "religious" people as frequently failing to exemplify one of the two core messages of Christianity: love of neighbor. Instead, it is the Samaritan—a social outcast from a marginalized community—who is held up as the model for Christian living. In this move, Jesus offers a contrast between what I am calling "spirituality" and "religion". He signals that what matters about one's relation to God is one's lived willingness to see God in the face of the other. It should come as no surprise, then, when Jesus claims that "Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to

me" (Matthew 25:40, MSG). Notice, again, the humility that Christian spirituality invites. The idea of being "religious" as an expression of social status, or one's in-group identity, or one's holiness falls flat in light of the actual texts held as authoritative by historical Christian communities.

I do not cite these Biblical passages as theologically authoritative for our work here as philosophers, but instead as evidential support for the idea that Christian "spirituality" is plausibly understood as a depth-dimension that ruptures one's own narrative of self-sufficiency. Identifying religiously as a "Christian" is, according to the very texts appealed to by Christian traditions, not sufficient without the transformed identity that then gets lived out in social ways with others who are too often "overlooked and ignored" by those identifying as "religious". My suggestion is that the SBNR are likely appealing to just such a humbling self-awareness in relation to transcendent excess when they claim for themselves the "spiritual" designator. This general suggestion receives evidential support when we consider that between 40% and 51% of the SBNR claim that a primary mode of their "spiritual practice" involves spending time in nature (Barna 2017a). So, even if "God" is taken in a much more non-descript and looser sense than would be in play in Christianity, the general sense of humility in the face of that which is beyond/excessive/transcendent would seem to apply, nonetheless. This general sense of spirituality also then appears to align with the other-orientation found in historical Christian spirituality. Indeed, only between 11% and 17% of the SBNR identify as "conservative" (Barna 2017a; Pew 2021 finds 15% to be conservative). And, when we push further into specific data on political issues, consistent with the general affirmation of situational ethics, we find that the SBNR are much more committed to political views that attempt to expand freedom and agency to others rather than making sweeping restrictions of such liberty in the name of an overriding moral view. For example, only 25% favor making abortion illegal, 77% support "acceptance" of homosexuals, with 75% supporting marriage equality (Pew 2021). Two notable exceptions to this general trend of political commitments is that 57% do support stronger environmental regulations, and a majority also support governmental aid to the poor (Pew 2021). Importantly, though, these instances of increased governmental involvement, the aim seems to be one of expanded flourishing for others (future generations and the poor, specifically). Notice that in all of these cases, there appears a thoroughgoing devotion to others, rather than to expanded power or self-interest. It is not a stretch to link spiritual practices that encourage humility and connectivity to such social views. In both areas, I contend, the spirituality of the SBNR is consistent with the basic forms of Christian spirituality (even if the specific beliefs about Jesus and the authority of the Bible are radically divergent).

7. "Religious, but Not Spiritual"

Given everything that has been suggested up to this point, I want to propose that new phenomenological engagement with the rise of the SBNR, and the particular modes of "givenness" whereby "religion" is presented within the U.S. and "spirituality" is presented within Christianity, invites the need for a new category to characterize those from whom the SBNR are most directly understood to be differentiated. As I have argued, the SBNR seem to be primarily suspicious of those self-identify as "religious" in organized, exclusivist, insular, and authoritative ways, but yet have abandoned "spiritual" humility (and the other-oriented love that results from it) as a hallmark of their religious existence. The category that I want to propose to get at these complicated sociological dynamics is: *Religious, but not Spiritual* (RBNS).

Although I intend RBNS to be a proposal for a contemporary social category, it is not without historical precedent. I think that it presents the same basic idea that we find in Søren Kierkegaard's "attack on Christendom", Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity", and Martin Luther King Jr.'s critique of "white moderates".[15] All three of these ideas are critiques of institutional expressions of religion in the name of the importance of the spiritual depth that religion is meant to invite, as it were. Specifically,

Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and King are all devoted to the "spiritual" notion of the kenotic logic that we saw in the New Testament, by which "religion" can never be tantamount for exclusivist and insular social power, but instead stands opposed to the idea that wealth, power, status, and privilege are ever signs of righteousness. It is significant that all three thinkers speak to an historical reality in which "religion" has been reframed such that it now signifies a social marker, rather than a spiritual one. Yet, as we saw in the examples of the rich young ruler and the question about who counts as a neighbor, "religion" has long been presented in such ways. It is always easier to think about religion as a matter of social affiliation than it is a matter of transformed selfhood. The spirituality of the SBNR that generally turns inward in order to find a humbled connection with oneself as relate to something bigger than oneself seems to be an attempt to eschew such external markers of status and meaning (see Barna 2017a).

I think that RBNS serves as an accurate category for what we are now seeing so prominently within current American social life. Simply put, and I offer this claim not as a theological judgment, but as a new phenomenological description, many within prominent strands of Christianity, specifically within dominant forms of white Evangelicalism, who identify as determinately religious are seemingly doing so by abandoning the spirituality that their own tradition celebrates. In this way, perhaps rather than be surprised by the rise of the SBNR, we should be surprised that more who identify as Christian do not include themselves in the SBNR category in order to stand opposed to the givenness of the RBNS as such a prominent manifestation of what "religion" has, at least to some degree in some spaces within American public life, been allowed to become

On this point, it is worth considering a few other alternatives that would lie between SBNR and RBNS. The obvious option would be "religious and also spiritual", but this is a difficult category to consider according to the terms that we have outlined here since the spiritual dimension would require a rethinking of how the category of "religion" gets conceived in relation to our case study of dominant modes of white Evangelicalism. In other words, the "religious and also spiritual" would likely understand appropriately invested spirituality as the hallmark of religious identity. At the most basic level, the insularity, the authoritarianism, and exclusivism would be significantly softened, if not outright rejected, such that we would see the "religious and also spiritual" as manifesting what John Sanders (2020) terms "nuturant religion" as opposed to "authoritative religion". Nonetheless, the organized dynamics of even "nuturant" religious communities would be organized in ways that would likely give the SBNR significant pause.

A recent Barna study formulates an alternative category that I think does important work explaining the lack of Christian embrace of the SBNR moniker: "love Jesus but not the church" (Barna 2017a, 2017b). Those who love Jesus but not the church are similar to the SBNR in a variety of ways such that they also no longer seen organized religion as the best space for spiritual life. Moreover, they explicitly locate "spirituality" as a key aspect of their lived existence. However, the main distinction from the SBNR is that those who love Jesus but not the church tend to retain more traditional conceptions of God in line with Christian theism. Those who love Jesus more than the church also show a decided preference for a more nuturant conception of religion, generally. They are decidedly less exclusivist as compared to Evangelicals, as can be seen by the fact that 46% either "somewhat" or "strongly" agree that "all religions basically teach the same thing", as opposed to only 1% of Evangelicals (Barna 2017b).

The categories of "religious and also spiritual" and, especially, of "those who love Jesus but not the church" help to explain why those Christians who would oppose the RBNS do not necessarily need to move all the way to identifying with the SBNR in order to express such a critical position. Nonetheless, I do think that the RBNS category is helpful in allowing that critique itself to be more socially prominent as a distinct phenomenon. In order to flesh out this idea a bit, let us turn to an example from recent Christian history that I think does similar work in revealing how it is possible for those who identity as

"religious" to fail to be appropriately "spiritual"—as understood in their own tradition(s): Bonhoeffer's account of why he is so uncomfortable around the "religious".

Listen to Bonhoeffer's letter from prison dated 30 April 1944:

> I often ask myself why a "Christian instinct'" often draws me more to the religionless people than to the religious, by which I do not in the least mean with any evangelizing intention, but, I might almost say, "in brotherhood". While I am often reluctant to mention God by name to religious people—because that name somehow seems to me here not to ring true, and I feel myself to be slightly dishonest (it is particularly bad when others start to talk in religious jargon; I then dry up almost completely and feel awkward and uncomfortable)—to people with no religion I can on occasion mention him by name quite calmly and as a matter of course... (Bonhoeffer 1967, pp. 141–42)

Here, we find Bonhoeffer frustrated with "religious" people because they have abandoned a way of life by which the name 'God' would "ring true". But, with the "people with no religion", and here we might insert the SBNR, he claims that he can "mention him [God] by name quite calmly and as a matter of course". Interestingly, he stresses that he can talk about God with the "religionless" (or as I am suggesting SBNR) because they, unlike the "religious" (or as I am suggesting RBNS), appreciate the humility invited by spirituality, whether then presented in historically determinate religious communities or not. In this way, Bonhoeffer precludes neither being "religious and also spiritual"—indeed, that is where he would likely self-identify despite his own explicit stand against the German Lutheran embrace of National Socialism—nor "those who love Jesus but not the church"—which is where I would locate Kierkegaard, for example, and also Bonhoeffer's own account of "religionless Christianity"—but instead acknowledges the need for a way to mark those who still cultivate an appreciation of transcendence (SBNR) while standing against something quite determinate (RBNS).

Following Bonhoeffer's lead in critiquing the "religious" in his own time, and Jesus's challenge to non-spirited religion in his own, it is tempting to conclude that *RBNS is best viewed as a social/political framework that presents itself as a theological view*. For example, despite the fact that 92% of Evangelicals identify as "spiritual" (Barna 2017b), when understood in the specifically insular, exclusivist, and authoritative mode that is so prominent as to often be confused for "religion", itself, within much of American social life, white Evangelicalism more aptly describes a commitment to a particular vision of social life than it does to the way of Christ (as shown in the Biblical passages that we have considered, Bonhoeffer's lived example, and John Sanders' account of nuturant Christianity).

In conclusion, then, without wanting to suggest any sort of Rahnerian notion of an "anonymous Christian", which I take to be a potentially patronizing and dismissive relationship to others, approaching SBNR in light of RBNS as a contrast facilitates a better appreciation of not only approximately 1 in 5 American adults, but also the important complexity that attends the very ideas of "religion" and "spirituality" in the first place, whether considered in sociological, theological, or philosophical analyses. In this way, philosophy of religion can, and should, be increasingly (new) phenomenologically attentive and hermeneutically aware of the ways that its basic ideas are often conceptually contested and socially fraught. Thus, alongside "religious and also spiritual", and "those who love Jesus but not the church", RBNS is a needed category for philosophical inquiry because it allows us to better "see" what is plausibly given/revealed about the SBNR in the sociological data, and also about ourselves as we interpret and respond to such data. More importantly, though, when read through a new phenomenological lens, these categories provide opportunities to better "see" the diverse people using such descriptors as ways of positioning themselves in relationship to each other.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Notes

1   Although the "nones" and the SBNR are not identical groups, i.e., SBNR are nones, but not all nones self-identify as SBNR, they are often discussed interchangeably at the level of demographic trends and even in terms of their particular existential orientations. See, for example, Mercadante (2014, 2020). For an early account of the emergence of the SBNR, see Fuller (2001).

2   A critic might suggest that this general thesis is quite trivial, but beyond mere semantic indication, I do not believe it is. Exactly what is meant by "religious" and "spiritual" is decidedly unclear in much of the sociological data. They are hermeneutically opaque.

3   For a suggestion of how philosophy of religion can engage critical theory of religion in constructive ways to undertake such an investigation into the category of "religion," see Simmons (Forthcoming).

4   I should make clear that I am not proposing this as a legitimate philosophical definition of "religion," but simply trying to capture the general sense of the term as deployed in social discourse. Elsewhere I have offered more sustained considerations of philosophical definitions of "religion," see (Simmons 2015).

5   By "theism," here, I simply mean a conscious affirmation of "belief in God". Importantly, this does not say anything about which "God" is being affirmed. For more on the various conceptions of God prominently on display in American society, see Froese and Bader (2010). Additionally, Barna (2017b) explains that the SBNR have a range of conceptions of "God". Some of these conceptions would likely stretch traditional conceptions of "theism" such that they are decidedly not monotheistic and non-personal, but given Froese and Bader's analysis, coupled with the fact that the research questions are asked regarding "belief in God" as opposed to notions of divinity, transcendence, etc., I think that for the sake of our discussion here, "theism" in a very big-tent conception would still rightly apply.

6   Interestingly, when the question is shifted from "prayer or meditation" to focus exclusively on prayer, the percentages drop to 21–22% (Barna 2017b).

7   For more on how phenomenology can be understood in relation to religion, see Simmons and Benson (2013).

8   I acknowledge that due to the variety of ways that phenomenology can be understood, there is an ongoing debate in the scholarship about how narrowly or broadly to define it. The reason that I have decided in this essay to describe what I am doing as in line with "new" phenomenology, specifically, rather than phenomenology more generally, is because I want to push back on the "classical" conception of "transcendental" phenomenology (as outlined by Husserl) as the only, or even best, way to understand phenomenology as a lived philosophical practice. The distinctions between transcendental, genetic, and generative phenomenology are well known in the field, and what underwrites such debates is the varied views on the role of classical phenomenological aspects such as the epoché, reduction(s), intentionality, horizons, the relation of description to normativity, and the "as such" structure. Dan Zahavi (2019) has recently suggested that there might be times, even in more mainstream phenomenology, that something as seemingly foundational as the epoché needs rethought as not so essential. I have argued at lengh elsewhere (see Simmons and Benson (2013)) that new phenomenology, in particular, allows for a more broadly conceived phenomenological project in that it (1) focuses on phenomenality, as such, rather than simply on specific phenomena; (2) admits the normative claims deployed in all descriptive accounts; (3) challenges the centrality of the epoché and intentionality to phenomenological inquiry (explicitly in its focus on excess and non-standard modes of unapparent givennesss); (4) abandons the narrow desire to be a "rigorous science" that speaks to universal experience, but instead attempts to make rigorous sense of the ways that subjectivity and lived existence rarely admit of such universal/objective perspectives. This is important for my account because I anticipate that some critics would suggest that what I am doing here is not phenomenology because I do not walk through the orthodox steps of that method. I am sympathetic to such a critique in that I readily admit that I am not doing transcendental phenomenology here. Yet, such an objection would delimit the practice of phenomenology in ways that, again as I and others have argued, are certainly contestible as too narrow. New phenomenology, specifically, is not simply a matter of accurate description of intentional correlates, say, but rather a matter of patient interrogation of the world in order to invite transformed living—consider, e.g., Emmanuel Levinas's analysis of the face as a call for an invested concern for the Other, Jacques Derrida's description of "justice" in order to invite expanded "democratic" practice, Jean-Louis Chrétien's account of what it means to stand "under the gaze" of the Bible, or Michel Henry's critique of "barbarism" in the name of a vibrant commitment to culture creation. In all these examples, new phenomenology seeks to understand the givenness of that which is given in order to better make sense of one's own place in the context of meaning whereby such givenness occurs and is received. In that sense, what I am trying to do here is offer a new phenomenological reading of the phenomenon of the SBNR as a social reality by describing the categories being given/revealed in their self-descriptions as revelatory of broader conceptions, and helpful for subsequent critiques, of particular manifestations of religious and spiritual life.

9   For more on the complicated task of navigating Evangelicalism in the U.S., see Noll et al. (2019).

10 There is a wealth of literature making this case, but as just a few examples all considering different aspects of the legacy of the slide of white Evangelicals toward a Trumpist present, see Fea (2018), Balmer (2007), and Kobes Du Mez (2020).

11 For more on how such deep disagreement functions in polarized society, see Talisse (2009).

12 For an excellent account of how white Evangelical resistance to abortion, and the birth of the Religious Right more generally, is actually rooted in racism, see Balmer (2014).

13 In the attempt to be careful about my normative claims in relation to the categories I am attempting to describe, I am trying to be restrained in my judgment here. But, just to be clear, I do think that epistemic isolationism and authoritarianism are directly at odds with the ideals and social hope of democratic society. However, my qualifiers are meant to resist the notion that such aspects are somehow essential to religion, Christianity, or even Evangelicalism, as such.

14 Barna (2017a) speaks of two different ways of defining the SBNR and so when I give the range of percentages, it reflects that even slight differences of definition will yield different data regarding the views of those designated as "SBNR".

15 For excellent considerations of the relation between Bonhoeffer and King, see Roberts (2005), and Jenkins and McBride (2010). I have also written on the social ramifications of the theolgoical approaches of these thinkers, see Simmons (2021).

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