The American Religious Exodus**:**

Sociopolitical Tension, Education, and the Rise of Individualized Spirituality

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Introduction

The United States is witnessing a dramatic change in religiosity among its population. The results of nearly every poll in the last 40 years demonstrates a continuous decline of religion among Americans, with each generational cohort being less religious than the one before it.[1] In 1972, only 5 percent of the US population were religiously unaffiliated compared to 25 percent in 2016.[2] This change is largely thanks to younger generations, who prove to be increasingly less religious than their parents and grandparents. In 2007, approximately 14 percent of Baby Boomers (1946-1964) were identified as religiously unaffiliated, compared to 25 percent of Older Millennials (1981-1989). By 2014, both numbers had grown to 17 and 34 percent, respectively.[3] And in 2016, Americans from ages 18-29 reported an all-time high of 39 percent religiously unaffiliated individuals.[4] Not only are younger generations less religious, but those who are younger and religious are more likely to disaffiliate from their religious tradition. Further, the decline appears to be occurring primarily in popular Christian traditions such as Catholicism and Protestantism. From 2007 to 2014, Christian churches declined from 78.4 percent of the US population, to 70.6 percent, whereas non-Christian faiths rose slightly from 4.7 to 5.9 percent.[5] Therefore, this essay will be primarily concerned with explaining the religious disaffiliation of American Christians.

This essay will examine three popular arguments provided by scholars. Whereas previous research has often isolated these arguments, this essay provides a more holistic account of disaffiliation by explaining the shortcomings of each argument, and their ultimate dependency on one another to explain the drastic levels of disaffiliation. The first argument is that many mainstream religious organizations are aligning themselves with right-wing political parties and taking hard stances on controversial social issues which results in sociopolitical tension between

the religious tradition and moderate or liberal religious adherents. The second argument is that rising levels of education are causing a decline in fundamentalist religious beliefs, such as biblical literalism, which results in softened religiosity that is more susceptible to disaffiliation. The third argument is that young Americans increasingly prefer individualized approaches to spiritual matters and view churches as outdated institutions of rigid and unnecessary doctrines and dogmas. Together, these three arguments provide a more holistic account of religious disaffiliation. After presenting these three arguments, I will present an original study conducted on students at the University of Oklahoma wherein twenty-three interviews demonstrate the accurateness of these arguments and their interconnectedness.

To better understand the theories presented by scholars, I have conducted interviews with students on OU's Norman campus who have disaffiliated. I recruited students who had practiced and identified with a religious tradition before or during college and have experienced a significant shift away from their religious tradition. The results of the interviews support each of the three arguments for religious disaffiliation while also demonstrating how the causes work together. This small investigation of religious disaffiliation among students at the University of Oklahoma will, at minimum, provide support for popular arguments and themes being discussed by American sociologists and religious studies scholars who seek to understand the growing trend of religious disaffiliation.

The outline of this paper is as follows. First, the rising levels of sociopolitical tension within churches will be explained by providing a brief history of the American religious right, with specific attention given to the intertwining of Evangelical Christians and the Republican Party. Second, education's effects on religious beliefs will be investigated by examining three types of education: education offered through new information technologies, cultural exposure,

and science education. Third will be a section outlining the spiritual but not religious (SBNR) movement in America. Finally, the fourth section will turn to the on-campus study and provide the goals and results of interviews with OU students. In concluding, I will summarize the main points of the paper, while providing self-criticism on the short comings of my research.

Sociopolitical Tension

When religious traditions become involved in the political realm, members of the tradition with opposing opinions often experience a tension between their religious identity and their personal beliefs. Therefore, one explanation for heightened religious disaffiliation is that an increase in political engagement by religious groups is creating tension with younger generations. In the last century, America has witnessed an especially strong attempt by conservative Christian traditions to influence policy. In particular, the intertwining of the Republican Party and Evangelical Christians created a sociopolitical movement that promoted highly conservative policy by appealing to traditional Christian values. This movement, frequently referred to as the religious right, can partially explain the dramatic increase in religious disaffiliation among young Americans.

Evangelicals became distinguished from mainline Protestants beginning in the 1920s when liberal churches sought to incorporate modernity and modern science in their theology by taking a less literal interpretation of the Bible. The Conservative churches disagreed with the modernization of theology, and instead asserted the "primacy of religion over science," earning them the name Evangelical, a word with Greek roots meaning "Gospel."[6] Since their split with mainline traditions, Evangelical Christians sought a political party to enact their beliefs in policy. However, Evangelicals had little success until the Republican Party discovered high levels of support for socially conservative policies among white southerners, who were primarily

Evangelical.[7] In 1964, the Republican Party nominated Barry Goldwater as a presidential

candidate, who had stood in opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 earlier that year. This

helped Goldwater gain support among many white Evangelicals in the southern states, while

losing much of his support in other states. For the first time in American history, more white

southerners voted Republican rather than Democrat.[8] While Goldwater lost the election, the

Republican Party increasingly campaigned to white Evangelical southerners by standing in

"opposition to feminism, homosexuality, and pornography."[9] Evangelicals, who had historically

voted Democrat, were now voting Republican, demonstrating the intertwining of their interests.

The religious right's political agenda was further empowered by a fundamentalist cultural

movement. The fundamentalist movement is often described as a response to the countercultural

movement in the 1960s and 70s when there was a sudden upsurge of political protesting, drug

use, experimentation with communal living, sexual promiscuity and more.[10] Many Evangelicals

and conservatives saw the countercultural movement as a threat to their Christian values like

prohibiting sex before marriage and the ideal of the nuclear family. In reciprocation,

Evangelicals and conservatives began their own movement to promote what they believed was a

return to fundamental Christian and American values.

Jerry Falwell is an embodiment of the fundamentalist movement. Jerry Falwell, a small-

town Baptist pastor and a televangelist with more airing channels than Jimmy Carson, entered

the political arena in the late 1970s and early 80s in order to recruit Evangelical Christians for

the Republican Party. Falwell is responsible for delivering to society such gems as: "AIDS is not

just God's punishment for homosexuals, it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates

homosexuals!" and "The idea that religion and politics don't mix was invented by the devil to

keep Christians from running their own country."[11] Falwell traveled the country and held rallies

to promote Christian ideals. He encouraged all Evangelical Christians to register to vote while condemning unregistered voters as displeasing to God. He founded the political organization, the "Moral Majority," which assisted conservative politicians by offering them campaign money, endorsing them publicly on national television, and lobbying on their behalf.[12] Concurrently, mainline Protestant churches were steadily being outnumbered by Evangelicals.[13] The religious right was quickly becoming the most powerful political and cultural movement in the nation. The religious fervor that Falwell brought to politics proved highly effective in mobilizing constituents, and in inspiring them with the same religious fervor.

Under the influence of Falwell and other religious right leaders, Evangelical constituents, policymakers, and other elites became imbued with a sense of passion, often feeling as though the policies they preferred were divinely inspired. This phenomenon was studied by several. In 1998, Mark Regnerus and Christian Smith, whom specialize in sociology of religion, sought to observe whether religious affiliation had an impact on an organization's lobbying efforts or volunteerism. They found that Evangelical conservatives "lobby officials and participate in religiously based community organizations more than all other types [of religious organizations, or non-religious organizations]," arguably in a mission to fight against the threats to their worldviews.[14] In 2007, Elizabeth Oldmixon and Brian Calfano, experts on politics and religion, researched the relationship between legislators' personal religious convictions and their constituents, and found not only that the two are almost always congruent and mutually reinforcing, but that the religious nature of their opposition to gay rights or abortion was so intense that "legislators become the defenders of a way of life—possibly a divinely ordained way of life."[15] Religious conviction fueled political and social opinions so dramatically, that it completely changed the sociopolitical landscape in the US.

After the controversial *Roe v Wade* case, which prohibited state laws banning abortion in 1973, the US erupted in debates over the issue. Greg Adams researched the drastic effect that abortion policy debates had on both the Republican and Democratic parties and found that the intense nature of anti-abortion policy disputes resulted in increased polarization between Republicans and Democrats.[16] Often ignored however, is how heavily religion shaped this polarization. John Evans argues that the intensity behind the abortion issue was largely thanks to Evangelical "strictness." Whereas mainline Protestants tended to avoid teaching a position on abortion, Evangelical churches were uniform in their teachings against it. Thus, mainline Protestants and others were much less motivated towards the abortion issue while Evangelicals opposed it as an expression of their faith.[17] In other words, the abortion debates were often a battle between those who felt inspired by god, and those who were fighting for civil rights.

While the abortion issue certainly stirred up controversy, it is arguable that no other social stance has earned the religious right more controversy, and caused more religious disaffiliation, than their stance against same-sex marriage. In the late 1980s, a General Social Survey of Americans found approval for same-sex marriage to be as low as 12 percent, but by 2014, this number jumped to 56 percent.[18] This rapid change of heart among many Americans meant trouble for the religious traditions that stood staunchly against same-sex marriage such as Evangelicals and Black Protestants, who are approximately 60 percent opposed.[19] The Public Religion Research Institution found that among millennials, "nearly one-third say that negative teachings about, or treatment of, gay and lesbian people was either a somewhat important (17 percent) or very important (14 percent) factor in their disaffiliation from religion."[20] This poll helps demonstrate a clear connection between sociopolitical tensions and religious disaffiliation among young Americans.

Religious disaffiliation due to sociopolitical tension has been further demonstrated in several research studies. In 2002, Michael Hout, a specialist in analyzing demographic data on religion and politics, and Claude Fischer, a scholar on American sociology, sought to explain the doubling of Americans with no religious preference (from 7 to 14 percent).[21] Their analysis used General Social Survey data on religious and political affiliations from 1990 and 2000. They found that liberals and moderates were increasingly less religious while conservatives remained equally religious. Hout and Fischer suggest that liberals and moderates began to prefer no religion because the religious right "made religious identity seem like an endorsement of conservative views."[22] Hout and Fischer argue that either the religious right or the stance of some Christian churches on specific social issues such as abortion and gay rights are responsible for "5 to 7 percent of American adults holding no religious preference in the later 1990s." Further, they argue that the decision to disaffiliate "was a political act, a dissent from the affinity that had emerged between conservative politics and organized religion."[23] Fortunately, newer studies provide even clearer connections between the religious right and religious disaffiliation.

In 2018, Paul Djupe, Jacob Neiheisel, and Kimberly Conger, sought to confirm Hout and Fischer's findings by evaluating data from several studies and polls from 2000 to 2010.[24] Their goal was to examine each US state individually and determine the effects of the religious right on religious disaffiliation. The scholars considered factors such as religious right lobbyist groups, state bans on same-sex marriage, and overall saliency of the religious right's agenda. The team found that religious disaffiliation rises quicker in states where the religious right is most visible and active in opposing a specific controversial policy, especially same-sex marriage. For example, in 2010, state bans against same-sex marriage were in place in twenty-nine states. In 2006, these states had 3.1 percent less religious nones than states without same-sex marriage

bans, but in 2010, that number had shrunk to 1.4 percent, demonstrating an acceleration of religious disaffiliation in states where gay rights were more clearly opposed.[25] This provides support for Hout and Fischer's argument by offering evidence that religious Americans that are exposed to the religious right's agenda are more likely to disaffiliate. However, the research team made a further claim. When the religious right is most salient, religious Americans may "use the Christian Right as a proxy for religion as a whole and discontinue their religious identities as a result."[26] In other words, not only is the religious right taking a toll on religious attendance at Evangelical churches, it is also causing a negative stereotype to surround American Christianity altogether. However, their study does little to demonstrate the proxy effect clearly, as they do not present data that demonstrates religious decline by religious tradition.

The religious right has clearly generated sociopolitical tension between American Christian traditions and those with moderate or liberal views. However, it is important to note that tension between the individual's social or political opinions and the churches' does not necessarily affect the individual's religious *beliefs*. Hout and Fischer observed that those who become religiously disaffiliated were often "those with the firmest beliefs" rather than skeptics.[27] This raises questions because the majority of surveyed "religious nones" in the US gave "loss of belief" as the biggest reason for leaving their religion (50 percent).[28] Further, if the primary cause of disaffiliation was the intertwining of religion and politics, then there ought to be an observably sharper drop in the Evangelical traditions compared to mainline Protestant traditions. This is not the case. The decline in religiosity is occurring across all mainstream Christian faiths, and it is only marginally quicker amongst Evangelical youth.[29] This can be explained in part by the study from Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger which demonstrated the willingness of some Americans to disregard all American Christianity based on the stances of the religious right.

However, there is not enough evidence to support this theory fully, and it still does not account for the large loss of religious beliefs. To fully understand religious disaffiliation, the decrease of religious beliefs will need to be explained.

Education and Beliefs

If most religiously disaffiliated Americans claim that a loss of belief is the primary cause for their disaffiliation, which beliefs do they mean? Surprisingly, polls show that most Americans still hold beliefs about God. Pew and Gallup both report that at least 80 percent of Americans, religious or not, still believe in God.[30] However, for the first time in American history, more Americans believe the Bible is a book of fables written by men than the literal word of God. In the 1970s around 38 percent of Americans held the literalist perspective, compared to roughly 25 percent today, whereas the "created by man" perspective has doubled from 13 to 26 percent.[31] The decline in religious belief appears to be centered around fundamentalist beliefs.

The word fundamentalist was popularized in the early twentieth century by conservative Protestants who promoted a return to the fundamentals of Christianity.[32] The two most common fundamentalist beliefs, most often promoted by Evangelicals and Black Protestants, are biblical literalism and religious exclusivism.[33] Biblical literalism, which varies in interpretation, generally means the belief that the Bible is the untampered word of God, which ought to be taken literally and with as little personal interpretation as possible. This includes the Genesis account of creation in the Bible, which is clearly incompatible with modern understandings of evolution. As a result, religious participation in American Christian faiths is heavily correlated with skepticism of evolution.[34] Religious exclusivism is the belief of a religious tradition that salvation can only occur through their own religion. This belief is what encourages the

evangelism work by many Christians on public transport, university grounds, or in underdeveloped countries. Evangelical Christians see themselves as the holder of eternal salvation, and believe it is their duty to save as many doomed souls as possible by bringing non-Christians to Jesus Christ.

Fundamentalist beliefs have been in decline across American Christian traditions for over a century. Beginning with the modernization of theology in liberal traditions, many Christians came to view the Bible as divinely inspired rather than the literal word of God while the exclusivist narrative slowly disappeared from the podium as Americans generally became more accepting of other cultures. In the following decades, Biblical literalism across the US dropped from well over 80 to 40 percent by the 1970s.[35] Although Evangelicals are demonstrating a decline in fundamentalist beliefs, the decline is occurring much slower compared to mainline Protestants.[36] Approximately 50 percent of Evangelicals believe in the inerrancy of the bible compared to 20 percent of mainline Protestants.[37] Roughly the same number of Evangelicals agree that their faith is the only way to heaven compared to 13 percent of mainline Protestants.[38] And with Evangelical theologians continuing to debate about these fundamentalist beliefs, it is clear that they notice an obvious incongruency with fundamentalist beliefs and the future of Christianity in America.[39]

A steady increase in education across the US is causing a decline in fundamentalist beliefs. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how young Americans are becoming more educated, but there are a few popular suggestions. The first is information technology, which has increased exposure to other religions, cultures, and ideas more broadly. The second is an increase in pluralist values, wherein cultural exposure educates young Americans by offering them

alternative or competing worldviews. The third is college-level education, which has been argued to be detrimental to religion.

Advancements in information technology, beginning with the printing press, then solid ink printing, and now high-speed internet in the pockets of nearly everyone twelve years old and up, has continuously increased access to information among younger American cohorts. Paul McClure, a sociologist of religion, observed the effects that internet use had on young religious Americans and concluded that young internet users engage in "spiritual tinkering," wherein they slowly lose their "exclusivist posture" and begin to "navigate competing truth claims and ideas about what is ultimately important."[40] With access to information so readily available, younger cohorts are increasingly able to challenge the religious perspectives they've been taught.

Many sociologists have argued that the way Americans interact with religion has changed completely due to availability of information. Robert Wuthnow, a prominent sociologist of American religion, declared in 1998 that Americans are turning away from "spiritual dwelling," wherein the practitioner remains in the same religious tradition for most of their life, and towards "spiritual seeking," wherein they "negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom," often unable to settle for any one set of beliefs or practices.[41] In 2000, Wade Clark Roof, a sociologist of religion and psychology, described young Americans as part of a "knowledge class" who, given access to so much information, "are made aware of competing religious symbols and practices [becoming] unsure whether any one faith is any more 'true' or 'credible' than any other," and thus "approach religion less as a given reality and more as an option."[42] In 2006, Stewart Hoover, a professor and the director of the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture, argued that continuously developing media has created a "broader religious market," where young Americans are increasingly "seeking information about religion

and spirituality, as well as about the beliefs and practices of specific groups, [and partaking in] the digital exchange of greetings and inspirational materials."[43] These scholars all argue that by offering information that is contradictory to young religious adherents, information technology appears to weaken religious beliefs that are especially dependent on absence of information, such as biblical literalism and religious exclusivism. Further, these scholars argue that Americans are increasingly likely to take their spirituality into their own hands.

The second type of education that threatens fundamentalist beliefs is cultural exposure. America is increasingly diverse and as a result, pluralist ideals have become more popular among American youth. Jenny Trinitapoli, who conducted studies to better understand religious exclusivism amongst US adolescents, found that religious exclusivism is most prevalent when children or teenagers have religiously and culturally homogenous social groups.[44] Thus, in an increasingly pluralist society, exclusivist beliefs are under threat.

This phenomenon can be observed in American universities across the US. In 2000, Conrad Cherry, Betty Deberg, and Amanda Porterfield, each of whom are established experts of American religion, visited universities across the country in order to observe religion on campus. They observed which religious studies classes were offered, whether there was a pluralistic acceptance of all religions, and to what degree the campuses appeared to be encouraging or discouraging religious practices.[45] In all cases, the universities appeared to be increasing their religious studies curriculum to include classes on religions other than Christianity, including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and others.[46] The team noted that the common Christian practice of viewing people of other faiths as "objects of missionary conversion" that had been interwoven with university studies in previous years, has been replaced by an "effort to conceptualize religion as a universal human phenomenon."[47] Their research also reaffirmed what

Wuthnow had observed: the students on each campus "could be characterized as spiritual seekers rather than religious dwellers."[48] Even in Christian gathering and worshipping, it was usual to observe an emphasis on "cultivation of student spirituality" rather than "maintenance of denominational identity."[49] The team's observations clearly demonstrate the effect that pluralism has had on college campuses.

However, it might be argued that individuals with an exclusivist belief might simply make friends with like-minded individuals, effectively nullifying the effects of pluralism. However, Trinitapoli argues that young people with exclusivist beliefs are "not so exclusivist after all," and are increasingly accepting of other cultures and religions. Trinitapoli argues that even among those who only have friends that are Christian, the "liberal ethic of tolerance" has weakened their exclusivist beliefs.[50] Although these individuals may believe that their faith is the only way to earn salvation, they are careful about coming across as offensive to people of other religious traditions. The exposure of other cultures and religions appears to be slowly eroding the exclusivist belief by lessening the prevalence of homogenous social networks, and by encouraging polite religious discourse.

A third common claim is that college education decreases religious beliefs by exposing students to scientific ideas that challenge religious doctrine. This claim has become the source of hundreds, or thousands, of studies and arguments that provide a variety of conclusions on the matter. For example, some have argued that college-life decreases religious participation, however this is likely due to a busy college student lifestyle. After graduating, the same individuals are more likely to increase and maintain religious participation compared to non-college graduates.[51] Similarly, university education has been observed to be positively correlated with decreases in fundamentalist beliefs, yet recent studies demonstrate that this affect might be

much smaller than previously thought, and that college students may place their religiosity aside during their education or don't view college education as conflicting with their religious convictions at all.[52] Other studies actually conclude that college more often strengthens religious convictions.[53] Thus, college education cannot be said to have a clear effect on religiosity. However, most of the evidence suggests that college education, alongside the education that comes with internet use and cultural exposure, is negatively correlated with fundamentalist beliefs. The most obvious cause of this comes from science education, which challenges biblical literalism and the genesis story that accompanies it.

Fundamentalist beliefs are declining amongst Americans, and we can confidently point towards education as a major cause for this. However, the decline in these beliefs does not necessarily result in religious disaffiliation. Therefore, I propose that higher levels of education lead to a softening of religious beliefs that raises one's susceptibility to religious disaffiliation. For example, a Christian with softened religious beliefs is more likely to disaffiliate due to social factors such as having a parent or close friend who is not religious.[54] There is some evidence to support this argument. From 2005 to 2009, sociologists Christian Smith and Patricia Snell tracked the religious beliefs and affiliations of hundreds of teenagers into their adult lives. Teenagers who were mainline Protestants were twice as likely to say religion was no longer important to them as adults compared to Evangelicals.[55] Further, the mainline Protestants teenagers, who were far less likely to hold fundamentalist beliefs, saw a much larger decline in even basic religious beliefs. Belief in God dropped 17 percent amongst young mainline Protestants compared to 8 percent of Evangelicals.[56] The mainline Protestant teenagers were also far more likely than Evangelical, Mormons, or Black Protestants to profess doubt over the divinity of Jesus Christ, the existence of angels, the miracles of God, and the existence of heaven

as adults.[57] The reasons for the decline in these beliefs among mainline Protestants cannot be completely ascertained. However, Smith and Snell's findings do show support for the argument that young Americans with softer religious beliefs are more susceptible to religious disaffiliation.

Further studies ought to be conducted to demonstrate the accurateness of this argument. For this paper's purpose, we can declare with confidence that Americans are more educated than ever before, and their exposure to new information, cultures, and religions is softening their religious convictions which may contribute to religious disaffiliation. Thus far, this essay has explained why many Americans leave their religious institutions and lose their religious beliefs. However, there is another cause of disaffiliation. Americans simply prefer a more individualized approach to religious or spiritual matters.

Individualized and Personal Spiritual Trends

Traditional American religions have a competitor: individualized, or "unchurched," spiritual practices and beliefs.[58] Americans who disaffiliate are not necessarily turning to complete secularization. Increasingly so, Americans are turning away from traditional religions, and taking up unchurched spiritual beliefs or practices that emphasize individual experience. Recent polls recognize this trend by seeking for individuals who identify as "Spiritual, but not Religious," or SBNR. These polls suggest that as many as one-fourth of all Americans now identify as SBNR.[59] Understanding who is SBNR, and how spirituality differs from religiosity, has been notoriously troublesome for scholars in the last 30 years. The distinction between religiosity and spirituality has frequently been described as "fuzzy," and despite the desire of scholars to distinguish the two, most religious people claim they are *also* spiritual.[60] Thus the definition of spirituality differs when one is discussing people who are religious *and* spiritual versus those who are *not* religious yet, *are* spiritual. For this section, the term spirituality will be

used as it is increasingly coming to mean: non-traditional, usually unchurched, practices and beliefs that place heavy emphasis on personal experiences and insight, often with the goal of self-transformation or the attainment of something ultimate. Further, those who are SBNR often hold distaste for institutionalized traditions, which they view as rigid, old-fashioned, and unhelpfully dogmatic.[61] Understanding the SBNR movement helps explain how traditional American religions are increasingly less appealing to young Americans, and thus, why they are disaffiliating.

As Leigh Schmidt, a distinguished professor in the history of religion, puts it, the new upsurge in SBNRs should not be understood as a "rootless generation of seekers," but rather as the result of centuries of unchurched traditions, philosophers, religious wanderers, and individual encounters with spiritual experiences.[62] The nineteenth century produced several philosophies that emphasized individual experience, and rebellion from blind adherence to church doctrine. First among these philosophies comes from Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish-born scientist who, in the mid-1740s, came into mystical contact with angelic beings. Among other claims, Swedenborg proposed that the biblical God could, "through diligent study and by cultivating mystical states of awareness," be contacted and communicated with through angelic figures.[63] Swedenborg's ideas not only challenged the notions of hierarchy of the church that existed at the time, but also proposed that the divine was readily available to the individual practitioner. Swedenborg's writings went largely unnoticed until being translated to English in America where they influenced a well-known philosopher during his studies at Harvard in the 1820s: Ralph Waldo Emerson. While Emerson gave credit to Swedenborg for many of his own ideas, Emerson's influence on the Transcendentalist movement had its own flavor.[64]

Emerson disagreed with Swedenborg's need to express his ideas through Christian language, especially his insistence that angelic communication was necessary to contact the divine. Instead, Emerson took an even further step toward individualized practice, or "self-reliance," as he often called it.[65] Further, Emerson rejected the notion that the Bible was the only holy text. He drew on many Hindu texts to communicate ideas about the self that supported his ideas of finding God within the individual. Of particular interest to Emerson were the Hindu concepts of Brahman and Atman, which represent the all-pervading presence of God and the fractioned piece of God that exist in the individual, respectively.[66] Emerson held that God and all that exists were one in the same. Emerson argued that the illusion of humankind's distinction from God was self-imposed and could be self-removed. He expressed these sentiments in his works, especially when discussing solitude in nature, about which he wrote, "the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."[67] Emerson and the Transcendentalist movement pushed a "metaphysical awakening" across America. The lasting impact was primarily the idea that the individual does not need a medium to achieve closeness, or unity, with the divine. Churchgoing was rendered superfluous under Transcendentalist thought.

Several other philosophies spread throughout America the nineteenth century that encouraged individualized spirituality. Mesmerism, a movement dedicated to the science of Animal Magnetism spawned from Franz Mesmer when he proposed that there is a vital energy that flows through all living things that can be controlled or manipulated. Mesmerist healers grew in numbers during the 1840s and gained attention for wide claims that they could spontaneously heal people, cause trance-like states, and perform various mental tricks.[68] Not a decade later, Spiritualism spread rapidly by reports of contact with spirits, combined with

miraculous occurrences wherein the spirits would induce trances, move objects, read minds, or generally dazzle the crowds that flocked to witness the events.[69] Spiritualism convinced hundreds of thousands of Americans that a "spirit world" existed and could be contacted without the help of God or church clergy. Around the 1880s, the New Thought movement erupted from Phineas Quimby who, under the influence of mesmerism, found he had a gift for inducing trances in others. However, Quimby later realized that he had little to do with the trance, and that the determinant factor was the level of belief that the patient held about the healing and trances.[70] The belief that one's own thoughts and beliefs have special creative powers remains a very popular belief today, and is even now the thesis of self-help and pseudoscience books. Take, for example, Dawson Church's 2018 book, *Mind to Matter,* wherein he provides a thorough metaphysical account that explains his thesis, "Thoughts become things."[71] Swedenborgianism, Transcendentalism, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and New Thought allowed Americans the avenues to practice spiritualities and find new beliefs that didn't come from religious institutions. The emphasis on individual experience and self-empowerment became indispensable tools for those who wished to break away from traditional religion. However, many of these movements were dismissed as "fringe" movements, whose leaders were often less educated than the clergy of traditional religious institutions.[72] This began to change in the twentieth century as Asian philosophies and psychedelic drugs gained the attention of academics.

Perhaps the most symbolic representation of America's growing fascination with Asian philosophy occurred when Indian guru Swami Vivekananda gave his address to the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. Vivekananda boldly expressed his pity for anybody who "dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion" in front of hundreds of well-educated Protestants.[73] In the next hundred years, Asian philosophy erupted in popularity. For example, in

the 1930s, D.T. Suzuki, a Japanese scholar and Zen practitioner, brought ideas from Zen Buddhism to America in his book *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Zen Buddhism was highly attractive to many Americans due to its exciting and mysterious mention of enlightenment, or a sudden attainment of higher consciousness. Suzuki's writings of Zen gave inspiration to an entire generation of scholars who were highly successful at popularizing their interpretations of Zen. These included individuals like Thomas Merton, Abraham Maslow, and especially Alan Watts, who has recently resurged in popularity through videos on YouTube with millions of views. However, the Zen being spread in America was clearly unrepresentative of Japanese Zen. American scholars and the American spiritual seekers have been keen to extract, or "cherry pick" what they see as the most useful, or sensical, part of the religion, something that is characteristic of the SBNR movement altogether.[74] Today, books on Zen Buddhism are scattered across shelves in the "self-help," "spirituality," and "religion" sections of book stores and cover topics from stress relief, tips on being a better athlete, and methods for attaining enlightenment.[75] By making this unconventional philosophy digestible and available to Americans, religious adherents who felt disenchanted with traditional religion were able to find solace, comfort, and utility in new places. These new places encouraged individual practice, were easy to learn, and asked for no commitment from the practitioner.

Psychedelics paired nicely with the rise of Asian philosophies in America. In the twentieth century, William James popularized the idea of using drugs as spiritual or mystic mechanisms. James released his most popular book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902, which expounded upon the importance of individual experiences in terms of finding the ultimate. In his concluding remarks, James wrote that religion allows us to "experience union with *something* larger than ourselves," pointing out both the vagueness of the ultimate, and the

importance of experiences for communicating with it.[76] Among the methods of religious

experience that James discussed was his famous experience with nitrous oxide: "Nitrous

Oxide…stimulate[s] the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree....Our normal waking

consciousness…is but one special type of consciousness…No account of the universe in its

totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite discarded."[77] These

writings, stemming from a "highbrow intellectual," helped to "cast an aura of respectability over

the continuing public fascination with the study of para-psychology and altered states of

consciousness."[78] So, when Albert Hoffman stumbled upon the LSD molecule in 1938, some

Americans were ready to receive it as a spiritual aid. In terms of popularizing their use, there are

a few important figures to mention.

Huston Smith, a religious studies scholar who's book *The Religions of Man* has sold over

3 million copies to date, was highly immersed in the experiential side of religious studies, having

spent time training with Zen masters, Buddhist monks, and Indian Yogis. However, it is lesser

known that Smith derived much of his personal inspiration from psychedelics. Smith once

remarked that he "had had no personal encounter with God" until his ingestion of LSD, which

had been administered by Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert at Harvard.[79] Alpert, was himself a

major influencer of the psychedelic movement. After being fired from Harvard after

administering LSD to undergraduate students, Alpert traveled to India where he spent time with

an Indian guru. Upon his return to the US, Alpert called himself Ram Dass, traveled in fancy

Indian garbs giving dharma talks to large crowds of people, and promoting his new book, *Be

Here Now*, which has sold over 2 million copies.[80] Alpert's most memorable pronouncement was

that psychedelics had come to help young Americans "tune in, turn on, and drop out," a phrase

that gained the attention of several pop culture figures, including John Lennon.[81] Even after the

drugs were scheduled by the DEA, this did little to stop the spread and use of LSD and other psychedelics. Current studies suggest that over 30 million Americans, or 10 percent of the US population, have tried a psychedelic drug.[82] Psychedelic drugs and Asian philosophies provided Americans in the twentieth century with an alternative to their churches. And with scholars like Huston Smith, William James, Alan Watts, D. T. Suzuki, and countless others all supporting their usage and usefulness, the unchurched spiritual traditions gained credibility as legitimate substitutes to traditional religiosity.

Here, the story catches up to the sociologists who noticed that many young Americans were increasingly open to new ideas, philosophies, religions, and practices. It was during this period, roughly the last 60 years, that unchurched spiritualities became popular enough to be considered mainstream. Roof argued that growing discontent with traditional religions encouraged the spread of unchurched spiritualities by creating what he termed a "Spiritual Marketplace," which used books, the internet, and universities the medium for transmitting the unchurched spiritualities. These unchurched spiritualities quickly became highly popular, and highly profitable.[83] Many social elements came together to push the unorthodox and unchurched spiritualities into the mainstream, including countercultural movements, the rise of therapeutic culture, and apparently some degree of acceptance of these new beliefs into old Christian traditions.[84] Shockingly, the untraditional spiritualities and traditional religion have been mixing for decades now. For example, in 1990, one study demonstrated that 24 percent of churchgoers regularly consulted their horoscopes, 20 percent believed in reincarnation, and 11 percent believed in spirit channeling. Nearly half of churchgoers in the US subscribe to some sort of paranormal or extra-spiritual belief.[85] Of course, Christian Smith and Patricia Snell found that these beliefs are increasingly popular with each younger generational cohort.[86] Even more

traditional Christian beliefs, such as the concept of God as a personal creator, are being

challenged. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell found that the concept of God had been

significantly altered from a "personal creator," to a God that is omnipresent "cosmic life force."[87]

Lastly, young Christians are increasingly likely to include practices from other world religions

(almost exclusively Asian religions).[88] These observations prove that unchurched spiritual

traditions have made their way to the mainstream of American religion. However, have non-

traditional spiritualities contributed to religious disaffiliation? The short answer is, it is unclear.

There is not enough research to say whether individualized approaches to spirituality are

a major contributor to religious disaffiliation. It seems more likely that religious individuals who

become disenchanted or bored with traditional religion begin to search for spiritual practices and

beliefs that fit their individual needs. Therefore, as the SBNR identity becomes more popular, it

is possible that the individual spiritual needs of young Americans are increasingly met outside of

traditional religion. One of the benefits of the SBNR identity is its fluidity, or ability to adapt

spiritual beliefs and practices to account for new concerns. This might appeal to individuals who

feel traditional religions are too slow to adapt to new concerns and values.

One example of this is the heightened concern for the environment. Many scholars and

authors have blamed the Christian worldview for the irresponsible treatment of the environment.

For example, Wendell Berry, an environmentalist and poet, argued it is the "conceptual

division…of the creator from the creation" that allows for reckless treatment of the Earth. She

continues, "a man could aspire to heaven with his mind and his heart while destroying the earth

and his fellow men, with his hands."[89] Evangelical Christians are indeed more likely to doubt

climate change and less likely to support environmental policies, although this may have more to

do with their political affiliations than their religious doctrine.[90] With each generation of

Americans being increasingly concerned with the environment, there might be good reason to shift away from traditional religion and take up spiritualities which emphasize a new mental approach to environmental protection.[91] Jason James argues that "cosmic consciousness," or the feeling of oneness with the universe, that is often promoted in the SBNR traditions "affirms both our spiritual and material bond with nature and the moral realization of this bond presents us with an opportunity to cultivate an environmental ethic that can accommodate the findings of both science and spirituality."[92] Further, Asian religions like Buddhism and Hinduism that have been westernized often contain messages of universal love and responsibility. Therefore, it is possible that future generations will take up SBNR traditions for their environmentally aware properties.

The SBNR movement stems from a rich history of individualized spiritual beliefs and practices that have now penetrated mainstream society. With the new American culture of spiritual seeking and religious exploration in the spiritual marketplace, untraditional spiritualities are abundantly present in the minds of Americans. Thus, when a religious practitioner becomes disillusioned with their religion, they can turn to unorthodox spiritualities for guidance. While polls demonstrate a decline in the religious and an increase in the SBNR, more research ought to be conducted on the SBNR movement to better understand its effect on religious disaffiliation. It is probable that SBNR traditions will continue to gain popularity due to their ability to adapt to the needs of each individual.

Methodology

Initially, the intent of this paper was to observe the effects of college education on religiosity. I had hypothesized that college education served to create a more SBNR individual by breaking their religious beliefs and exposing them to new spiritual practices and beliefs that

would hold their interest. This approach ended abruptly as interviewees continuously discredited the argument that college education weakens religious affiliation. Further, only one of twenty-three interviewees expressed an SBNR identity. However, in the interviews, participants were continuously enthusiastic about why they disaffiliated, and I began to observe common themes: political and social tensions, disenchantment or loss of belief, and a purely utilitarian decision to leave the religious institution in favor of personal spirituality. Thereafter, I set out to examine each of these causes individually. Each cause demonstrated a role in religious disaffiliation, although none of the arguments proved sufficient on their own. Instead, each argument provides a part of the story. Sociopolitical tensions have caused a decrease in church attendance and religious identification. Education has caused a decline in many religious beliefs, especially more fundamentalist beliefs. And the increase in individualized spirituality has given religiously unaffiliated individuals an alternative.

The on-campus interviews sought to confirm the effectiveness of these three causes and observe their interrelatedness. I recruited twenty-three students through email and in-class appearances. Students were given the chance to share their experiences if they had participated in an American religious tradition of any kind and disaffiliated with that religious tradition. Converts to other religions were not accepted. While I did not restrict my search to Christians, the participants were almost exclusively Christians. The interviews were conducted in private rooms and averaged 30 minutes. The interviewees were first asked a set of questions about their previous affiliations, beliefs they held, and experiences they remember. Next, I allowed them to express the reasons for their disaffiliation in their own words without prompting. This allowed me to better understand their experiences rather than trying to draw my own conclusions from them. After they had explained their reasons for disaffiliation, I brought up the themes of this

paper, if they had not already discussed them. Last, I asked each participant to explain any new spiritual beliefs, practices, or inspirations that they may have gained after their disaffiliation.

Results

Of the twenty-three OU students interviewed, Evangelicals constituted the plurality. Catholics and mainline Protestants made up the rest of the participants, save one Jew, one Anglican, one Mormon, and one non-denominational Christian. Presenting the data as clean-cut may be misleading because many of the participants switched between churches or didn't know what denomination their churches claimed. In Table 1, general statistics of the participants are provided.

Overall, the arguments presented throughout this paper found support among the participants, save five outliers. Five of the participants explained their religious disaffiliation as stemming from personal traumas such as abuse. For example, one Mormon student explained his disaffiliation as a result of public humiliation by his Elders. Another student explained living with a very abusive father, which eventually resulted in a pessimistic worldview that rejected the notion of a benevolent Christian God. These outliers demonstrate the complexity of explaining religious disaffiliation and serve as a reminder that the argument presented in this paper is incomplete. None of the participants were omitted from the results in order to reflect a more honest representation of disaffiliation. For the 18 participants whose experiences did reflect the arguments laid out by this paper, most of them provided two or three reasons for their disaffiliation. For example, it was very common for interviewees to express frustration with anti-gay rhetoric in their church, yet most of these interviewees did not disaffiliate until finding a comfortable way to handle spirituality individually. This supports my argument that religious disaffiliation ought to be understood as a complex process involving several factors.

Table 1 Interviewee Statistics

Denomination	# of Participants of 23
Evangelical	10
Mainline Protestant	5
Catholic	4
Other	4
"My Church Supported…	
Anti-Gay Rhetoric	10
Biblical Literalism	11
Religious Exclusivism	12
Conservative Politics	10
"Education Loosened My Beliefs"	15
Especially…	
Cultural Exposure	10
Internet Access	2
Science Education from School	3
"I Began to Prefer Individualized Approach"	19
Inspired by…	
Asian Religions	9
Drug Use	1
New-Age (meditation, yoga, etc.)	5

Sociopolitical Tension: In the interviews, sociopolitical tensions were extremely apparent in approximately half of the interviews. Of the participants who felt their churches supported conservative politics, all but one of them felt their church also promoted anti-gay rhetoric, and most of them were Evangelical churches. Same-sex marriage was more frequently mentioned as a source of tension among Evangelicals than abortion. This was likely due to 6 of the participants identifying is LGBTQ+, although I'd add that same-sex marriage has also seen much more media attention than the abortion issue in recent years. Further, after being prompted, only the

Catholic participants recall being taught that abortion was wrong. Among the 10 participants whose churches supported anti-gay rhetoric, all of them listed it as a contributing factor for their religious disaffiliation. However, the severity of their churches' anti-gay position varied drastically.

In one scenario, a participant recalls revealing her queer sexuality to her parents. The next Sunday, she was approached by a deacon of the church who asked her questions about her sexuality. "My parents told people from the church…it was clear that these [people] weren't going to be friends anymore." She recalls feeling pressured to "pray the gay away." Another student had a much milder experience. He did not ever witness direct anti-gay rhetoric, but still felt the influence of the religious right agenda in his church. "No one associated with my church made explicitly homophobic [comments]…but the vague anti-gay agenda of the Christian church in general was influential in my decision to leave Christianity." This latter experience, which was shared by two other participants, grants a small amount to support to the research done by Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger, which argued that some individuals choose to see Christianity as it is represented by more fundamentalist churches.[93] Overall, anti-gay rhetoric clearly contributed to many of the participants' disaffiliation; but surprisingly, only one participant said anti-gay rhetoric was the primary reason for their disaffiliation.

While the participants were not asked directly about their perception of the religious right, many of the students made remarks such as: "[the preacher] didn't say to vote for Bush or Trump but he definitely made it clear that we sided with Republicans." These same students recall a developing tension as their political and social opinions slowly became more liberal, often due to things they learned at school or on the internet. While this tension did not discourage

their participation in the religious traditions, they used words like "uncomfortable" or "old-fashioned," to describe their changing perception of their churches.

Education and Beliefs: Fundamentalist beliefs were highly prevalent among the participants. Nearly half of the participants recall being raised in religious traditions that actively taught that the Bible was the literal word of God *and* that the Bible disagrees with modern science. One participant explained that her homeschool education included creationist theory. She exclaimed, "It wasn't until college that I learned about evolution." Another student recalls some in her church congregation explaining that the "dinosaurs didn't exist" because they weren't mentioned in the Bible. Religious exclusivism was present yet diminished. One student remarked, "[I was taught that] Jesus is the only way to heaven, but [they church] never discussed other religions," which was a common way of explaining respective traditions among the participants. After asking the participants whether they felt the church raised them as religious exclusivists, they usually said yes, but that it was indirect or implied exclusivism, rather than an explicitly stated part of church doctrine. However, three participants were exposed to Islamophobic rhetoric. Two of the interviewees can recall being sent to a "church-camp" that "taught us how to argue against non-Christians, evolutionists, but especially Muslims." As Trinitapoli argued, the homogeneity of these camps helped exacerbate the exclusivist perspective.[94] These two participants felt the church camps were "very motivational…We all got really fired up…coming back from camp you always had a 'Jesus High' that lasted a month or so." But ultimately, each of the participants who were raised with fundamentalist beliefs felt their beliefs begin to weaken as their education level rose.

When asked about the loss of their fundamentalist beliefs, the 10 or so participants provided several examples of how education had loosened their beliefs. By far, the most

effective type of education among the participants was cultural education, or exposure to people of different cultures or religions. Five of the participants came from small rural towns that lacked cultural or religious diversity. For these students, coming to college was the major factor in their cultural education. As one participant put it, "College made me feel less restricted" and "exposed to more people." Many of the participants quickly made friends with people from different countries or with different religions. For example, one of the students was assigned a roommate during freshman year who was bisexual, Asian, and Muslim. "Being around people that didn't know anything about how I grew up made me realize they could still be good people without being Christian," remarked one student. Six participants took classes on world religions, which caused them to see their own religion as a part of a broader religious landscape. One student, who took an Asian philosophy course, said, "their ideas made me feel more inspired [than Christianity] had." Others felt that the internet and classroom education were more challenging to their religious beliefs. For example, one participant lost her religious beliefs at thirteen years old after simply surfing on the internet and finding information on atheistic arguments. Another stopped believing when she entered college and took her first non-homeschooled science class. "Everyone else already knew about all this stuff, and it left me feeling weird. Like I was raised by the church." But education had its limitations as well. While many of the students lost their belief in the Bible's inerrancy, they reportedly maintained a general affiliation with Christianity. "I stopped believing but I still went," was a common narrative. Despite their loss of belief, something else was necessary for them to fully disaffiliate.

Individualized Spirituality: Almost every participant expressed developing a preference for individualized spirituality as a reason for their disaffiliation. While sociopolitical tension and education weakened their affiliation with Christianity, it appears many of the students remained

religious until developing their own beliefs and practices. These new beliefs and practices varied from student to student, with some expressing a commitment to atheism, secularism, or science, and others expressing interests in New-Age spiritualities.

Other than drawing inspiration from books, media, or classrooms, the participants seemed entirely self-directed. One of the participants, an atheist, explained his ability to care for his mental health by "[taking] time out of my day to read, journal, or just go walking." I asked him if he saw this as a spiritual practice and he replied, "in a sense, yes, because it helps me better myself and reflect on something deeper…but also no because I don't believe in having a spirit or in a god." Another student explained her success with mindfulness meditation which "puts [her] in a totally different mood where I can reflect on what I like or dislike about myself." In one case, a student explained his use of drugs for spiritual connection. He was a devout Christian until he ingested LSD. Thereafter, he explained that LSD provided him with a "moral compass" that was more helpful to him than the morality of the church. In each scenario, the participants seemed to express having lost the need for church as a spiritual or emotional guide. There was so much confidence among the participants in their capabilities, that religion seemed to be the furthest thing from their mind. I asked one student how her sense of empathy had changed since her disaffiliation. She responded, "I still care about other people. Actually, I think I care even more because now I feel like I care more about other things like the environment, animals, and people all over the world. And I don't have to have the belief system I grew up with to have all this." Overall, the students appeared very comfortable with their individualized approach to spirituality.

Four of the participants could not provide me with an inspiration for their new practices or beliefs. They claimed that the conscience simply guided their actions. But fifteen of the

participants described inspiration from a variety of sources. Nine of the participants drew inspiration from either Buddhism, Daoism, or Hinduism. However, most of the books or people they mentioned were from Western society. Three interviewees mentioned being inspired by *Siddhartha*, a book about a Hindu ascetic who rejected the Buddha as a teacher, and instead achieved self-realization through his own efforts. The author, Herman Hesse, was a European. One student claimed drawing Zen inspirations from the speaker Alan Watts, another European. Five of the participants drew upon New-Age elements like self-help books or yoga classes. But no matter the case, their inspirations seemed fleeting. One student described their interest in Buddhism as "really intense, and I even thought about joining monasteries. But after a while it just sort of faded." Their inspirations and interests, while helpful, seemed to be short-term. As Wuthnow suggests, I found that students looked to several sources hoping to establish a sort of toolset of beliefs and practices that could help them in life.[95] Further, I began to understand why these students choose not to identify as SBNR. The unchurched spiritual inspirations act more as supplements to their secularized lifestyles. In other words, the participants didn't understand their interest in other religions or spiritual practices to be spiritual at all. Rather, these interests were simply tools that provided some type of aid to their lives which they viewed as primarily secular.

Conclusion

Religious disaffiliation in the US is an increasingly important topic. It is very likely that the US will have a generation that is mostly made of religious nones soon. The existing research appears to suggest a few major causes for the increasing rates of religious disaffiliation; and personal interviews confirm each of these arguments. Yet, they only provide a clear explanation when understood holistically and in relation to one another. Sociopolitical tensions are causing

religious people to leave their churches due to incongruencies between their personal opinions, and the opinions of the religious right. Rising levels of education are challenging fundamentalist beliefs such as biblical literalism, which may be causing a softer religiosity that heightens susceptibility to disaffiliation. And unchurched spiritualities have become so popular and common that religiously disinterested people now have somewhere else to draw inspiration for their own individualized spiritual pursuits.

This account of disaffiliation is still incomplete however, as it fails to account for socialization theory. Religion is a highly social phenomenon. Of the twenty-three interviewees, fifteen of them said that the social aspect of religion was the most important. It is likely that their disaffiliation has much more to do with changing social spaces than this paper gave credit. Further, the arguments in this paper cannot explain the disaffiliations that resulted from personal traumas. Fortunately, this paper can at least identify these cases rather than not granting them any attention whatsoever, as occurs in most surveys. There are also several flaws with my study. First, students are usually very busy, and it can be difficult get interviews without offering payment. The students who volunteered may not accurately represent the body of religiously disaffiliated individuals on campus. The individuals inclined to give interviews may have been more passionate about sharing their experiences due to lingering tension between them and their family, or perhaps more extraverted individuals volunteered. There is no way to know whether the twenty-three interviewees fairly represent the crowd of religiously disaffiliated individuals at the University of Oklahoma.

However, the research presented in this paper, alongside an original study which grants further support, provides a more holistic explanation of religious disaffiliation among young

Americans. Moving forward, I hope this introductory level research provides readers with a first

step to understanding and explaining religious disaffiliation among American youth.

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