

SESSION 6: Issues in Belonging

Session: This session considers the many new spiritual and religious identities and their relationship to Interfaith work.

OUTLINE OF SCHEDULE:

05 min: Gathering Prayer

10 min: Homework Processing

20 min: Presentation & Conversation: Emerging Adulthood

25 min: Presentation & Conversation: Belief Without Borders

15 min: Presentation & Conversation: Blended Identity and Faith Styles

10 min: Wrap-Up—This content is determined by the local facilitator.

10 min: Closing Prayer

COPIES THAT NEED TO BE MADE:

1 copy per participant:

Gathering Prayer (½ page)

Emerging Adulthood (1 pg)

Emerging Adulthood/ Belief Without Borders Discussions (¼ pg each)

Belief Without Borders (2 pgs or duplex)

The Contributions of Blended Identity and Practices (1 pg)

INSTRUCTOR'S CONTENT

05 min: Gathering Prayer By William Laurence Sullivan

LEADER: To outgrow the past but not extinguish it;

INDIVIDUAL VOICES:

- *To be progressive but not raw,*
- *Free but not mad, critical but not sterile, expectant but not deluded;*
- *To be scientific but not to live on formulas that cut us off from life;*

ALL: To hear amidst clamor the pure, deep tones of the spirit;

LEADER: We take time now to name the “tones of spirit” that we have heard this week.

(Please affirm each other silently as we share from our personal experiences.)

LEADER: To seek the wisdom that liberates and a loyalty that consecrates;

INDIVIDUAL VOICES:

- *To turn both prosperity and adversity into servants of character;*
- *To master circumstances by the power of principle,*
- *And to conquer death by the splendor of loving trust:*

ALL: This is to attain peace;

LEADER: This is to pass from drear servitude to divine adoption;

ALL: This is to invest the lowliest life with magnificence.

And to prepare it for coronation.

10 min: Homework Processing

Which options did you choose? What did you learn?

20 min: Presentation and Conversation: Emerging Adulthood

(9-10 min) For the past several weeks, we have been talking about how to initiate and sustain interfaith conversations. I would be remiss if I didn't include some information about three other groups of people who often think of themselves as part of the conversation. The three groups we'll be considering today are different from each other, but related.

Some people are forging an identity writ large and their religious identity is very much in flux. These are Emerging Adults rising in the challenges of postmodernism—a time when everything is critiqued and questioned, very little is named and accepted, and even less is considered a given.

Some people do not identify with a single Tradition and often don't consider it a personal value to identify with a single Tradition. These are the Spiritual But Not Religious people. They compose a religious identity from fragments of two or more Traditions and rarely accept conventional membership in any Tradition.

It is important to understand that the participation of both of these groups will often be beneficial for individuals and may add to the congeniality of the atmosphere as a whole. But it probably won't advance interfaith work per se because they do not stand within a Tradition and cannot function as Ambassadors.

Some people live with a blended religious identity because their marriage or family is interfaith. And some people add a practice from another Tradition to their very firm identity within their root tradition. These folks will understand many of the concerns and issues of interfaith work but may not appreciate the hurdles they pose for people without their background. On occasion, they will be impatient with people who see their identity and/or practice as combining incompatible elements.

We turn to the first group, Emerging Adults. (*Distribute handout: Emerging Adulthood*) First, I would like to remind you that the ideas of childhood and adolescence are relatively new in human history. Though the study of childhood and adolescence is presently very robust, it's really only in the last 300 years that we've

thought of childhood as a separate sociological category. And it's only in the last 100 years that we've "created" adolescence by extending formal education beyond the physically defined period of puberty.

In the last half-century, the sociological markers of adulthood have been pushed back 5 to 6 years on average. (*Review handout: 5 Conventional Sociological Markers and data from 1960 and 2000.*) Given the general social conditions of the early 21st-century, many of these young people find themselves with a dubious status: They are physically beyond puberty, legally of age, and often educationally prepared for a job—but filled with an odd mix of anxiety about their inability to break into their fields at levels that will afford them true adult independence (including to pay their school debt) and a deep sense of possibility. They will sometimes describe themselves as having a "Quarter Life Crisis." David P. Setran and Chris A. Kiesling sum up this description by noting it is no longer sufficient to describe young adulthood. Because of the extension of the process of "growing up" the better name is *emerging adulthood*.

Ofra Maysel and Einat Keren, from the University of Haifa in Israel, have done considerable research on a particular shift in emerging adulthood that is important for our consideration. Emerging adults are especially concerned about meaningfulness in their lives. The four major life meaning-making categories that are operative are: 1) achievements/ work, 2) relationships/ intimacy, 3) religion/ spirituality, and 4) self-transcendence/ generativity. Today, work and relationships are the organizing principles. Said another way, work and relationships offer individuals purpose and a sense of coherence. In fact, they make their meaning *from* these.

It may seem odd to emphasize this since when we look at the data, work and relationships were obviously important to the young adults of 1960. However, in previous generations, family and religion offered an overarching sense of the coherent; work and relationships were tasks related to this framework. Now, work and relationships are used to build a very personal framework rather than adopt or adapt an overarching one. Emerging adults are more likely to describe adulthood by psychological tasks (like taking responsibility for one's actions) rather than the Five Conventional Markers that are external signs. And meaning must be constructed rather than adopted or adapted. It is a daunting task to construct meaning in a society overrun with options and possibilities for encountering and exploring systems of meaning. This contributes to the conclusion that there is no normative demographic for this age group.

Emerging adults are building their lives in new and unfamiliar ways. Given the added changes in childhood religious affiliation and formation, when they do engage religion or spirituality, they tend to do so with this very personal approach rather than grounding in a given tradition. When emerging adults do affiliate with a Tradition, I have seen a weird thing can happen to them: They get appointed as a delegate for the community! It's not unusual for religious organizations to look to the "young" blood for somebody fresh to send to some new thing they're trying out. For many reasons, this may prove an awkward moment.

Your concern as an Ambassador is to be aware of these general shifts, to assess how the Emerging Adult you're dealing with does or *doesn't* fit the general description, and how attached they are to a group if they have been sent as a representative. It is also valuable for you to understand how your particular experience is similar to or different from theirs after all finding or making meaning is a shared value across generations and experiences!

(7-8 min) Discussion: In groups of three discuss these questions:

These are available on a ¼ sheet for handout or can be posted on a flip chart for the whole group.

- What was your experience of coming into adulthood? How did you make the transition and when did you **know** you were an adult?
- As a young adult, what values guided your decision-making? Where did you learn those?
- How were your experiences similar to and different from Emerging Adults today?

(2-3 min) Wrap-up as a large group:

- We have focused on how it may be difficult for Emerging Adults to fully appreciate the work of interfaith dialogue. But their unique position in the world also holds some gifts. What do you think they might offer to the interfaith enterprise?

25 min: Presentation and Conversation: Belief Without Borders

(8-9 min) The second group we are considering is “the Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR.) As I said with Emerging Adults, it is important to understand that the participation of this group will often be beneficial for its individuals and it may well add to the congeniality of the atmosphere as a whole. But it probably won’t advance interfaith work because they do not stand committed to a single Tradition and cannot function as Ambassadors. It is important to keep this in mind, because Spiritual But Not Religious people are sometimes very active in communities short-term or may be familiar with several communities without being a member of any. (*Distribute Handout: Belief Without Borders*) It is not unusual for them to show up for an interfaith event and feel comfortable being fully engaged even though they aren’t actually representing anyone. If you look at the very last category on the bottom of page 2 of the handout, you will understand this dynamic. Spiritual But Not Religious people consider it an Essential Practice to “not settle” into just one place or thing.

Linda Mercadante has done extensive research on the Spiritual But Not Religious ethos and its practitioners. Through hundreds of interviews, classes, and site visits, she has assembled a comprehensive and expansive portrait of a group that has previously been identified mostly by what it’s not. She even points out that there is a way in which this group is beginning to look like a movement.

As you hear this, you should recall our discussion in Session 2 about whether interfaith work is a “movement.” Some of the same questions apply here and Mercadante answers with many of the same nuances as we had in considering our question. Spiritual But Not Religious people are not a movement if you are expecting them to deliberately address a social issue as a bloc. However, what started as a wildly divergent group that Traditions often described as dropouts or “lapsed,” has evolved into a group with a common language for their experience and a shared theological core. It is particularly important to notice Mercadante’s outline of several types of Spiritual But Not Religious people many of them are not dropouts or dissenters. (*Review information at bottom of page 1*) This schema is contrary both to a popular description of society as becoming more secular and to the earlier categorization of all religiously unaffiliated people as “seekers” in a spiritual marketplace.

Oftentimes, this group is still labeled most simply by what it’s not: Not restrained by a Tradition; especially not confined by Western religion; not believing in an exclusive, male God; not accepting notions of original sin. But as the group has grown in number, it has grown in complexity as well. Partly because so much information is accessible, many people are now connecting with Traditions indirectly and in segmented ways. Unfortunately indirect exploration does not usually offer a systematic introduction to a tradition and may not foster a deep understanding of its intricacies. Nevertheless, there have been notable theological developments: A recognition by the group that they are experimenting across Traditions and may not be using practices or language as a Tradition does; God language is redefined rather than abandoned; the beauty of the cosmos is appreciated; the struggles between “nature” and science, inner authority and questions about free will are acknowledged; and the ills of the world are recognized and spiritual practices are employed to heal their effects.

The many different styles of identity within the Spiritual But Not Religious cohort pose interesting dilemmas for religious communities. This stems partly from their choices to be outsiders, partly from their personalized use of practices from ancient Traditions, and partly from their partial engagement with communities.

(3 min) *Pause for reflection: Let’s stop and think about our own experiences for a moment. As you have chosen to become a Mentor and Ambassador, you have committed to working on behalf of your Tradition.*

You may have been raised in it or you may have chosen it, but you have embraced it as a home from which to work. You have accepted formation in its way of life, wrestled with the inherent contradictions of putting one's divine aspirations to work in human life, and stayed within it. Think about when you have struggled with it. Make some notes about the teachings, practices, and/or structures that have at times been hard for you to accept personally. Were those struggles minor or major upheavals for you? How did you get through the experience?

(3-4 min) Back in groups of three discuss these questions:

These are available on a ¼ sheet for handout or can be posted on a flip chart for the whole group.

NB- This discussion is *not* about the struggle or issue but how you negotiated it.

- Who are the people that helped you?
- What practices and reasoning helped you?
- How did you find those resources?

(2 min) Large group discussion:

- Without telling us the content of your personal reflection or small group discussion, name one reason you choose not to be an outsider to a religious community.

(5 min) In most cases, people who choose to stay within a Tradition despite a struggle, have found something or someone to help them negotiate the difficulty. Admittedly, sometimes it's been a blunt force like fear or ecclesiastical discipline that keeps a person within a Tradition, but many times it's been a Mentor or Ambassador and a safe space to ask hard questions. (Clearly, my goal is for you to be grounded in your Tradition and able to represent it faithfully, but not to be a blunt force.) This is the trade-off to Spiritual But Not Religious choice to stay on the outside.

As mentioned earlier, for a time, we had a tendency to think of all these unrooted people as angry or searching. But remember it turns out that such folks may not have any gripe with your Tradition and they also may not know anything of much depth about it. Their preference is to craft their own worldview much as Emerging Adults craft their own meaning. I bring this up at this juncture because I also hope you'll remember your Mentor training has prepared you to assist people that are not settled in any community; you can use those skills with people who may be Spiritual But Not Religious as well as inquirers in your community.

In fact, your skill may be especially important when Spiritual But Not Religious people are present at interfaith events. You may actually find yourself switching roles to help group participants that aren't aware of all the inter-community dynamics or that don't realize the limitations on their contributions since they don't represent a Tradition.

Further, as you can see in the "Community" section of the handout (page 2), Spiritual But Not Religious people understand membership and service very differently from the way Traditions operate. Spiritual But Not Religious people often engage in service as an expression of their self-actualization and personal commitment to a cause. This is in contrast to a commitment to a community and, by extension, its mission.

So when an interfaith group undertakes some work together, specific Traditions engage that work as part of their communal religious charge and/or outreach. They fully expect that the work will do three things: 1) Obviously, it will meet some larger need in society; 2) it will strengthen their own community in its identity; and 3) it will build relationships—and trust—between communities. Spiritual But Not Religious people truly care about social needs and offer real help on many projects so they are important participants in the work. They also bring a spirit of real inclusiveness as they work with others. Still, they can't directly help communities strengthen their identity or build group-to-group relationships.

Spiritual But Not Religious people are, for the most part, as sincere and generous as other faithful people and should not be dismissed from the wider interfaith conversation. However, we also need to be clear about why their participation is limited by their very practice—and be kind in conveying this.

15 min: Presentation and Conversation: Blended Identity & Faith Styles

The last group we are going to discuss is practicing interfaith living in a different way from the Spiritual But Not Religious group. Their obvious similarity is in blending practices from at least two Traditions. Their difference rests on how those practices are chosen, namely Blended Identity people live within two communities in a deliberate way. I'm going to outline three ways this happens. This reflection considers many issues in the literature on Multiple Belonging and Dual Spirituality, but puts things in very basic terms.

First, the easiest examples of this are a couple in an interfaith marriage and children in their interfaith home. For example, a Pagan-Christian couple may observe the Great Sabbats as well as the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. They may teach their children to say a Meal Blessing or Prayer to the Earth before eating and offer Grace After Meals when they have finished. In this case, a family is practicing two Traditions in a very methodical way. However, the Pagan parent is still a Pagan and the Christian parent is still a Christian.

This kind of family life is not without complications. The Pagan will choose his/her devotional preference from many schools of Gods and Goddess while the Christian has Christ as the primary revelation of God. The Pagan may or may not belong to a group while the Christian generally does. As our study has shown, the Pagan and Christian theological languages are different. Simply deciding to observe elements of both Traditions will not erase these differences. Clearly, other combinations of Traditions may be even harder to accommodate than Pagan-Christian.

Children who grow up in these families will know two theological languages and the important observances of both Traditions. They will know what a Tradition looks like from the inside, from the perspective of a practitioner. Still as with any language, they will only be able to speak or practice one at a time. Our brains are not equipped to do real multi-tasking—in theology or anything else. (Good multi-taskers are really just very fast at switching between activities. In brain language, tasks are always either foreground or background. Multi-taskers switch foreground for background more quickly than others—but they don't do both tasks at one time.)

John Mabry (*Faith Styles*) describes a range of faith styles within traditions that runs from Traditional believer to Liberal believer to Jack believer. This range also influences how easily a couple or family might meld. The traditional believer is comfortable with the language, practices, and structures of the tradition. This is not to say he or she is uncritical, only that he or she has made theological peace with the system and how to live meaningfully within it. The liberal believer is also steeped in tradition but more playful with its elements. She or he is less likely to take things literally or to be satisfied to wait for change. In both of these cases, the believer will probably pass on the tradition with a certain amount of joy.

As Mabry describes it, the Jack believer knows a tradition, often loves it, and feels judged by it because he or she is unable “to live up to it.” Such a person feels condemned and may even have an experience of being publicly denounced to go with it. The denunciation may be specific to that person or of a general category to which that person belongs. This is a very painful place to live and will make passing on the tradition fraught with contradiction.

Whatever the particulars of faith, in all these cases practitioners have decided to engage their Traditions very purposefully. In other words, these families are *not* saying, “I'm not imposing anything so the kids can choose for themselves.” Instead, they are offering their partners or their children information, formation, and practice—even though they may not demand full immersion in a single Tradition.

People with this experience of a blended practice are generally sympathetic to interfaith work. If there is any lack in their ability to engage it, it is in one of two ways: 1) They don't understand the subtlety of the difficulties of Traditions interacting on a macro level. 2) They aren't willing to claim either as their root and therefore can't effectively act as an Ambassador for either. In either case, these people can be very valuable in interfaith work as "Translators."

(1 min) Reflect for a moment: Do you know someone living in a religiously blended family? What do you admire about this kind of practice? What questions would you like to ask them?

Second, a person will stick her/his toe into the water of blended practice by simply trying something ecumenical; say a Methodist decides to attend a lecture series at the Lutheran church. This may or may not be a big step depending on two things: 1) One's faith style (see description of *Faith Styles* above) within one's own denomination, and 2) the denominations of Lutheran and Methodist.

Accepted dress, seating, polity, and leadership customs may be radically different. But one thing will be guaranteed—in both groups, basic signs will still be recognizable: The Trinity (and images for them), the Bible and a pulpit, the cross, and so on. With just a few targeted questions, the Methodist can get enough information to literally 'blend' into the crowd. And yet, the Methodist may *feel* completely out of sync. Early on, it's possible a person may feel either quite daring or quite deceitful for this foray, but obviously that will ease off as a blended practice develops.

Many times, such a practice develops out of necessity. For example, a friend of mine grew up in a rural town with one church building shared by two Traditions, Unitarian (now Unitarian Universalist) and Quaker. Each group met every other week. So if you chose to attend church every week, as her family did, you were going to develop a blended practice!

Or in a similar case, I have a Buddhist friend who moved cross-country only to discover the local Sangha was part of Thich Nhat Hanh's Community of Mindful Living (a Mahayana school) and not the Vipassana Insight Meditation Group (a Theravada school) that he was used to. The Three Jewels were the same, the group valued meditation, and the Dharma teacher used familiar terms, but my friend was confused by the Sangha's participation—as a group—in the local hunger walk. He had expected a lecture on the psychology of meditation not encouragement to join a city function. Yet, this was the only Sangha for 100 miles and he took this Jewel very seriously! Gradually, he developed a blended practice and now says he's been enriched.

Admittedly, ecumenical work may be harder than interfaith work at some organizational levels. But these individuals are functioning *as* individuals, Strange as it may seem, these people are often unaware that they have only acted ecumenically! They may even speak of valuing interfaith cooperation—and then be surprised when Hindus and Native Americans show up for an event. I have had people attend an interfaith event and the ask me with true innocence and confusion, "Why didn't today's prayers end with 'in Jesus' name'?" Upon questioning, I discovered they didn't know the difference between ecumenical and interfaith.

At this point of ecumenical experimentation, these folks aren't primed to be Ambassadors. They may be really fine "Tour Guides" that help visitors find their way around on the turf they know best. This is true because they have grown to recognize the finer points that make their root distinctive and they can describe this in a compelling way. But they will have to do more work to grow into Ambassadors.

(1 min) Reflect for a moment: Have you had ecumenical experiences? If so, how have they helped you understand your own Tradition? If not, how could you add them to your experiences so that you deepen your understanding of your Tradition?

Third is the group of Blended Identity people who have chosen to add literature, study, or practice from a different Tradition to their root Tradition. Examples are a Jew who takes up a Buddhist meditation practice, or a Muslim who studies the Bible with a Christian group, or an Atheist who sings with the Baha'i Choir.

Depending on their relationship with their own Tradition. This may be an easy extension of a root practice by which they recognize something familiar in another Tradition and use it to supplement their root. Or it may be an attempt to make sense of something painful with which one is struggling. And of course, there are all kinds of possibilities in between those extremes. In any case, there is no intention to join the "second" Tradition or even to make it primary in one's practice. For the most part, the only reason these folks don't make good Ambassadors is because they are more occupied with individual than with community work at this point. Their stretch is for very personal reasons. As their familiarity and depth grows, they may be interested in representing their root Tradition publicly—or not! These folks are not opposed to interfaith work, it's just a different style of engagement. They will probably be very helpful Allies.

(1 min) Reflect for a moment: How have you been stretched by being included in practices from another Tradition? When did you need to keep the experience to yourself and continue working with it? When were you ready to work with it publicly?

10 min: Wrap-up

This content is wholly up to the local facilitator: Please reflect on the parting encouragement, pep talk, or thanks you want to impart to your group completing this program. Also include any reminders about what your organization expects of Mentors and/or Ambassadors for continuing formation, ministry, and accountability. Thank any co-facilitators or teachers.

10 min: Closing Prayer

- Begin with a favorite reading or prayer from a previous session.
- Settle in with a minute of silence.
- Ask participants to share the most significant insight or experience they are taking with them from this process.
- Offer a heart prayer or supplication of thanksgiving for the work you have done together.
- Conclude by repeating the song "Bring Many Names" from Introduction to Theological Reflection, Session 3 & 4.

Bring Many Names

1) Bring many names, beautiful and good,
celebrate, in parable and story,
holiness in glory, living, loving God.
Hail and hosanna! Bring many names!

2) Strong mother God, working night and day,
planning all the wonders of creation,
setting each equation, genius at play:
Hail and hosanna, strong mother God!

3) Warm father God, hugging every child,
feeling all the strains of human living,
caring and forgiving till we're reconciled:
Hail and hosanna, warm father God!

4) Old, aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,
glad of good surprises, wiser than despair:
Hail and hosanna, old aching God!

5) Young, growing God, eager, on the move,
saying no to falsehood and unkindness,
crying out for justice, giving all you have:
Hail and hosanna, young, growing God!

6) Great, living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
closer yet than breathing, everlasting home:
Hail and hosanna, great, living God!

BRING MANY NAMES

Words: Brian Wren

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Music: Westchase, Waterdown Meter: 9 10 11 9

GATHERING PRAYER
By William Laurence Sullivan

LEADER: "To outgrow the past but not extinguish it;

INDIVIDUAL VOICES:

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- *Free but not mad, critical but not sterile, expectant but not deluded;*
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LEADER: We take time now to name the "tones of spirit" that we have heard this week.
(Please affirm each other silently as we share from our personal experiences.)

LEADER: "To seek the wisdom that liberates and a loyalty that consecrates;

INDIVIDUAL VOICES:

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- *To master circumstances by the power of principle,*
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EMERGING ADULTHOOD

*From 'Spiritual Formation and Emerging Adulthood:
A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry'
by David P. Setran & Chris A. Kiesling © 2013, Baker Academic*

FIVE CONVENTIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL MARKERS OF ADULTHOOD:

Leaving home
Finishing school
Becoming financially independent
Getting married
Having children

EXAMPLES FROM 1960

66%+ attain all 5 by age 30

70% of women attain all by 25

Average ages of marriage:

Women, 20/ Men, 22

38% of HS grads attend college

EXAMPLES FROM 2000

<50% of women/ <33% of men attain all 5 by 30

25% of women attain by 25

Average ages of marriage:

Women, 26/ Men, 28

70% of HS grads attend college

33%± also attend grad school

58% of college students are women

OTHER CONTEMPORARY CHANGES

Less stable jobs, higher student debt
Parental safety net for middle & upper classes
Easier & more reliable birth control
Exhilarating and anxiety-ridden time
Absence of strong social cues & supports

QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS

NO NORMATIVE DEMOGRAPHICS

EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Describes gap between adolescence & adult milestones

Young Adulthood = insufficient designation

Characteristics

Active engagement in identity formation

Instability: Regular moves & job changes, life plans always in revision

Self-focused: Free from lots of oversight—and free from significant responsibilities

Feeling “in-between”

Optimistic about their future & invested in keeping all the options open

EMERGING ADULTHOOD DISCUSSION

In groups of three discuss these questions:

- What was your experience of coming into adulthood? How did you make the transition and when did you **know** you were an adult?
- As a young adult, what values guided your decision-making? Where did you learn those?
- How were your experiences similar to and different from emerging adults today?

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-

BELIEF WITHOUT BORDERS DISCUSSION

NB- This discussion is *not* about the struggle or issue you identified but how you negotiated it.

In groups of three discuss these questions:

- Who were the people that helped you?
- What practices and reasoning helped you?
- How did you find those resources?

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BELIEF WITHOUT BORDERS: INSIDE THE MINDS OF THE SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

Linda A. Mercadante
(Oxford University Press © 2014)

Robert Wuthnow:

We have become a nation of “seekers” of spiritual experience,
rather than “dwellers” in a firm religious location.

Mercadante: Four basic components of both spirituality and religion:

- Belief in some kind of larger reality
- A desire to connect with this larger reality or greater force
- Promotion of rituals and practices as an aid or witness to this connection
- Expectation of particular behaviors that foster or demonstrate the desired connection

The separation of spirituality from religion is a divorce that allows:

- 1) Proliferation of alternative spiritualities outside religious sponsorship
- 2) Alternative or complementary health practices outside scientific medicine
- 3) Individualized loosening of social expectations and controls

There is clear and dominant rhetoric that belief is unimportant, unessential, and potentially harmful...
However, there is a formulation of a new set of principles to guide practice and action.
Belief does matter and is an inevitable part of any religious or spiritual life.

What looks to many as a rise in individualism is beginning to take on some characteristics of a movement.

General Characteristics

- Those less involved in religion are less involved in any kind of organization
- Media has become a meeting place
- Communication is more horizontal and less mediated
- Fewer people are being raised religiously resulting in general religious illiteracy
- However religious illiteracy ≠ secularization; a new language of re-enchantment of the world is growing
- Understanding of Eastern religion is very shallow but Eastern religion is used as a rhetorical contrast to Western Christianity (NB- the understanding of Christianity is often equally shallow!)

Five Basic Styles

1) Dissenters-

- a. Protestors- have been hurt by organized religion (often with theology)
- b. Drifters- got out of the habit of organized religion and can't see why to go back to it
- c. Conscientious objectors- always suspicious of religion, religion is for the weak

2) Casuals- Spiritual practices are functional not a life-organizing principle. Dabble as needed!

3) Explorers- Theological syncretists with a spiritual wanderlust. No plans to settle in anywhere and undisturbed by the seeming contradictions of putting some practices together.

4) Seekers- Looking for a spiritual home (often have positive formative experiences.) Usually can articulate the criteria of a “good fit” for themselves. Often have high standards that make the search particularly arduous and long.

5) Immigrants- Folks trying to adjust to a new religious home with new skills. Smallest group of those known as Spiritual But Not Religious.

MERCADANTE cont.
COMMON THEOLOGICAL THEMES

HUMANITY

- Human beings are inherently good.
- The notion of sin is rejected (especially original sin,) but it is recognized that humans do not always choose well. There is a positive thinking orientation.
- Spiritual practices are therapeutic and fix guilt, repair bad or limited personal choices, and resist impositions from religious traditions.
- There is a struggle between understandings of free will and scientific determinism.
- Inner authority is championed at the same time as reality and perception are questioned—this creates deep inner conflict.

DIVINITY

- Common rejection of exclusive, male God (whether or not they saw it as oppressive) and personal God.
- Three images are common:
 - 1- God energy is accessible at all times
 - 2- The consciousness growing in humanity will awaken God
 - 3- A form of monism prevails: All is ONE, but Ultimacy is neither involved in nor aware of individual human lives
- The Universe is used as an image of Divinity—it is essentially good and benevolent. Thus there is a Universal Truth and all religions are essentially similar—but none have a complete claim to Truth.

WORLD & COSMOS

- Nature is a source or mediator of spiritual feelings because it has a sacred quality. Institutions are not viewed as having a sacred image.
- Science is both revered and ignored. So there is an awareness that biology does influence behavior and the climate is changing. While at the same time, alternative medicine capitalizes on the sacred nature of the cosmos and feelings can be trusted.
- Religion is optional, chosen, and privatized; all worldviews are relativized and homogenized.
- Society is considered as suspect as religion in many cases (because it is seen as an institution.)
- “Natural law” is often reduced to judgment based on personal interest, minimizing harm, maximizing enjoyment and nurturing intuition. When it is employed for the sake of peace, it is actually to avoid conflict and be more inclusive.

COMMUNITY

- There is a pervasive fear of “group-think, manipulation, isolation, repression or even abuse” in spiritual communities. The exception is twelve-step communities that are perceived as spiritual but not affiliated with any tradition, hold an anti-dogmatic position of “take what you need,” and appear non-hierarchical.
- Spirituality is an individualistic work so not-belonging is favored; it is assumed that growth will require one to always keep moving. Authority does not live in a Tradition, but in an individual’s practice and insight.
- The primary commitment is to self and happiness, which limits the ability for group loyalty or the elevation of others’ needs over mine.
- The primary goal is happiness and peace not a better world. Doing good is to flow from one’s self-actualization and usually involves either short-term action or commitment to the cause not the sponsoring organization.

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

- Personal spiritual experience is the touchstone of meaning.
- “Poaching,” sampling, or experimenting with practice from many Traditions is not just acceptable but encouraged. You have a right to use whatever works for you (even if you’re not using it the way the originating Tradition does.)
- Resist “dogmatism, judgmentalism, and exclusivism.” Operate as the arbiter of your own truth.
- Adopt the stance, “I will not settle.”

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF BLENDED IDENTITY AND PRACTICES

Blended Identity people live within two communities in a deliberate way.

- **First, an interfaith marriage and children in an interfaith home.**

Practicing two Traditions in a very methodical way.
However, each person retains their root identity.

Disadvantage: Blending is hard work; some things can't really be blended.

Advantage: Persons have more than one theological language.

Caution: We can speak or practice one Tradition at a time not multi-task religion. In brain language, tasks are always either foreground or background. Multi-taskers switch foreground for background more quickly than others—but they don't do both tasks at one time.

People with this experience of a blended practice are generally sympathetic to interfaith work. They can be very valuable in interfaith work as “Translators.”

- **Second, trying something ecumenical.**

There is enough familiarity that with a few targeted questions, one can get enough information to literally ‘blend’ into the crowd even though one may *feel* completely out of sync.

Disadvantage: Neither community may have any awareness of the expanded identity.

Advantage: The personal experience may be very profound.

Caution: Strange as it may seem, these people are often unaware that they have only acted ecumenically! They may even speak of valuing interfaith cooperation—and not know the difference between ecumenical and interfaith.

People with this experience may be really fine “Tour Guides.” They can help visitors find their way around on the turf they know best because they have grown to recognize the finer points that make their root distinctive and can describe this in a compelling way.

- **Third, people who have chosen to add something from a different Tradition to their practice of their root Tradition.**

Disadvantage: The experience of a practice may not come with a historical-theological introduction to its place in a Tradition.

Advantage: A person has a direct experience of the power and validity of a very different Tradition.

Caution: The only reason these folks don't make good Ambassadors is because they are more occupied with individual than with community work at this point. As their familiarity and depth grows, they may be interested in representing their root Tradition publicly—or not!

These folks are not opposed to interfaith work, it's just a different style of engagement. They will probably be very helpful Allies.