

The Nones, Dones and SBNRs in a Ministry Context

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Abstract

As more and more Americans relinquish specific religious identities in favor of being “Spiritual But Not Religious,” the movement has earned its own acronym... *SBNR*. Along with the designation of *SBNR*, two additional categories have emerged known as “none” (no particular affiliation) and “done” (no longer affiliated).

The rise “Nones, Dones and *SBNRs*” in America’s spiritual landscape is a source of heated debate in many theological circles, and as one might expect, opinions are divided along party lines. Conventional religious communities think it's unacceptable to "cherry pick" spiritual ideas and cobble together a personal theology. And on the other side of the aisle, progressive thinkers and mystics can't imagine relating to the divine any other way.

As an example of two vastly different views from noted theologians, Harvard Divinity professor Harvey Cox observes that "people are drawn more to the experiential than to the doctrinal elements of religion" (2009, p. 13). And in stark contrast, Rev. Lillian Daniel disdainfully refers to *SBNR* theology as a "cheap god of self-satisfaction" (2013, p. 10)

This paper explores a spectrum of beliefs, assumptions and attitudes engaging the Nones, Dones and *SBNRs* (N/D/*SBNR*) in a ministry context, with a particular focus on how some congregations and spiritual organizations reach these groups with their marketing messages.

Introduction: Jesus was a “Done”

In a recent conversation with a group of professional chaplains in an online chat room, I posted the question, “How do you engage the None, Dones and *SBNR* population?”

The answers were diverse, as expected, and included a full spectrum of strategies, beliefs, assumptions and attitudes. On one end of the spectrum, Rev. Maggie Yenoki, a Unitarian minister, explained that she follows Unitarian Universalist principle #4, which upholds the idea of “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” accepting any and all religious perspectives. On the other end of the spectrum, Rev. Lew Button, an evangelical minister, said, “We try to present the message without some of the things often associated with church.” When I asked him what the message was, he replied, “It is all about Jesus” (Daniel 2017).

From my perspective as a card-carrying SBNR, Lew’s response pinpointed the exact reason why so many Americans have moved away from traditional religious systems into the ambiguous zone known as *Nones, Dones and SBNR*.

Because it’s not all about Jesus for everybody.

As Putnam’s study noted, most of us now *choose* our religious preferences rather than *inheriting* them, and the study found that “Roughly half of white Americans have departed from their parents’ religious stance, either through switching to a different religious tradition or through lapsing into religious indifference” (2010, p. 159).

Religious models like Lew’s claim to be the exclusive keepers of a unique and absolute truth about the nature of reality. The ambiguity of a spiritual rather than religious outlook can be uncomfortable for those steeped in creed-bound or bible-based religious views. As Cox states, spirituality [vs. religiosity] can be perceived as dissent (2009, p. 23), and dissent has traditionally been discouraged by the church. But Jesus himself was a dissenter. Even though he followed the customs of his Jewish heritage, his personal theology, as we understand it, was the polar opposite of the beliefs held by the cult of Yahweh. While the god of the Hebrew scriptures was

“assumed to hate anyone that the nation of Israel hated” (Spong 1998, p. 47), Jesus changed the face of that god to one who loved, accepted and forgave everybody, regardless of social status, nationality, religious community or gender (Gal. 3:28, Revised Standard Version).

It may be “all about Jesus” for Lew and his congregation, but Jesus was all about shaking up the popular faith of the day and challenging rules, laws and images of God that no longer served the population. It may even be accurate to say that Jesus was a “Done,” and the shake-up he instigated forged the roots of the Christian faith. Today’s movement toward the more spiritually-spacious view of the N/D/SBNRs does not *challenge* traditional faith, but instead, gives that faith more meaning through teachings and practices that have more relevant, more personal application in today’s world. In a Christian context, as Cox observes, Christianity is still alive and well, but “in movements that accent spiritual experience, discipleship and hope; pay scant attention to creeds; and flourish without hierarchies” (2009, p. 8).

In this paper I will address three questions:

1. What are the people in my immediate area doing instead of attending worship?
2. The perspective of a congregation outside my own tradition
3. How does the increase in Nones, Dones and SBNRs affect my ministry?

1. What are the people in my immediate area doing instead of attending worship?

This question implies that attending worship in the traditional sense (i.e., in a church) is somehow expected or normative, but that is an snapshot of life from the 1950s, a period that Putnam calls “the high tide of civic religion” (2010, p. 82). The idea that doing anything other than Christian worship on Sunday morning is indicative of moral turpitude is no longer sustainable in a world where family time, social interaction, engaging with nature, reading, exercise and various forms of self-care are understood as holy practices. N/D/SBNRs find that the

idea of God existing in all expressions of the cosmos and in all aspects of human experience is far more useful. As Mercadante points out, SBNR thinking “relocates authority from external to internal” (2014, p. 192). Instead of being separate from the energetic force known as *God*, we are actually part of it, and can take it with us wherever we go. Instead of God directing us from afar, it is a two-way conversation in which energy flows to us from a divine source, but also emanates *from* us back to that source, as a two-way conversation that makes every experience an act of co-creation. Instead bowing down to an all-powerful man-in-the-sky, the N/D/SBNR population is looking for something more life-affirming and more nurturing than “a barbaric god and a world full of humans who are little more than guilt-filled creatures” (Spong 2016).

As Drescher describes, the N/D/SBNRs do not want to be “captured.” They are more interested in *being* than in *believing*, and do not require a statement of faith or a lifelong commitment to something that by its very nature, is dynamic and changeable. Drescher says, “We have to think hard about how we can sustain relationships with people who are stopping in, not seeing them as potential members, but as whole human beings (Darling 2016).

What does “stopping in” look like for churches trying to reach out to N/D/SBNRs?

One Presbyterian church in my progressive California neighborhood added yoga and meditation classes to its weekly calendar, hung Buddhist prayer flags in the tree outside the church, and started serving cookies and coffee to passers-by on Saturday mornings. While this program brought people in to the classes and created opportunities for conversation on the front lawn, the church pastor lamented that nobody actually came in to the church. From my perspective as an SBNR, the issue is not about whether a church offers yoga classes, welcomes the GLBTQ community or serves organic fair trade coffee. It’s more about the need to renovate a

stale old fear-based theology that is no longer workable for mature, thinking people. Passers-by may enjoy chatting with their neighbors over coffee and coming to yoga classes, but they don't want to be proselytized. They want to be respected for the path that they're on, rather than being told that they're on the wrong one.

Putnam observed that the majority of the non-religious in America were raised in religious homes, and more than half had some sort of religious education as children (2010. p. 147). While a basic religious education and familiarity with cultural norms and traditions can contribute to a well-rounded perspective, some forms of religious indoctrination can be severely wounding, causing someone to run in terror from anything resembling a religious system. Nate Phelps is the son of noted evangelical extremist Fred Phelps, founder of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church and the "God Hates Fags" movement. Nate fled the cult on his 18th birthday in 1976, and went on to form a group called *Recovering From Religion*, which offers a step-by-step program for those wishing to "leave religion and spirituality behind" (Exit Track).

While leaving spirituality behind (vs. religion) may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater, Phelps and others who recognize the dangers of bad theology are in good company. Episcopal priest Matthew Fox proposed a "new reformation" in 2005 when he published his 95 Theses or Articles of Faith for a Christianity for the Third Millennium and tacked it to the door of Wittenberg church where Martin Luther displayed his original 95 Theses in the year 1517 (Fox, 2006, n.p.). Fox rejected concepts like original sin, eternal punishment and a humanoid god who has an opinion about how we behave, and replaced them with a god that is more spiritual than religious. A sampling from Fox's theses includes:

- . The notion of a punitive, all-male God is contrary to the full nature of the Godhead who is as much female and motherly as it is masculine and fatherly.
- . Religion is not necessary but spirituality is.
- . Ideology is not theology, and ideology endangers the faith because it replaces thinking with obedience, and distracts from the responsibility of theology to adapt the wisdom of the past to today's needs. Instead of theology it demands loyalty oaths to the past.
- . God speaks today as in the past through all religions and all cultures and all faith traditions none of which is perfect and an exclusive avenue to truth but all of which can learn from each other.

Fox's views exemplify what the N/D/SBNRs in my community are striving for... a new definition of the divine based on inclusion, ethics and love (both brotherly and universal). For Christians, that includes everything that Jesus taught, but does necessarily have to include the doctrines and dogmas established by the church.

2. The perspective of a congregation outside my own tradition

From 1997 to 2007, I was actively involved with a group called The American Humanist Association (AHA), which describes Humanism as "an ethical and life-affirming philosophy free of belief in any gods and other supernatural forces" (2017, *What is the mission of the AHA?*). Although I held many supernatural beliefs, such as the continuation of consciousness after physical death and the exploration of other realms of consciousness through out-of-body-journeying, I joined AHA and served on its board because I agreed with their stance against biblical fundamentalism, and I admired their social activism.

When my first book came out in 2007, I got a call from the AHA president, who politely informed me that my book's support of communication with spirits did not agree with Humanist

ideals. I was asked to resign from the board, from the organization and from my designation as an ordained Humanist minister.

In order to fulfill the requirement for this paper that I interview a congregational leader from a tradition that is not my own, I spoke with Fred Edwards, past AHA executive director, editor of the *Humanist* magazine and chair of the *Humanist Manifesto III* drafting committee. When asked if he thought if Nones and Dones were the primary audience for AHA's outreach, he stated, "We directly appeal to those who hold to a matrix of views that we espouse. We try to be specific in targeting our audience. It isn't enough to just be a None or a Done. We just prefer to lay our ideas out on the table and receive those who say, 'This is what I've been all my life; I just didn't have a name for it.'" (Edwards, 2107).

AHA's guiding document, *The Humanist Manifesto*, has existed since 1933, and is now in its third iteration. It clearly spells out the ideas and beliefs of the organization, and one could say that it serves as a creed or a doctrinal statement. Fred says, " We have a clear set of philosophical ideas and ethical values, and we are looking for people, regardless of their "spirituality" or lack thereof, who are in harmony with them" (Edwards, 2107). Although AHA offers classes in Humanism to anyone who's interested, the organization does not actively pursue "seekers," but prefers to limit its outreach efforts to those who are already aligned with Humanist principles.

Fred's preference for preaching to the choir doesn't presume that outsiders *need* what Humanism offers. By contrast, evangelical churches like Rev. Lew Button's operate on the biblical edict from Matthew 28:19 to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In addition to interviewing Edwards

about AHA, I also interviewed Lew, who is ordained by the Churches of God General Conference, but refers to himself as a “recovering fundamentalist.” He believes that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and because this is true, he “cannot just sit on it.” He believes that the Bible is true and is the essence of spirituality, but also recognizes that “the way the message has been shared has not been healthy or even biblical” (Button, 2017).

Somewhere on the spectrum between these Fred and Lew we find Maggie Yenoki’s Unitarian strategy to “engage the public in many programs, protests, and possibilities that nourish the passions of all faith traditions.”

3. How does the increase in Nones, Dones and SBNRs affect my ministry?

Although my work as an a clinical chaplain gives me the opportunity to work with individuals from all faith traditions, my primary ministry work is done as the founder of a non-profit organization that produces an annual conference dedicated to exploring death and the afterlife from an interfaith perspective. So there are two parts to my ministry... working with hospital and hospice patients of all faiths, and working with the attendees at the conference, who tend to be N/D/SBNRs . On the chaplaincy side, the emerging SBNR presence does not have a significant impact, because I am already well-versed in interacting with that population. If anything, having more N/D/SBNRs in the community makes my job as a chaplain easier, because they generally bring less dogma-based fears to the experience of illness, trauma, death and grief (Mercadante 2014, p. 206).

Unlike traditional ministers who are working to understand and engage SBNRs, I am approaching the issue from the opposite direction. My challenge, in this context, would be to reach out to those who are aligned with traditional religious systems. But like Fred Edwords

from the American Humanist Association, my ministry is not concerned with “bringing non-believers into the fold.” I am content to preach to the choir, and the N/D/SBNR community is a very large choir.

However, I still need to fill seats at the conference, just as congregational ministers need to fill seats in their churches. So in order to answer the question of how the N/D/SBNR trend affects my ministry, I have taken a closer look at the mission of the conference, and identified specific points that have an appeal wide enough to speak to the religious and the non-religious alike:

- . We help our followers find peace when facing death, loss and bereavement
- . We support their spiritual exploration in whatever form it happens to take
- . We address social issues such as hospice care, death education, end-of-life planning, assisted death and end-of-life training for physicians
- . We offer religious education in the form of interfaith dialog regarding spiritual/mystical death and grief practices across cultures.
- . We use rituals, ceremonies, meditations and prayer to expand our understanding of death and beyond

Conclusion

A 2010 survey by the Barna Group estimates that “by the end of the next decade, 40% of all church-attending Christians will be worshipping God outside the parameters of a traditional congregational context” (Tickle 2012, p. 183). Spirituality is an expression of our relationship with unseen forces in the non-physical world, and as humanity evolves, that relationship evolves too. It is not possible for that relationship to be stagnant, because nothing in the universe is stagnant.

As an interfaith minister who chooses to respect the innate wisdom of the soul vs. the doctrines of men, I prefer to think that we are all guided by an inner compass that directs our spiritual leanings, and each of us is on a unique spiritual growth trajectory. This is true for individuals and their spiritual paths, but also true for communities, organizations, cultures and nations. Spiritual awareness and our understanding of the divine is a dynamic process, constantly changing and constantly subject to review and adjustment.

Consider the way we receive religious teachings as children, and how, as we mature, our critical thinking skills help us discern what makes sense and what does not. Children raised as Christians or Jews are told biblical stories and inculcated with images of God that translate, in the mind of a four-year old, as an invisible but all-powerful parent figure that watches over humanity and uses magical powers to make things happen. According to Fowler's research, (1981), as a child moves through the developmental stages during its lifespan, these images may change from an immature depiction of the spiritual world to one in which there is a more universal awareness of divine presence. I suggest that this developmental progression applies to communities and cultures as well as individuals. It could be said that 3500 years ago, at the beginning of monotheism, humanity had the mind of a four year-old, but now our spiritual understanding is maturing, hence the N/D/SBNR movement.

Bass points out that spiritual awakening "is the work of learning to see differently" (2012, p. 220). The N/D/SBNRs are doing that work, and their new way of seeing is paving the way to new ways of knowing God and understanding our place in the universe.

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