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Is a theology for SBNRs possible?

Linda Mercadante

Sheer numbers are enough of a reason to suggest a theology for the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). The SBNR population now comprises more than a quarter of Americans and is slated to keep growing. Already their numbers are greater than the total of all types of Protestants in the United States.¹ There is also a more critical reason. In a globally challenged, polarized, violence-ridden, climate-endangered world, the tasks we face are so critical, so massive, and so vital to world survival that some common spiritual and social principles are needed to foster cooperation. Yet the common principles and networks of relationships that have long helped society function are dwindling.

In other words, America is losing much of its social and spiritual “capital.” Social capital is the fruit of community. It is the links that join us together as a society, fostering trust, cooperation, and mutual productivity. Traditionally, social capital has been greatly fostered by religion. In fact, it is estimated that half of America’s social capital comes from religion (Putnam 2001, 66). Spiritual capital are those nonmaterial factors that arise from religious practices, beliefs, institutions, and relationships. These provide behavioral norms; a sense of meaning for life; and even economic, social and political effects.²

This means that the loss of religious attendance, belief, and practices is not just a loss for actual religion. This also does not bode well for American society in general. It follows that even SBNRs and secularists should understand they benefit from religion. But they also can benefit from practicing a form of “theology.” Why is this so, when “theology” seems so deeply linked with organized religion? For even the nonreligious need to understand what they believe, why they believe it, and how this functions in their lives. This could make this rapidly expanding population a force for good in society, rather than simply a disjointed societal sea-change with unclear effects.

The difficulties are real

The difficulties of suggesting a theology for SBNRs must be acknowledged up front. First, SBNRs are hard to characterize and are often maligned,

especially by religious people. They are sometimes stereotyped as “salad bar spiritualists”; proudly eclectic; “poachers” of other cultures’ spiritual practices; New Agers; and shallow, self-serving individuals. Although these are often exaggerations, this does not sound like a population that would attract the efforts of theologians.

Second, SBNRs are not really an integrated identifiable group. Instead, they are more of a “demographic” or “gerrymandered set.” As philosopher Jeanine Diller explains, this means: “It’s not clear that there is anything every member of the set has in common; there is no governing principle for why they are all in the set.”³ What they have most in common, I would add, is what they are “not,” that is, religious. Even many of those who still actively participate in organized religion now identify as SBNR.⁴

In addition, SBNRs are a self-selected set with a somewhat exclusivist quality. Its activities require both time and resources, which many people don’t have. Thus, there is an aspect of “spiritual privilege” to the SBNR designation. As Stephen T. Asma says: “The dismissal of religion . . . is often a luxury position of prosperous and comfortable groups. . . . Perhaps they have not suffered much. . . . For the rest of us, religion is vital to our well-being.”⁵

Third, the definition of the phrase “spiritual but not religious” is far from precise. The nutshell description implies that spirituality is personal and heart-felt, whereas religion consists of human-created doctrines, institutions, and outward rituals. But in the diverse SBNR population, this sharp divide does not always hold. The SBNR set can include secular humanists, atheists, and those who simply do not identify with any religion: the “nones.” It encompasses people who draw on aspects of “metaphysical religion,” read popular works on the topic, create rituals, and revive others. Alternatively, it includes those who focus primarily on alternative health practices, energy work, and self-authenticity, often with a basis in what is “natural” or of the earth. Thus, what it means to be SBNR often includes a hybrid or syncretic assembly of spiritual practices and beliefs.⁶ Increasingly, it also includes growing numbers who retain some practices, beliefs, and even regular participation in organized religion.

Fourth, as I demonstrated in my book, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*, the most common denominator for a majority of SBNRs is not simply that they are not religious. It goes further than that. For I found SBNRs, as diverse as they are, to have an impressive agreement on the specific concepts in which they *don’t* believe.⁷ The rejected beliefs include such things as a self-determining, transcendent, personal God; humans created in God’s image but with a propensity to turn their backs on this God; spirit-infused, yet human-created, institutions; and some kind of afterlife dependent upon God’s judgment. Not surprisingly, because SBNR is more a boundary-setting rhetoric than a clear-cut set of positions, many of these beliefs are the hallmarks of religion, in particular, Christianity.

Fifth, although the SBNRs are not without an array of guides, at present they are without any agreed-upon texts, leaders, or groups. There are no widely recognized programs to promote intellectual and ethical harmony or solidarity outside the revolving door of trends and teachers. Although there are some widely respected teachers – such as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, and Pema Chodron (who actually represent traditional religions) – and a few common principles, such as compassion, tolerance, or goodwill to all, these have not yet led to organization. Instead, they have bred a culture in which this growing population learns its catechism in yoga studios, fitness programs, self-help books, television shows, and internet sites.

Sixth, the vested interests of theologians and religious leaders would likely not be served by this task. As counterintuitive as this may sound to clergy, it is probably unrealistic for religions to consider the SBNR population a new “mission field.” Perhaps religious leaders would do better to promote the positive teachings and values of their respective faiths and correct what has led to misinterpretations.⁸

Is creating an SBNR theology useful when it might be more effective to focus on the fact that “real religion is about human flourishing” (Asma 2018, 1)? After all, sociologists project that certain characteristics of this group – especially their anti-institutional bent – make it unlikely that they will lead to a reformation for organized religion or the creation of a new religion.

As Mark Chaves concludes in *American Religion*:

This growing segment of the population is unlikely to reenergize existing religious institutions. Nor will it provide a solid foundation for new kinds of religious institutions or new religious movements. The spiritual but not religious should not be seen as yearning people ready to be won over by a new type of religion specifically targeted to them. They may provide a market for certain kinds of religious products, such as self-help books with spiritual themes, but they probably will not create a stable, socially and politically significant organizational expression. The spiritual-but-not-religious phenomenon is too vague, unfocused, and anti-institutional for that.

(Chaves 2017, 40)

Can we use the word “theology?”

As hinted earlier, the word “theology” can present another problem if by that we mean *theos logos*, words about God. Most of the hundreds of SBNRs I interviewed for my book *Belief without Borders* scrupulously avoid using the word “God.” Although this appears to be happening culture-wide and even in some religious settings, it is more explicit and intentional among SBNRs.⁹ Even if they believe there is some primal source, ultimate reality, or universal energy, they largely reject the idea that it is a divine personal being

and transcendent/immanent spirit. Although they may search for some type of “bottom line” or ultimacy, they generally do not believe in a God who is personally involved with humans, one who creates, acts, relates, controls, persuades, sets goals, makes promises, judges, communicates, or works for individual growth and continuity.

The theological focus on normativity, truth, and questions of good and evil also becomes problematic, because SBNRs protest religious norms, hold back from declaring things good or evil, and find truth to be relative.¹⁰ In addition to resisting the authority of any religious doctrine, tradition, leadership, sacred text, or organization, they increasingly identify religion with right-wing politics and harmful conservative agendas. Religious morality, standards of behavior, communal mission, and other practical facets of organized religions hold little import. These many factors are what SBNRs consider retrograde, backward looking, repressive, and lacking in creativity about organized religions, even if they grant that religions do some good things now and then.

Some traction is gained if we define theology more generally as “faith seeking understanding.” Oftentimes SBNRs see themselves on a spiritual quest, journey, or path, seeking such things as spiritual experience, greater understanding of the self, authenticity, ancient wisdom predating religion, cosmic energetic transmissions, holism, or harmony. Although this may be a place to start, it does not yet provide a sufficient theological basis. It is not clear what or whom this faith is in, how to reach understanding, and what that would mean.

But cynicism is not wisdom, and hope takes courage. Lending a hand is a hopeful move that people who think for a living can do. Religious intellectuals, in particular theologians, are equipped to suggest cognitive tools, historical and philosophical principles, and the wisdom of great mystics and theologians. They can promote common ethical standards, organize socially helpful projects, and propose missions that take all humanity under those umbrellas. They stand on faith traditions that live in hope for the human race, the Earth, and the entire universe. Even if the ground of their hope is questioned by SBNRs, they bring that hope to the task anyway.

In fact, the designation “spiritual but not religious” suggests a false dichotomy. SBNRs are not without ties to traditions, religious thought, and other influences. Although they borrow and adapt at will, this population is not totally eclectic and negative. SBNRs do not just disbelieve, disaffiliate, and distrust. There are some common affirmative factors in the SBNR movement that can give theologians starting places. In my interviews with SBNRs, I discovered that there are clusters of beliefs that they hold in common, especially around the four major concepts I examined: transcendence/immanence, human nature, community, and afterlife.

Common concepts

The hundreds of SBNRs I interviewed were not trained in theological inquiry. In fact, many had scant exposure to basic religious education. Even

so, they routinely raised issues ripe for theological engagement. I found that an array of common concepts emerges as one talks with SBNRs.

Transcendence/immanence

Their near-unanimity on transcendence and immanence was striking. Although they rejected a fully transcendent deity who personally interacts – thus seeing themselves entirely in what Charles Taylor calls “the immanent frame” (Taylor 2007) – they did propose a kind of horizontal transcendence. That is, they felt connected to something larger than themselves, be it the human race, the Earth, or an ultimate universal “oneness.”

They leaned toward “monism” and professed “all is one.” Thus, when proposing a connecting principle, many suggested that some kind of “universal energy source” permeates everything. Sometimes the SBNR interviewees spoke of “the Universe” in a way similar to how others speak of God, but more often they saw this as an impersonal, benign, constantly flowing source of guidance, help, and empowerment. They leaned toward a “re-enchantment” of the world such that more goes on under the surface than mere scientific materialism can reveal.

Human nature

Most felt confident when I asked them about human nature. In spite of their implicit monism, most did not see individuality as an illusion. Although a few echoed their attraction to Eastern religions by insisting the ultimate problem was “the ego,” most felt individuality was important and lasting. Freedom of choice and authority lodged in the self were sacrosanct principles, as was a belief in unlimited human potential. Some claimed immanent divinity resided in the depths of the self, with a few saying, “I am God.”

Common goals included finding one’s “authentic self” and clearing the energy blocks that make self-fulfillment difficult. Many agree that individual spiritual experience, unmediated by religious tradition – and especially as felt in natural settings – is the key to these things. Yet SBNRs often hope to find an ancient, primitive, or more “natural” spiritual tradition that pre-dates organized religion. SBNRs lean towards a type of “perennialism,” a contemporary assumption that each of the world’s religions converge on a few common principles, whether that is love, compassion, “brotherhood,” or others. They often feel proud to have outgrown the imprisonment of these principles in particular religions.

To them, what is most important are their individual thoughts and choices. Many insist they can stay in tune with the universal energy by practicing “positive thinking,” drawing to themselves what they project from their minds. However, many avoid using terms like “good” and “bad,” insisting that these are relative and judgmental. Ironically, however, during the interview process nearly 100 percent began their comments by saying,

“Everyone is born good.” They explained that individuals only slip into dysfunction when something has damaged them therapeutically or biologically, such as bad parenting or mental illness.

Community

As for community, many SBNRs I meet seek it out from time to time, but most do not find long-standing commitment essential for spiritual growth.¹¹ When I asked interviewees who supports them spiritually, many answered, “I do.” Some hoped to find a group where everyone could believe and practice as they chose, without peer pressure. However, the anti-institutional bent meant that few had found – or felt they needed – a group of like-minded people for the long haul.¹²

In spite of the individualism, this is not a population of “lone rangers.” Many will commit to causes, participate in charitable or political-action groups, and be motivated to serve, even if only on a case-by-case basis. Rather than the seedbed for a new spiritual organization, however, this is a developing subculture without, as yet, an identifiable center. Its ethos is passed around through low-cost or no-cost things, such as informal discussion groups, popular books, internet sites, 12-step and therapy groups, and alternative spiritualities such as Reiki. It also is disseminated on the back of capitalism through such businesses as yoga classes, fitness studios, boot camps, and self-improvement programs. These feed on and spread the gospel of individual self-fulfillment, sometimes with other participants encouraging each other’s personal spiritual journeys.¹³

Afterlife

When I ask SBNRs about their views on afterlife, the theme of individuality and self-fulfillment usually shows up again. In fact, some insist they have access to their “past lives” and/or expect ongoing continuation of their individuality after death. Although a few insist that death is the end of everything, many others have a general belief in reincarnation. It is a very American brand, however, promising endless lives of progress. SBNRs also mention karma – the idea that “what goes around, comes around.” It is seen as a process that regulates harm, replacing a God who judges or the universality of human sin.

One may hear, in the SBNR ethos, echoes of earlier themes in American religion, such as theosophy, transcendentalism, spiritualism, positive thought, romanticism, Swedenborgianism, etc. However, the SBNRs I meet are not consciously adopting or are in touch with these traditions. Even so, this growing group could be called the new “metaphysicals” or the “liminals” because they sense a fragile place between material and spiritual reality.¹⁴ No matter what term is used, however, the SBNR ethos provides some footholds for a theology.

Theological footholds

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to determine whether a systematic theology for SBNRs is feasible, much less to develop one. Yet there are a few theological starting places, as well as issues needing further development, that can provide room for the insights of religious thinkers.

Spiritual experience

The focus on spiritual experience gives a likely foothold. Exploring those times when a sense of fullness or peace or deep connection happens can put words to experience without automatically invoking religious doctrine. SBNRs seek a sense of “cosmic consciousness,” seeing it as the location of internal divinity. They often equate feelings of awe, wonder, mystery, and gratitude with spiritual experience. One connecting point, then, can be something like Schleiermacher’s “feeling of absolute dependence” or Tillich’s understanding of “ultimate concern.” At least one theologian is trying to bridge this gap by developing the concept of “love beyond belief” (Thandeka 2018).

On the other hand, theologians can explain that unmediated experience of any kind is an impossible goal, because everything is filtered through bodies, contexts, and history. After all, we all swim in a sea of culture. The fact that many SBNRs – sometimes with puzzlement – claim to feel inspired by religious architecture and music is one way to make this point. Theologians can contribute by discussing the ideas and beliefs behind these inspiring creations – and the sensations they evoke – especially because SBNRs often value artistic creativity.

Moreover, it must be asked whether spiritual experience is an end in itself or a route to something greater? One way to explore this question would be to examine the recent interest in dramatic bodily practices to see whether self-transcendence, self-fulfillment, or sheer stimulation is the experience sought. This could include such things as extreme sports (such as free climbing and BASE jumping), ideologically based dietary regimens, self-imposed pain or markings (such as tattoos, piercings, or body suspension on hooks), or pilgrimage treks (such as the Camino de Santiago in Spain).

The natural world

A starting place with wider appeal is the natural world, especially the environment and its nonhuman inhabitants. For SBNRs, nature is very often revered as a likely site of spiritual experience, with assertions like, “I find more spirituality in a sunset (out on a hike, at the ocean, etc.) than I do in a religious service.” The increasing focus on domestic pets can sometimes function as spiritual source for SBNRs as well. Although SBNRs are unlikely to understand the natural world as God’s creation, they do sense a

sacredness in the Earth. This links well to their sense of holism and oneness and the energy that permeates everything.

Perhaps because of this, SBNRs are often quite concerned with the degradation humans have caused the Earth. Sometimes their response is restricted to dietary and lifestyle changes. But this is limited. Instead, this concern can be linked with their often-expressed belief that the common ground of all religions is compassion. Having compassion for the Earth and all its inhabitants can motivate to action, for there is no expectation that a savior will come to rescue humans from their mess.

Yet the Earth crisis also forces us to realize that we all have erred in some way, becoming unconsciously complicit in the Earth's suffering. This moves the discussion beyond a simple assertion that "we are all born good" and individual freedom as the highest value. Instead, it raises issues of the reality of evil and human wrongdoing beyond a mere therapeutic explanation. It opens the door to exploring the different approaches religions take on human finitude, fallibility, and vulnerability.

Thinking about the Earth's suffering – and how that affects humans – suggests that we have inherited wrongdoing, catching it like a disease. Often without realizing it, we perpetuate it, but at times, we also knowingly cooperate with harm or fail to act in the face of it. This would not necessarily push SBNRs to a theological idea such as original sin, although it could be analogized with the genetic determinism of popular views on alcohol addiction. Instead, connecting the Earth's suffering with the SBNR focus on individual responsibility and the power of positive thought can lessen feelings of powerlessness and inspire action.

The authentic self

The SBNR focus on the authentic self, rather than socially imposed roles, can also link with many religions' emphases on the false self versus the true self. This, too, may help promote responsible activism. Beyond that, if SBNRs believe they can connect with cosmic consciousness or allow the universal energy to propel action, so much the better. One need not go as far as proposing God's grace or the Holy Spirit as this consciousness or energy, but pointing out the similarities might help SBNRs better appreciate religion and promote solidarity in action.

Issues needing work

Attention must be paid to the important issues needing further development. A few key ones can be mentioned here. One is the SBNR paradox between control and conformity. Do individual thoughts control reality in an interesting twist on "you reap what you sow?" Or must one conform to – become one with – the cosmic or universal energy source by removing blocks, clearing pathways, and staying attuned?

Another is the tension between individual and group. If individual authority is primary yet one seeks holism, oneness, and compassion for all, how does this tension get resolved in real life? This paradox has not been lost on advocates of the SBNR ethos, even if they are secular humanists. One leader of a humanist group affirmed the need for life-meaning beyond self-absorption and mundane goals. He stressed the need to inspire “nones” to move toward altruism and community. The problem to be overcome, he said, is “relative absence of inspiration, of potent means to climb out of our self-centric existences to something greater than ourselves, something more edifying than me, here, now.”¹⁵

The perennialist attitude towards world religions also needs more work. Although advocating tolerance, this view does not recognize the deep particularities of each religion. In addition, tolerance is more “live and let live” than deep reconciliation or mutuality, factors that could promote solidarity and cooperation in the face of current crises. One could even consider the random borrowing from practices, rituals, and/or beliefs of other religions – without permission, firsthand knowledge, or a legitimate guide from the particular religion – to be akin to “poaching” or stealing. SBNRs need to reflect more deeply on this practice. Does it reflect hubris, privilege, simple tolerance, a colonialist sense of entitlement, or an actual effort to embrace the “other?”

In addition, SBNR alternative spiritualities often pay insufficient attention to the very hard questions of life, issues such as imposed suffering, victimization, cruelty, abuse, and other harms that seem more intentional than inadvertent. Affirming that all individuals are born good or that we should keep a positive attitude is not an adequate formula that reaches the depths of actual or unexplainable evil. As an example, when the internet was formed, many assumed it would automatically be a force for connection and good. Where were the conversations about its unexpected “sorcerer’s apprentice” type effects, such as election manipulation, the spreading of lies, or its potential to enhance human division?

Finally, more work needs to be done on ideas of afterlife. Is there a trajectory for this, an endpoint? Do humans endlessly and individually progress, or do they ultimately get absorbed into the oneness? If individuals transition into and out of life and a new body takes the place of the old one, if the brain dies with the body, how does reincarnation really work? If karma keeps order and restricts random harm – and if its cold justice extends to all – where is the place for compassion, love, forgiveness, or mercy, themes that SBNRs insist are common wisdom?

New grounds for dialogue

It is possible the SBNR movement indicates many are becoming fed up with the pervasive cynicism, irony, and suspicion of genuine emotion that permeates contemporary culture (Mercadante 2017a). As SBNRs take more

seriously what they are for, rather than simply against, they may be willing to reconsider the hope and truth-claims found in religions. By working on the hard questions suggested earlier and seriously grappling with human frailty, willfulness, and vulnerability, they may realize it is the cracks that let the light in.¹⁶ But this will not happen automatically. Theological tools are needed. Therefore, it is important to recognize the footholds available for envisioning a theology for SBNR people.

It is also critical to include faith communities in this work. Historic religious traditions, writings, and informed participants contain a wealth of millennia-old reflection, showing both meaning and mishaps, offering wisdom, cautions, and the long lived experience of putting beliefs into action.

Rather than eschewing belief and focusing on experience, the starting point of an SBNR theology should be, as Philip Sheldrake contends, “to actually have the courage and ability to make our implicit beliefs and values more explicit and balanced and then to live a principled and harmonious life more effectively” (Sheldrake 2012, 120). The first task of theologians, then, is to help SBNRs excavate their buried beliefs and recognize that a disharmony here often hinders fulfillment, community, and spiritual growth.

At this moment, the focus on self-authority, individualism, and distrust of institutions stands in the way of creating an SBNR theology that could be widely accepted. However, history shows that oftentimes things happen that make humans realize they have to organize, agree, and rally to the same vision. Hopefully, this will not be some cataclysmic event, but will come about organically as we try to save our home the Earth, promote peace instead of violence, and increase our respect for “the other.”

Notes

- 1 The Pew Forum is replete with articles and statistics on the rise of SBNRs and “nones.”
- 2 For more on spiritual capital, see the *Spiritual Capital Research Project* (2018).
- 3 Thanks to Jeanine Diller for pointing out that this is more a “gerrymandered set” or “demographic” than an actual cohesive group. Email correspondence Dec. 27, 2018.
- 4 I found much evidence for this in my qualitative research. See Mercadante (2014).
- 5 This has been noted before, e.g., see Asma (2018, 3): “The dismissal of religion . . . is often a luxury position of prosperous and comfortable groups. . . . Perhaps they have not suffered much. . . . For the rest of us, religion is vital to our well-being. There are many forms of suffering that are beyond the reach of any scientific or secular alleviation. Religion is a form of emotional management, and its value does not lie in whether it is true or false, but whether it consoles and humanizes us.”
- 6 See, e.g., Mercadante (2017b), DeGruyter.com
- 7 For a full rundown of beliefs rejected and proposed see Mercadante (2014).
- 8 Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said as much: “Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit . . .

when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless” Heschel (1976), Kindle location 325.

- 9 I’ve noticed this problem even in seminaries, but as for the wider culture, see e.g., Merritt (2018).
- 10 This obviates an excellent definition of the work of theology and culture: “the process of seeking normative answers to questions of truth, goodness, evil, suffering, redemption, and beauty in the context of particular social and cultural situations” Lynch (2005, 36).
- 11 Some earlier New Agers are quite harsh in condemning this SBNR feature. See, e.g., Brian Wilson’s summary of the change from New Age communal solidarity, such as characterized by the Fetzer Institute, to the current emphasis on the self: “From the beginning the Fetzer Institute’s mission was . . . global spiritual transformation . . . [but this] has fallen out of step with more recent developments within the New Age movement. . . . The New Age moved on . . . to the point that many contemporary observers see it as a shorthand for spiritual shallowness and reject the label outright. Many prefer instead the label ‘spiritual but not religious’ . . . although SBNRs tend to be just as hyper individualistic and shallow as the New Agers they decry” Wilson (2018, 211–212).
- 12 There are some exceptions, such as the Fetzer Institute, or popular retreat centers, such as Esalen in Big Sur, California.
- 13 See, e.g., the marketing of the fitness studio “System of Strength.” Its website proclaims: “The System™ was created and a community of inspiring, like-minded badasses was built. . . . We’ll sweat together. We’ll struggle together and we’ll leave feeling proud, together.”
- 14 See, e.g., Parsons (2018) and Bender (2010). A history of this can be found in Albanese (2007). Another history traces the foundation of this emerging population in liberal religion – see Schmidt (2012).
- 15 Krattenmaker (2017); also phone conversation 10/9/18. Krattenmaker is on the board of the Yale Humanist Community.
- 16 From Cohen’s (1992) lyrics in “Anthem”: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” From the 1992 album *The Future*. Columbia.

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