

The Future of Spirituality and Traditional Religion

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## INTRODUCTION

Quest Club has a way to push ourselves out of our comfort zones, and this topic suggested by Mick Parrott has definitely been a challenge for the scientist in me. A great deal of credit for this paper goes to my sister Angie Quinn and my husband Jon Yankowiak that are both present today.

For the first time in writing a Quest Paper, I turned to my friends on Facebook and asked for help in finding resources for this topic. I had great suggestions from my friends and my first step was exploring the suggested resources. My dear friend Holly Sutter gave me some great direction with this perspective: “religion gives us the framework of how ‘to do’ God and living (social aspects, balancing daily life, and being human with other humans). Then there is the other piece – direct experience of God which is spirituality, is open to everyone, and is accessible without a priest, minister, or intermediary.”

The search for meaning, connection, God, and living a good life is the Quest that many of us in this room are on today. Many people believe in some higher power, something bigger that is outside of ourselves. Something the science has not been able to prove, but still there are many that believe in God. What is it that moves through all things? Is this quest for connection fully human or do other species, past and present, seek meaning beyond survival?

When teasing out what is “traditional religion”, how far do we go back? There is so much that has been lost throughout human existence. There are religious traditions that weave in and out of many modern-day religions. When and where did these traditions start? When did humans

begin to pass down rituals and possessions that tried to explain the connection to something bigger outside of oneself? Our worldviews are very much connected to our sense of community.

## THE PAST

Discoveries brought forth by scientists in 2015 from the Rising Star cave system, about 25 miles northwest of Johannesburg, unearthed evidence that suggests the earliest intentional burials occurred between 335,000 and 241,000 years ago. Other animals such as elephants and chimpanzees show mortuary behavior such as keeping watch over a dead body. What was discovered at this site in South Africa is what scientists describe as funerary behavior, indicating “intentional social acts by beings capable of complex thought who understand themselves to be separate from the natural world and who recognize the significance of the deceased.” Evidence of funerary behavior is evident in modern humans and many instances in Neanderthals. Interestingly, the Rising Star cave system burials predate previously discovered intentional burials by 100,000 years and performed by a newly discovered hominid – *Homo naledi* - a hominid with a brain size of only a third of all of us sitting in this room today (Romey, 2023).

During the peer-review process, anthropologist Agustin Fuentes reported in the Daily Princetonian “The *Homo naledi* brought their dead down into this really deep, hard-to-get-to cave space and then buried them down there... [it requires] a lot of coordination, cooperation, foresight, compassion, and care for the dead” (Fazel-Zarandi and Hartman-Sigall, 2023). How many generations of *Homo naledi* passed down these funerary processes and we may never know how much of these rituals can be found in the way we mourn the dead today?

## PARAMETERS

Traditional religions, also known as folk religions, are “faiths closely associated with a particular group of people, ethnicity, or tribe. They often have no formal creeds or sacred texts” (Pew Research Center (2), 2015). In 2010, about 405 million or 6% of the global population adhered to traditional religions of which 90% live in Asia-Pacific areas. In North America, it is estimated that over 1 million people or 0.3% of the population in 2010 practiced traditional religions. Moving forward in this paper, the term “traditional religions” will refer to these populations and I will adopt the broader term “religious traditions” to describe broader religious concepts during the course of this paper (Pew Research Center (2), 2015).

To look into the future of religious traditions and spirituality, we need to consider common ground of these concepts. In 2015, the International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences defines religious traditions as “broad understandings of the supernatural produced in societies and practiced by groups and individuals” (Skerkat, 2015). Cultures from our deep past and today are interwoven with religious traditions that reflect the desire to connect with what is something that we cannot understand with our five senses.

From the Oxford Languages Dictionary, spirituality is “the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things” (Oxford, 2024). However, spirituality is very hard to define as it is individualized as compared to religious traditions. Is there a connection with shift from religious traditions towards spirituality in our world that increasingly embraces individuality?

## THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The Pew Research Center published a report in December 2023 titled “Spirituality Among Americans” that explored the connection or disconnection between those that consider themselves religious and/or spiritual. This study concluded that 7 in 10 American adults describe themselves as spiritual or say the spirituality is important in their lives. Researchers followed up with this 70% and ask what is essential to being spiritual to them. The results show that 74% said it is “being connected to something bigger than myself” followed by 70% stated it is “being connected to God.” As described earlier, religious traditions may have started to set us apart from nature, but 43% in this study say being spiritual means “being connected to nature”. Interestingly, 31% believe spirituality means “being connected with loved ones who have passed.” Which brings us back to why hominids begin to intentionally bury their dead. Interestingly, 50% of those that say they are spiritual believe graveyards, cemeteries or other memorial sites have spiritual energies, which brings us back to consider the long tradition of burials and the indication of compassion for the dead (Pew Research Center (5), 2023).

This study also showed that there is not a clear distinction between “spirituality” and “religion”. The results show 83% of Americans believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to the physical body. So, this is an increase from the 70% that describe themselves as spiritual. Interestingly, about 57% believe animals can have their own spirits or spiritual energies (Pew Research Center (5), 2023). In the US, 66% of households have pets, a little over half of households consider their pet as much of a family member as a human family member (Megna, 2024).

As someone that is engaged with our local conservation community, these last two statistics do not surprise me. The study shows, 48% believe there is spiritual energy in natural features such as mountains, rivers, and trees. A smaller group of 26% believe that certain objects like crystals, jewels, or stones hold spiritual energy (Pew Research Center (5), 2023).

One significant change in America is reflected in recent data that show a dramatic shift with regards to those that attend Christian churches in the U.S. The “Great Dechurching” is the phenomena of people that regularly attended church who no longer attend (Graham and Davis, 2023). Forty million people stopped attending church in the past 25 years in the US, which is about 12% of the population. This is the largest change in American church attendance ever recorded (Gabbett, 2023).

A Pew Research Center’s study shows a 12% drop in Protestants and 3% drop in Catholics since 2007. During this time, there is also a drop from 56% of Americans that consider religion very important to 41%. Significantly, those that say that religion is not too important/not at all important rose from 16% to 33% during this same time (Smith, 2021).

Here are the numbers and context:

### **In 1972 – 92% of American adults said they were Christians**

What else was going on in 1972? The divorce rate was 4.1%, inflation rate was 3.4%, The *Godfather* was the number one movie, and *American Pie* dominated the airways. Also, this was the beginning of the Watergate scandal.

### **In 2007 – 78% of American adults said they were Christian**

That is a 14% decrease in 35 years. What else was going on in 2007? The divorce rate was 3.6%, *Spider-Man 3* was the number one movie and *Irreplaceable* by Beyoncé is the number one music hit. The inflation rate jumped to 4.1% due to the banking crisis that led to the Great Recession. Also, the first iPhone was released in 2007.

### **By 2021 – only 63% of Americas identified as Christians**

That is an alarming 15% decrease in 14 years. What else was going on in 2021 beside extreme anxiety about the pandemic and 2020 elections? The divorce rate was up to 6.9% and inflation jumped from 1.4% in 2020 to a whopping 7% in 2021 (Srinivasan, 2024).

Another significant fact is that charitable giving by affluent Americans has dropped significantly. Between 2015 and 2020, the rate of affluent Americans giving to organizations was between 49.6% and 46.9% respectfully. Then, between 2020 and 2022, this dropped to 39.3%. This is a 20% drop in charitable giving in two years (Bank of America Institute, 2023). However, the declines in churches had already begun before this trend, which indicates that money is not the problem nor the solution to why people are moving away from places of worship.

How does this recent drop in regular church attendance and drop Americans identifying as Christians effect our places of worship? In 2014, there were 3,700 closures but over 4,000 church openings. In sharp contrast, in 2019 the study showed 4,500 Protestant churches closed as compared to only 3,000 new churches opening (Earls, 2021). This is prior to the drop in

charitable giving and the pandemic effect were pastors report that today's attendance is only about 85% of pre-pandemic attendance. Lifeway Research also survey US young adults that attended church for at least a year in high school and were between the ages of 18 and 22. The researchers discovered that 7 out of 10 had stopped attending church regularly. This could be for many reasons such as distance, lack of access, or lack of connection to a new faith community (Earls, 2021).

Other religions that are part of our American fabric, such as Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hindu and other faiths, make up about 6% of the US population, which is up from 5% in 2007.

Interestingly, the number of Muslims and Christians in the US attending services weekly are about the same, 43% and 45% respectfully. In comparison, about 12% of adults that identify as Jewish attend weekly services (Smith, 2021).

Interestingly, the American Jewish community is facing similar trends with drop in places of worship. It is reported that "in the past 20 years, more than one-third of Conservative synagogues and one out of five Reform synagogues closed" (Prince, 2022). In contrast, between 2010 and 2020, the number of mosques grew by 31% throughout the US (Bagby, 2020).

Currently, the Christian population that has the highest rate of daily prayer and say religion is important to them is born-again/evangelical with this rate being a bit higher in African-American populations than Caucasian (Smith, 2021).

Reasons cited for de-churching of Christian communities include sex abuse scandals, pastors or church members being "too political" on social issues. Young people not feeling welcome or a part of the community. These factors are leading more US adults that are categorized



themselves as “nones”. This is a growing group of Americans that describe themselves as atheists (those that don’t believe in a God), agnostics (believe the existence of God is unknown), or “nothing in particular” (Smith, 2021). When Pew Researchers added “nones” to studies in 2007, about 18% of US adults identified as “nones”. When comparing adults that identified as Christians and nones in 2007, it was almost a five to one ratio. In 2021, that ratio shifted to a little more than two to one. To sum up, statistically there has been a significant change since 2007 with American adults that identify as religious and “none at all” (Smith, 2021).

Nihilism is another belief that rejects all religious and moral principles as life is considered meaningless (Oxford, 2024). A survey in 2021 of 10,000 young people globally revealed that 56% are convinced that humanity is doomed due to the climate crisis (Smith Galer, 2021).

Startling numbers from the US Surgeon General show that people aged 15-24 are experiencing a 70% decline in time spent with friends from people the same age in 2000 (Seitz, 2023) and the sense of extreme loneliness is rising among all demographics, especially since the pandemic.

A general reflection is that currently our cultural worldviews that were once dominated by religious traditions are moving towards spiritual connectedness or being completely disconnected with others.

## WHAT IS THE FUTURE?

Looking at all these current situations, it is hard to see religious life in America dominating our culture like it once did due to lack of attendance, charitable giving, and rise of “nones” and nihilism. Where are these trends leading us? Pew Research Center (2022) published a report

that modeled expected trends between Christians, “nones”, and other religions in the United States for the next 50 years. To create this model, the researchers used the fact that most religious switching in the past happens between ages 15-29. If the current rates ensue it is expected that 21% of “nones” will become Christian and 31% of Christians will become “nones”. This will lead to Christians being less than 50% of Americans by 2070 and “nones” will be an estimated 41%. Interestingly, the other religions such as Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hindu and others, are expected to grow to 13% in the same time. This trend would be mirroring the trend in Western Europe over the last 50 years (Pew Research Center (3), 2022). Interestingly, the Pew Research Center published a study at the beginning of the year, “Has the rise of religious nones come to an end?” There has been a noticeable drop to 28% of those that identify as “nones” (Smith and Cooperman, 2024). What does this mean for future trends?

Globally, those traditional religions that make up about 5% of today's population is expected to drop to only 4.8% by 2050. Over 90% of this population is in Asia-Pacific and is anticipated to drop to 81%, while the adherents to traditional religion is expected to increase in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2050. In regards to Christian and Muslim global populations, in 2010, there were about 31.4% Christians and 23.2% Muslims. By 2050, the rate of Christians is expected to stay at 31.4%, but Muslims will close the gap with approximately 29.7% of the population. Also, the Muslim population is younger on average than any other religion (Pew Research Center (2), 2015).

We also must follow the money when considering trends. Back to the Bank of America Institute's report on charitable giving. Adults older than 42 years old give most to religious life at nearly 24% of all giving for this age group. For those younger than 42, religious life is the third in

priority and giving at only 16%. The top priority for giving for the younger adults is education and efforts to combat climate change (Bank of America, 2023). With the potential of lack of attendance and lack of future funding, will the “Great Dechurching” start to accelerate?

## A CALL TO ACTION

How do we connect with each other in the future since we are moving away from Sunday morning community services to acknowledging each other with an emoji on a social media post? How do we keep young people engaged with cultural activities when most of the culture they are interacting with is electronic? How do we keep ourselves and those we love mentally, physically, and spiritually healthy and not fall prey to thoughts of despair, even in the face of challenges of today?

Another dear friend Phil Schurger suggested that I look into the work of Karen Armstrong. This led me to start with her TED talk from 2008 and listen to multiple podcasts. Karen Armstrong is a leading voice in the role of religion in our lives. Karen describes herself as religious, spiritual, and a “freelance monotheist”. She is a scholar in major and minor religions throughout the world. In her stunning 2008 TED Talk, she describes her journey from the convent, to rejection of all religious traditions, to finding joy in reading the sacred texts from all over the world throughout time. This includes tracing the meaning of the word believe. Karen contends that when you say, “I believe” didn’t originally mean that “I accept”, but “I believe” means “I am committing myself”. Religion is about behaving differently. She found a common link of the Golden Rule throughout all major religions, with the first written by Confucius - Never treat

others as you would not like to be treated yourself. Confucius said this was the central thread that brought all of his teaching together to transcend and to reach human-heartedness. “We need to move beyond toleration, but towards appreciation of each other” (Armstrong, 2008).

In her 2018 interview with Oprah, she says “that religion is something that you do. Religious knowledge is practical knowledge like learning to drive a car – you learn by doing it, you can’t learn to dance by reading a book. Action is essential in all religions leading with kindness and compassion that will take you out of yourself and towards another - day by day, hour by hour – and you leave yourself behind” (Oprah Super Soul Podcast, 2018).

All religions have the common thread of compassion that is not only for your own faith or group, it is for all others, to love your neighbor and to honor the stranger. As our global community learns more about each other with a simple Google search, we can become less like strangers, find connection, and appreciate each other more. This is the future, continuation of religious traditions and spiritual reflection with acts of compassion in search of that which is bigger than ourselves. I challenge all of us to practice compassion in all we do and push ourselves to never treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself.

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