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# Something besides monotheism: Sociotheological boundary work among the spiritual, but not religious



Paul K. McClure

Baylor University, Sociology Department, One Bear Place, #97326, Waco, TX 76798, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 10 June 2016

Received in revised form 4 November 2016

Accepted 9 January 2017

Available online 7 February 2017

### Keywords:

Religion

Spirituality

Boundary work

Sociotheology

Culture

Omnivorousness

## ABSTRACT

The expression “spiritual, but not religious” (SBNR) has gained considerable traction among sociologists of religion and culture, media outlets, and the broader public in recent years. Though the expression itself has achieved wide appeal, few studies have explored what SBNRs believe about God, religion, or spirituality. This paper uses survey data from Wave IV of the Baylor Religion Survey (2014) and draws from the theory of “cultural omnivorousness” to show that SBNRs have significant sociotheological differences when compared to those who are both religious and spiritual (RAS). The expression “spiritual, but not religious” is more than a manifestation of religious deinstitutionalization or “believing without belonging.” Rather, being “spiritual, but not religious” involves sociotheological boundary work that distinguishes SBNRs from traditional monotheists. When compared to RAS respondents, SBNRs are more likely to view God as a higher power or cosmic force instead of a personal being and are more likely to adopt an individualistic ethic as opposed to finding moral authority in God or Scripture. By examining the historical context and sociotheological characteristics of SBNRs, this paper locates a boundary between SBNRs and RAS monotheists and offers theoretical reasons why SBNRs engage in sociotheological boundary work.

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## 1. Introduction

*To priests, least of all, are you inclined to listen. They have long been outcasts for you, and are declared unworthy of your trust, because they like best to lodge in the battered ruins of their sanctuary and cannot, even there, live without disfiguring and destroying it still more.*

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1799)

*I think the term for me would be more spiritual than religious.*

Justin Timberlake (Larry King Live, 2001)

The growth of the “spiritual, but not religious” (SBNRs) in recent decades has prompted sociologists to shift their focus towards this sizable portion of the population. Using data from the World Values Survey, Houtman and Aupers (2007) found that from 1981 to 2000, “post-Christian spirituality” expanded in eleven of fourteen countries they studied. Chaves (2011)

E-mail address: [paul\\_mcclure@baylor.edu](mailto:paul_mcclure@baylor.edu) (P.K. McClure).

similarly documents the steady rise of SBNRs, who as a growing minority climbed from 11% of the population in 1998 to 18% in 2008. Recently, data from the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) show that SBNRs now account for approximately 27% of the American population, a figure on par with self-identifying Catholics (25%) and Evangelicals (28%).<sup>1</sup> Though SBNRs have always been a part of America's religious history, few social scientists know much about their sociodemographic makeup or their (anti-) religious beliefs and practices. In analyzing these specific beliefs and practices, this paper makes use of what Juergensmeyer (2013) calls "the sociotheological turn" and aims to delineate the social and theological characteristics of SBNRs. Accordingly, a number of questions related to SBNR beliefs, behaviors, and belonging animate this project. For instance, are SBNRs simply a manifestation of religious deinstitutionalization, what Grace Davie calls "believing without belonging" (Davie, 2013; Mercadante, 2014)? Is SBNR identity a byproduct of religious aversion in the era of late modern capitalism (Huss, 2014) or perhaps the postmodern consequence of spiritual seeking, shopping, or tinkering (Bellah, 1985; Roof, 2001; Wuthnow, 1998, 2010)? Or does claiming SBNR status imply a different sociotheological agenda, one that diverges from the historic Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions?

To answer these questions, this paper will first observe some early and important traces of SBNRs in American religious history. In doing so, this paper aims to situate SBNRs in their proper historical context and correct the misunderstanding that SBNRs constitute an entirely new type of spiritual species. While the presence of SBNRs in American religion is not a new phenomenon, what may be novel is that SBNRs now appear across the religious landscape in greater numbers than in previous eras.

Second, this paper seeks to uncover the sociotheological correlates of SBNR self-identification. I will not attempt to offer my own novel definition of religion or spirituality, though considerable progress has been made to establish essential areas of overlap between religion and spirituality (Ammerman, 2013; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Hill et al., 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1997) as well as critical points of discontinuity (Huss, 2014; Marler & Hadaway, 2002). Aside from these important contributions, this paper generally agrees with Huss (2014, p. 47), who argues that "contemporary spirituality challenges the division created in the modern era between the religious and secular realms of life and enables the formation of new lifestyles, social practices, and cultural artifacts that cannot be defined as either religious or secular."

To unpack these categorical distinctions, a pertinent question for this study is what people mean when they identify themselves as "spiritual, but not religious." Despite its popularity, the SBNR expression is only conceptually significant if we know how SBNRs stand out among other types of spiritual and religious configurations. Further, while the theological orientation of SBNRs aims for inclusivity, there are limits to this openness that can be detected empirically and theoretically understood by observing parallels in the sociology of culture. I will argue that Peterson's research on "cultural omnivores," who demonstrate high social status through an expansive consumption of cultural objects and activities once considered illegitimate, provides a model for understanding SBNRs (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992; Peterson, 1992, 2005). Extending Peterson's research, Bryson's (1996) study of omnivores, whose musical preferences included "anything but heavy metal," can be used to explain why SBNRs are spiritually inclusive but exclusive of monotheistic traditions.

Finally, from the data and theory presented, I will argue that the "spiritual, but not religious" formula functions as sociotheological boundary work that SBNRs employ to distinguish themselves from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim monotheists.<sup>2</sup> Related to this, I will show that SBNR identity is not simply a sociologically expedient catch-all for spiritual nomads who cannot find a religious home. To be sure, SBNRs are far from a homogenous group, but neither are they spiritual free agents independent of one another. On the contrary, SBNRs have a distinct, identifiable history (Fuller, 2001), a culture of their own (Bender, 2010), and a specific demographic makeup—mostly white, highly educated, and city dwelling. The SBNR phenomenon warrants further research not only because it is growing (Heelas, Woodhead, Seel, Szerszynski, & Tusting, 2005; Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Chaves, 2011), but also because it contains a number of theological and moral assumptions that have social consequences (Jang & Franzen, 2013). Taken together, the sociotheological characteristics of SBNRs help distinguish them from other types of religious and spiritual people, and these distinctions reveal a sociotheological boundary that has to this date been undisclosed in either the sociology of culture or religion.

## 2. Early signs of sociotheological boundaries

In the two hundred years since Friedrich Schleiermacher addressed his cultured despisers, the religiously discontent have made greater inroads into American culture. While the religious landscape in the United States has always been diverse and dynamic, the rise of post-Christian spirituality cannot be attributed solely to the effects of the 1960s counterculture. Today, given the prominence of SBNRs, finding a logic to the "spiritual, but not religious" expression requires both historical

<sup>1</sup> These categories are not mutually exclusive, however, since some respondents identify as both SBNR and Christian. This survey also allows for multiple ways to measure SBNRs. Using cross-tabs from two other variables—*How religious do you consider yourself to be?* *How spiritual do you consider yourself to be?*—a more modest estimate yields that 21.12% of respondents claim to be both somewhat/very spiritual and not/slightly religious. In earlier research, Fuller (2001, p. 10) estimates that SBNRs constitute about 20 percent of all Americans.

<sup>2</sup> Religious and spiritual (RAS) respondents are treated interchangeably with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim monotheists in this paper. A Pearson correlation reveals that RAS respondents are highly correlated with monotheists, and in the BRS IV, 91.72% of all RAS respondents identify as Christian, Jewish, or Muslim.

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