“Being Religious” or “Being Spiritual” in America: A Zero-Sum Proposition?

PENNY LONG MARLER
C. KIRK HADAWAY

Recent discussions of religious attitudes and behavior tend to suggest—and in a few cases, provide evidence—that Americans are becoming “more spiritual” and “less religious.” What do people mean, however, when they say they are “spiritual” or “religious”? Do Americans see these concepts as definitionally or operationally different? If so, does that difference result in a zero-sum dynamic between them? In this article, we explore the relationship between “being religious” and “being spiritual” in a national sample of American Protestants and compare our findings to other studies, including Wade Clark Roof’s baby-boomer research (1993, 2000), 1999 Gallup and 2000 Spirituality and Health polls, and the Zinnbauer et al. (1997) study of religious definitions. In addition to presenting quantitative and qualitative evidence about the way people think about their religious/spiritual identity, the article draws implications about modernity, the distinctiveness of religious change in the recent past, and the deinstitutionalization of religion.

Since the Herbergian 1950s, the face of institutionalized religion in America changed dramatically (Herberg 1960). The post-World War II period witnessed the dissolution of a Protestant hegemony, the steady assimilation of the Catholic ghetto, and a dramatic increase in intermarriage among Jewish Americans. More than ever before, Americans claim no affiliation and “other” affiliations to Eastern religions or New Age practice as well as allegiance to a burgeoning number of small sects, cults, and large, “totalistic ” nondenominational churches (Marler et al. 1997; Kohut et al. 2000). What it means to be “religious” is clearly not what it once was.

Over the same four decades, the demographics of American society also changed: families became smaller and more diverse; larger numbers of parents work full time; and racial/ethnic diversity steadily increased through immigration, intermarriage, and higher birth rates (Marler 1993). What it means to be an “American” is clearly not what it once was.

Sociocultural trends towards deinstitutionalization, individualization, and globalization have been used by a number of authors, including Pargament (1999), to explain increased attention to “spirituality” and the diminished cultural presence of traditional religious institutions. Sociologists of religion, notably Roof (1993), identify so-called baby boomers as the primary carriers of a late modern American religion that is self-reflexive, unabashedly consumerist, small-group based, and creatively syncretistic. The 1960s are, consequently, viewed as the watermark of 20th century religious revitalization and change: a “third Dis-establishment,” a “third Great Awakening,” or even the “second Reformation” (Roof and McKinney 1987; Hammond 1992; Ellwood 1994; Miller 1997; Cimino and Lattin 1998; Sweet 1999). An explosion of “spiritual seeking” is seen as characterizing the present moment—creating what Roof (2000) calls a “spiritual quest” culture.1 Cimino and Lattin (1998) echo this observation and go further, predicting that the gap between being religious and being spiritual will widen.

In traditional social science terminology, “spirituality” appears to represent the functional, more intrinsic dimensions of religion, whereas “religion” represents the more substantive, extrinsic ones (Pargament 1999). This particular conceptual pairing, ironically, makes the contemporary

---

1 Penny L. Marler is Associate Professor of Religion, Sanford University, Birmingham, AL 35229. Email: plmarler@sanford.edu
C. Kirk Hadaway is Minister for Research and Evaluation, Office of General Ministries, United Church of Christ, 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115. Email: hadawayk@ucc.org
spirituality versus religiousness debate prone to the same kinds of ideological tendencies that Robertson (1971) aptly identified in the ongoing secularization debate. Proponents of “implicit religion,” for example, argue that as institutional forms of religion eroded, noninstitutional and nontraditional forms of spirituality filled the void. In this case, spirituality as the search for meaning is “good” and religion as a stultifying institution is “bad,” or at least anachronistic. With different mechanisms but similar outcomes, rational choice theorists take a substantive, extrinsic approach. Institutional religious decline is downplayed in favor of an emphasis on conservative and sectarian strength. Here, fuzzy and individualistic spirituality is “bad” or, at best, inconsequential, and strong, strict religion is “good.”

This article looks at the role survey methodology plays in this zero-sum approach to the relationship between being religious and being spiritual. First, we look at two well-publicized surveys that operationalize “being religious” and “being spiritual” in slightly different ways: one item from Roof’s 1989 survey of American baby boomers (Roof 1993) and another from a December 1999 Gallup survey (Princeton Religion Research Center 2000). Then, we compare these items and their results with a 1995 study by Zinnbauer et al. (1997) that includes a more comprehensive version of a similar survey item and our 1991 survey of American Protestants, which included items on “being religious” and “being spiritual” similar to the Zinnbauer item in scope but patterned after the Roof item. Next we look at a follow-up study by Roof (2000) and a replication of the Zinnbauer questions conducted among a cross-sectional sample of Americans in 2000 (Scott 2001) in order to examine the effects of sampling on survey responses. Finally, we review qualitative data on the meaning of “being religious” and “being spiritual” from the Zinnbauer study (1997), Roof’s (2000) follow-up interviews of American baby boomers, and our own face-to-face interviews of marginal Protestants.

**BEING SPIRITUAL (BUT NOT RELIGIOUS?)**

Five different surveys conducted over the past decade asked whether respondents consider themselves to be “religious” or “spiritual.” Each took a slightly different approach, however, in sample structure and question wording. The two most widely referenced are Roof’s (1993) study of American baby boomers and Gallup’s 1999 national poll (Princeton Religion Research Center 2000). These studies reinforce assumptions that “spirituality” and “religiousness” are mutually exclusive; moreover, they are often cited as support for the notion that Americans are increasingly spiritual and, consequently, less religious.

In 1989, Roof interviewed a subsample of 536 baby boomers identified in a larger cross-sectional sample (2,620) from four states (California, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Ohio). The survey asked: “Do you consider yourself to be in any way religious?” and 86 percent responded “yes.” For the 14 percent who said “no,” a follow-up question was asked, “Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?” In response, 65 percent said “yes,” 21 percent said “no,” and 14 percent declined to answer. That most of those who said they were not religious indicated that they considered themselves to be “spiritual” persons was interpreted as highly meaningful by Roof—even though they represent only 9 percent of all respondents. He called them “highly active seekers” (Roof 1993). What was not asked and what did not figure into Roof’s interpretation was whether those who identified themselves as religious also considered themselves spiritual.

In 1999, the Gallup Organization included a similar item in a national telephone poll of 1,037 adults, 18 years and older (Princeton Religion Research Center 2000). In that survey, respondents were asked: “Which of the following comes closest to describing your beliefs?”

- You are religious—54 percent.
- You are spiritual, but not religious—30 percent.
- Are you neither?—9 percent.
In the Gallup case, respondents were able to choose between being religious, being spiritual but not religious, or being neither spiritual nor religious. However, they were not offered a choice of being religious but not spiritual, nor of being both religious and spiritual. Even so, 6 percent of all respondents “volunteered” that they were both. In both the Roof and Gallup surveys, there is an implicit assumption that being religious and being spiritual are mutually exclusive. Being both is not expected; respondents are one or the other, or neither.

**Being Religious and Being Spiritual**

In 1995, Zinnbauer et al. (1997) surveyed 348 respondents in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Participants were drawn from 11 organizations, including Christian or other church-related institutions, mental health or medical professionals, and nursing-home residents. This survey asked respondents to “Choose one statement that best defines your religiousness and spirituality”:

- I am spiritual and religious—74 percent.
- I am spiritual but not religious—19 percent.
- I am religious but not spiritual—4 percent.
- I am neither spiritual nor religious—3 percent.

The most obvious difference between this survey and the two discussed previously is the high percentage of respondents who said they were both religious and spiritual. Clearly, allowing respondents this option rather than forcing them to choose between being religious or spiritual produces a quite different image of the religiosity and spirituality of the American public. The “spiritual but not religious” option in the Zinnbauer study produces results approximately halfway between Roof and Gallup. Roof’s initial screening question about being religious is very inclusive, “Do you consider yourself to be in any way religious?” and since very few people said “no” (14 percent), the “spiritual only” category is necessarily small (only 9 percent). In the Gallup study, however, the “spiritual only” category is inflated because people who might otherwise see themselves as both spiritual and religious were forced to choose between being “religious” and being “spiritual but not religious.”

In 1991, we surveyed a random sample of 2,012 Protestants aged 21 or older drawn proportionately from four states that represented the religious constituency of their respective census regions: Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia, and Ohio. That survey asked, “Are you religious?” to which 73.5 percent responded, “yes.” Respondents also were asked, “Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?” To this question, 82.4 percent answered affirmatively. Cross-tabulation of responses produced these proportions: 64.2 percent both religious and spiritual, 18.5 percent spiritual only, 8.9 percent religious only, and 8.4 percent neither religious nor spiritual.

Like Zinnbauer et al. (1997), we found that the majority of respondents see themselves as religious and spiritual. Both studies also found that about 19 percent of respondents claim to be spiritual but not religious. However, proportionately more respondents in Zinnbauer et al.’s smaller institutional sample claimed to be both religious and spiritual and fewer claimed to be “religious only” or “neither.”

**Boomers, Protestants, and a National Representative Sample**

Two additional studies allow a more complete look at the impact of sampling on survey results. The first of these was a follow-up study conducted in 1995 and 1996, in which Roof (2000) reinterviewed 409 of his original 536 baby boomer respondents. He replaced his original two questions with the same questions asked in our 1991 survey of Protestants: “Are you religious?” and “Are you spiritual?” However, the questions were not asked consecutively in Roof’s interview.
The second study was a replication of the Zinnbauer et al. (1997) questions in a national telephone poll conducted for *Spirituality and Health* (Scott 2001).

Table 1 shows responses to these two polls and compares them to Zinnbauer et al. (1997) and our 1991 survey of Protestants. Comparing the national results from Scott (2001) conducted in 2000 with the 1995 data from Zinnbauer et al. shows the result of using a national sample drawn randomly rather than convenience samples drawn from institutions where people were more likely to be more religiously active than the general American public. The proportion saying that they are both religious and spiritual is much higher in the institutional sample than in the national poll. Conversely, the proportion saying they are neither religious nor spiritual is much higher in the national sample.

When our 1991 poll of Protestants is compared to the national *Spirituality and Health* results, we also see the effects of a sample that is somewhat more religiously active than the general American public. This effect is all the more clear when a Protestant subsample is extracted from the *Spirituality and Health* data. Excluding Catholics, “others,” and people who have no religious preference increases the percentage who are both religious and spiritual from 61 to 67 percent and decreases the percentage who are neither religious nor spiritual from 11 to 6 percent. People with no religious preference are most likely to choose the “neither” option, followed by “others,” Catholics, and Protestants (in that order). When the Protestant-only data in the *Spirituality and Health* poll are compared to our Protestant data, it can be seen that the results are very similar—despite the fact that different questions were used. Still, both methods allowed the respondent a full range of choice, including being both religious and spiritual.

Interestingly, the survey of baby boomers conducted by Roof in 1995–1996 (which includes Catholics, “others,” and “nones” along with Protestants) produces very similar results to the *Spirituality and Health* survey for the religious and spiritual option and the neither religious nor spiritual category (see Roof 2000:173, 321). It also should be noted that dropping the more inclusive screening question, “Do you consider yourself to be in any way religious?” reduces Roof’s “religious” respondents from 86 to 74 percent of his baby boomer sample (combining the religious only response and the religious and spiritual category). Where the new Roof survey differs from all other polls that allow the full range of religious/spiritual options is—oddly enough—in the low percentage of persons who say they are spiritual only and the high percentage of persons who say they are religious only. Is it possible that baby boomers are less likely than other age groups to see themselves as “spiritual” and more likely to see themselves as “religious”? Apparently not. Inconsistent with Roof’s 1995–1996 survey findings but consistent with his conclusions, both the *Spirituality and Health* poll and our survey of Protestants found that the baby boomer cohort was more likely to say they were only spiritual and less likely to say they were only religious than was the general population.
TABLE 2
BEING RELIGIOUS AND BEING SPIRITUAL BY AGE COHORT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Cohort</th>
<th>Religious &amp; spiritual</th>
<th>Spiritual only</th>
<th>Religious only</th>
<th>Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oldest Born 1927–1945</td>
<td>66.8%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>67.1%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Busters</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Trend data on being religious and being spiritual are not available. However, it is possible to infer change using cohort data from our 1991 survey of American Protestants. Two very interesting patterns can be seen in Table 2. First, the baby buster cohort is more distinct from the baby boom generation than the baby boomers are from the two oldest age cohorts. Busters are much less likely to say they are both religious and spiritual and much more likely to say they are neither religious nor spiritual than any other age group. Second, the percentage of persons who say that they are spiritual but not religious increases steadily, albeit modestly, from the oldest to the youngest age cohort. Among the baby busters, however, the rise in “spiritual only” is more than offset by a decline in those who say they are both spiritual and religious. The net effect is a cohort that is less “spiritual” than any other.

THE MEANING OF “BEING RELIGIOUS” OR “BEING SPIRITUAL”

The majority of Americans view themselves as both religious and spiritual, and age cohort data indicates an increasing tendency to respond “spiritual only.” The question that arises next, however, is what do persons mean by “being religious” or “being spiritual”? Zinnbauer et al. (1997) asked respondents to choose among five statements that describe the ways they believe the concepts of religiousness and spirituality relate to one another. They included:

- Spirituality is a broader concept than religiousness and includes religiousness—38.8 percent.
- Religiousness is a broader concept than spirituality and includes spirituality—10.2 percent.
- Religiousness and spirituality are the same concept and overlap completely—2.6 percent.
- Religiousness and spirituality overlap but they are not the same concept—41.7 percent.
- Religiousness and spirituality are different and do not overlap—6.7 percent.

Of the five statements that describe the relationship between religiousness and spirituality, four overlapped but differed in some way. Analysis of the association between the above items and the previously discussed question about being religious or being spiritual showed that the only significant correlation was between being “spiritual but not religious” and responding that religiousness and spirituality are different and not overlapping.

We also asked respondents about the relationship between “being religious” and “being spiritual.” Following the two questions about religiousness and spirituality, our four-state poll asked, “Do you think that there is any difference between being religious and being spiritual?” to which 71 percent answered affirmatively. Not surprisingly, respondents who said they were both religious and spiritual or neither religious nor spiritual were less likely to say there was a difference between the two (66 percent and 57 percent, respectively). On the other hand, those who said they were only spiritual or only religious were much more likely to say there was a difference between the two concepts (90 percent and 79 percent, respectively). Nevertheless, as
in the Zinnbauer survey, the majority of persons in all four categories said there was a difference between “being religious” and “being spiritual.”

If most Americans see themselves as both religious and spiritual and recognize some kind of distinction between the two, what is the nature of that difference? Already, we have shown that the majority of respondents see the difference as overlapping in some way; only a small proportion views the two concepts as distinct with no overlap. Three of the studies examined here also included qualitative measures of the relationship between “being religious” and “being spiritual.” The results of more open-ended interviews reveal complexity as well as uncertainty.

Zinnbauer et al. (1997) asked respondents to define “religiousness” and “spirituality.” The responses were analyzed for overall content and for the nature of the sacred. The researchers found that while the content of these definitions was significantly different, the nature of the sacred expressed in them was not. As Roof (1993, 2000) also found, spirituality was described in personal or experiential terms, whereas religiousness included personal beliefs as well as institutional beliefs and practices. On the nature of the sacred, the definitions of spirituality and religiousness incorporated similar (and traditional) concepts of the sacred (e.g., God, Christ, the church). Roof also discusses the tendency of most baby boomers to draw on traditional resources in new or renewed ways: they “reconnect,” “reframe,” or “retraditionalize” experience (Roof 2000:164–72).

Zinnbauer et al. (1997) found that both religiousness and spirituality were associated with frequency of prayer, church attendance, intrinsic religiosity, and religious orthodoxy. While most persons in their sample integrated spirituality with traditional organizational beliefs and practices, a small proportion did not. Those persons who identified themselves as spiritual but not religious were less likely to hold traditional Christian beliefs and to attend church worship services, more likely to be independent from others, claim an agnostic position, and see spirituality and religiousness as different and nonoverlapping concepts. This smaller group is similar to Roof’s highly active (1993) or self-identified seekers (2000).

Our 1991 survey uncovered a picture similar to that of Zinnbauer et al. (1997) and Roof (1993, 2000). Among American Protestants, being religious and spiritual was correlated with more traditional measures of religiosity (like closeness to God) as well as less traditional practice (like worshiping God through nature and Native American spirituality). On the other hand, being only spiritual was linked exclusively to nontraditional beliefs and practices (like New Age or Eastern beliefs and experimentation with crystals).6

**ARE THE LESS RELIGIOUS MORE “SPIRITUAL”??**

In our 1991 survey of American Protestants, we identified 736 marginal Protestants—persons who claim a Protestant denominational identity but who attend church “several times a year or less.” In 1992, 432 of these respondents completed a longer telephone interview. The results of both surveys were analyzed, and a cluster analysis produced four identifiable types of marginal Protestants (Hadaway and Marler 1992; Marler and Hadaway 1993). By definition, these respondents were “less religious” based on institutional measures; and by self-report, the majority was less active in church than they had been in childhood. Did these marginal Protestants identify themselves as “less religious” and “more spiritual”? More importantly, how did they interpret their own responses?

Compared to the general population of Protestants, we found that marginal Protestants are much less likely to see themselves as “religious and spiritual” (46 percent), more likely to see themselves as “spiritual only” (25 percent), slightly more likely to see themselves as “religious only” (10 percent), and more likely to see themselves as “neither” (18 percent). The pattern of response to these items is similar to but more dramatic than that of the youngest cohort in the general sample of American Protestants. Overall, marginal Protestants are much less likely to see themselves as religious or spiritual (in any way) than more “churched” respondents. Larger
proportions of “spiritual only” and “religious only” are more than offset by the lower numbers of “religious and spiritual” and higher numbers in the “neither religious nor spiritual” category.

In 1993 and 1994, we conducted 49, one-to-two hour, face-to-face interviews with selected marginal Protestants whose responses best fit the types generated through cluster analysis. In an effort to explore the meaning of “being religious” or “being spiritual,” interviewees were asked (again) if they considered themselves to be religious or spiritual (or both) and, further, what those terms mean to them. Content analysis of transcribed interviews revealed the following pattern:

- Being religious/being spiritual are the same concept—28 percent.
- Being religious/being spiritual are different and independent concepts—8 percent.
- Being religious/being spiritual are different and interdependent concepts—63 percent.7

The majority (63 percent) see “being religious” and “being spiritual” as different but interdependent concepts. Not surprisingly, most of those who talked about the close relationship between spirituality and religiousness also responded in the first survey that they were “religious,” “spiritual,” and that there is a “difference” between the two concepts. About a quarter, however, earlier said they were “spiritual,” not “religious,” and that there is a “difference” between the two.

For the main, marginal Protestants talk about the religious and the spiritual as different but interdependent concepts. They recognize the possibility of both a “naked” spirituality and an empty or “soul-less” religion. Most of those who see themselves as “spiritual only” do so by default; they are less religious rather than more spiritual. As with Zinnbauer et al. (1997), spirituality is typically conceived as a broader concept that includes religiousness. Spirituality is, above all, about a connection between the individual and some larger, usually supernatural, reality. Religion is the expression of that connection: it is, in the words of these respondents, “organized spirituality,” “the practice of spirituality,” or “that part of spiritual experience that is institutionalized.”

Most marginal Protestants describe “spirituality” as a kind of internal moral compass that is directed and strengthened through religion. An older baby boomer from New England with a strong mainline denominational heritage talked about the relationship in this way:

Spirituality is more a personal direction, a “how you look at life” with a lower-case “I” than a capital “I” [and] religion can be the clothing for that. Being a spiritual person makes you think of crystals and stuff like that . . . [but it’s] not that [for me]. If pressed [I’d say I’m] more spiritual, but I like the trappings.

A suburban, ex-conservative Protestant, married to a Muslim and living in Georgia mused,

I think I would consider being religious as active in the church and all of that and then, spiritual probably more your inner feelings and self [so] I guess I’m more spiritual, more a spiritual person than a religious person. [But] I feel guilty about the religious part, so maybe [it’s] a bit more than just being spiritual . . . that [I] should be more into the church than just trying to handle it on my own, I guess.

In the first case, religion was the recognized, formative “clothing” for the views of this marginal Protestant but active social justice advocate. In the second, there is less clarity about a current life direction and/or any spiritual attribution for it. For both women, however, a conviction that religion enriches spirituality persists.

Other marginals who see religiousness and spirituality as different but interdependent talk about spirituality not so much as a way of living but more as an experience of “being connected.” A lumberjack and environmentalist from Georgia with a Quaker background explained that “Religions are peoples’ way of connecting to the Spirit . . . spirituality is being in touch with God, spirit-wise.” An artist from Connecticut puts it this way, “I believe in a universal spirit and whatever we do, you know, the energy is somehow connected. [So] the church is not in itself necessary. [Still] when you gather that much positive energy together, [there] has to be [a] good outcome,
and yes, I need a little bit of that power.” A young medical technician in Hartford, Connecticut observed, “Spirituality is more like feedback from above or divine intervention. [With spirituality] you can skip the middle man and go right to the boss [but] you can get spirituality through the church, too.”

Close to one-third of marginal Protestant interviewees either insisted that religiousness and spirituality were identical or were simply unable to talk about spirituality separate from religion. On the earlier survey, all of these respondents said there was no difference between being religious or being spiritual; 40 percent self-identified as “religious and spiritual,” another 40 percent as “neither religious or spiritual,” and the remainder responded, “spiritual only.” Most, however, admitted that they were not familiar with the term, “spiritual.” Interestingly, those who identified themselves as “spiritual only” in the earlier survey were less likely to say they were “spiritual” in the face-to-face interview.

A retiree living in Arizona answered our question in this way, “I never considered it . . . I consider myself religious, just not organized religion. I very definitely believe in God . . . and so, I feel that I am religious in spite of the fact that I say I don’t attend church.” Similarly, a Lutheran and admittedly agnostic woman from Ohio said:

I don’t know what the definition of “spiritual” is . . . being religious means that you believe in all of this [but] I always thought that you could be religious and be very good and not attend church, that it was more an inner guide for your life . . . and then, I personally think, in terms of religion and Christianity, I still think of an ideal or an idea that you carry with you inside that makes you kind to others and understanding and good.

An older widow living in rural Connecticut responded, “Well, I realize that you get a training in religion when you’re younger and so forth and . . . either this becomes a part of you or it doesn’t become a part of you.” In a similar way, an elderly African-American woman raised in a conservative Protestant home interpreted “being religious” and “being spiritual” through the lens of traditional religious teachings and practice.

[Being religious] is if you believe in God, you try to do to the best of your knowledge . . . you live basically according to the Ten Commandments, you know, as well in your power as you can, you don’t go around doing no harm to people, you trust in God. I don’t know what you mean when you say “spiritual”—they feel the Holy Spirit? It kind of means the same thing . . . some people phrase it one way and some people phrase it another.

For these older women, one Hispanic and two African-American interviewees, “being religious” and “being spiritual” was the same thing. Either you were religious and spiritual or you are neither.

Only 8 percent of marginal Protestant interviewees talked about “being religious” and “being spiritual” as different and independent concepts. In the earlier survey, half viewed themselves as “spiritual only,” whereas the remainder were divided between “religious only” and “spiritual and religious.” A middle-aged computer technician from Arizona said that religion is “church” and spirituality is “one’s awareness of God in the world” and is experienced most strongly through nature. Similarly, a grandmother from a small town in north Georgia observed: “Religion is ritual and from the head” while “spirituality is what you feel from the heart.” According to these respondents, neither “being religious” nor “being spiritual” was prerequisite to or necessary for the other; they are, in fact, “totally different.” Two other respondents were unclear about the meaning of “spiritual” but associated it with “new age” or “yoga” as opposed to “religion,” which had to do with more traditional “beliefs” or “church activity.”

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Are Americans less religious and more spiritual? The studies discussed here were conducted from the late 1980s through 2000 and, considering the variation in questions, wording, and
samples, no definitive conclusion is possible. What can be shown, however, is that the relationship
between “being religious” and “being spiritual” is not a zero-sum proposition. In fact, these
data demonstrate that “being religious” and “being spiritual” are most often seen as distinct but
interdependent concepts.8 As such, their separation among younger Protestants and the religiously
marginal suggests that being less religious is simply that. This is why some marginal Protestants
who readily admit they are “less religious” say they are “spiritual” by default. It is what is left: a
residual spirituality that is described as also something less, something “naked,” or less “powerful.”
Similarly, the “religious only” either react against popular perceptions of spirituality or are simply
unable to talk about religiousness and spirituality apart from one another.

If this is the case, why all the attention to “spirituality” in American religion? First of all,
the degree and kind of attention varies. Some discuss interest and involvement in “spirituality”
as evidence of the transformed but continued vitality of religion in America (e.g., Roof 1993,
2000; Miller 1997; Cimino and Lattin 1998), whereas others view current “spirituality” as “misty,
evanescent, wispy and, dare we say it, rich in appeal to narcissism” (Marty 1996:439) or evidence
of “cardiovascular fixation, vegetarian lasagna and the twenty-minute sermon” (Noll 1987; see
also Bruce 2002). Second, as has been shown, the perception of an increase in “spirituality” is
reinforced by survey methodology that does not give all respondents an opportunity to choose
“being spiritual” or that forces them to choose between “being religious” or “being spiritual”
(Roof 1993; Gallup 2000).

Third, there does appear to be a small contingent of persons who see themselves as spiritual but
not religious. These individuals are not church-going, more likely to be agnostic, and “independent
from others.” They tend to experiment with New Age or Eastern practices. Roof, as well as our
earlier work (Marler and Hadaway 1993), labels this group, “seekers.” However, as Roof (2000)
later discovered, a larger proportion of baby boomers express their spirituality in continuity with
religiousness. Our survey, Zinnbauer et al. (1997), and Scott (2001) had similar results. The most
“spiritual” by a variety of measures are those who are also the most “religious.”

The strongest pressure for interpreting American religion as vital (with measured “spirituality”
as part of that equation) is theory-based, however. Such theories hinge on a number of related pre-
suppositions: the continuing poll-based strength of American religion, particularly as it compares
with other Western nations; the decline of traditional religious institutions, especially mainline
Protestantism; expressed rejection of a “religion as decline” secularization thesis; and increased
interest in a “free market” paradigm to suggest a robust and diverse religious economy. Despite
mixed evidence of American religious strength, two related camps have emerged that nevertheless
support it. One camp counts extra-church participation in and public media fascination with the
“spiritual” as phenomena that signal something radically “new” in American religion (Roof 1993,
religious strength not so much as an epistemological and practical break with the modern but as a
structural consequence of America’s “free market” of religion (Finke 1990; Finke and Stark 1986,
1992; Iannaccone 1991). Interestingly, this second camp finds little evidentiary value in much
of contemporary “spirituality” to support their version of “anti-secularization” theory. Recent
research on evangelical congregations that are both institutionally “strong” and, at the same time,
more “spiritual” than “religious” essentially combines insights of both camps (Miller 1997).

One might argue that theories focusing on the unique conditions of late modernity, take
seriously post-war social change, and attempt to explain evidence of vitality in American re-
ligion have a certain face validity in spite of quibbles about the measurement and meaning of
“being religious” and “being spiritual.” If this is the case, however, establishing the strength and
sources of the “spiritual” is critical. And if different or contradictory evidence is generated by the
same or similar means, then the possibility exists that something else is at work. Moreover, if the
revised facts do not fit the extant explanation, is a better interpretation available?

Indeed, the most significant finding about the relationship between “being religious” and “be-
ing spiritual” is that most Americans see themselves as both. In fact, when possible change can
be traced through examining successive age cohorts or by comparing more with less churched respondents, the pattern is toward less religiousness and less spirituality. The youngest and the most religiously marginal are much less likely to see themselves as religious and spiritual, slightly more likely to see themselves as spiritual only, and much more likely to see themselves as neither religious nor spiritual. The net effect is that among less churched and younger Americans there is less agreement about religiousness and spirituality, and change is observed more in the decline of those Roof (2000) identifies as “strong believers,” the religious and spiritual, and the increase in “secularists.” These findings are, of course, at odds with current theories of American religious vitality.

Are there other interpretive possibilities? Recent historical work emphasizes continuity between the “popular religion” of the late 20th and that of the late 19th century (Lippy 1994). If true, the 1960s may signal more continuity than current theories admit. Resurfacing a particularly American way of being religious, further, is only exacerbated by social fragmentation and diversity, a late modern reflexive focus on the self, and an explosion in media availability and accessibility. The reappearance, then, of popular spirituality does not necessarily constitute a problem for secularization theories. Indeed, Casanova (1994) makes a convincing argument that there is a growing “public role” for religion in structurally differentiated societies. Privatization of religion may occur but is not required as a part of larger secularization processes.

The real anomaly in American religious history might be the period of unprecedented institutionalization between the World Wars rather than the dissipation that occurred afterward. That being the case, what Finke and Stark (1992) take as a long-term churching trajectory may be, in fact, a shorter-term churching phenomenon. The 1960s forward, similarly, may be not so much an instance of America becoming “more spiritual” as a process of becoming “less religious.” Both Beyer (1997) and Hervieu-Leger (2000) make this kind of argument about religious change. In Canada, a period of rapid denominationalization did not occur as the free market model would predict but rose (and fell) because of other sociodemographic changes affecting demand more than supply (Beyer 1997). In France, deinstitutionalization forces produced a break in the “chain of memory” that traditional religion established (Hervieu-Leger 2000). A change in the individual’s demand for religion and the related erosion of the authority of religious institutions are also reflected in our interviews with marginal American Protestants (see also Chaves 1994). In this case, the relationship between “being religious” and “being spiritual” is better pictured as an additive one.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

This research was funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment. We also thank Brad Landry for assisting with this research.

**NOTES**

1. In his work, Roof extends that of Bellah et al. (1985) in *Habits of the Heart*, finding evidence of a “Sheila” that is not her own “church” as much as her own “spiritual director.” To do so, he depends on Anthony Giddens for insight about identity and late modernity and Ann Swidler for the concept of a “cultural toolkit” (see also Marler and Hadaway 1997).
2. In the case of Miller (1997), “new paradigm” churches are both “strict” and “spiritual” and thus the best of both worlds.
3. This was a 15-minute telephone poll conducted using a set of randomly generated phone numbers and an eight-callback procedure. The sample size in each state was based on the national proportion of Protestants in the census region represented by that state.
4. These data were not reported in Scott (2001). The editors of *Spirituality and Health* graciously provided us with breakdowns of question responses by religious group.
5. The *Spirituality and Health* poll also replicated this set of questions in a national poll. The corresponding percentages are: 26 percent (spirituality is broader), 8 percent (religiousness is broader), 22 percent (the same), 30 percent (overlap but different), and 14 percent (different, no overlap).
6. Roof’s (2000) self-identified “strong believer” baby boomers are examples of the more traditionalistic but experimental “religious and spiritual” respondents, and Roof’s (1993) self-identified “highly active seekers” are echoed in our findings related to the “spiritual only.”

7. Content analysis of this marginal Protestant subsample results, interestingly, in a distribution strikingly similar to Scott’s (2001) findings on Zinnbauer et al.’s (1997) items on the relationship between religiousness and spirituality. This was in sharp contrast to the Zinnbauer et al. (1997) sample, which was, again, institutional and religious. Our marginal Protestant sample is more explicitly nonreligious by institutional measures.

8. The complementary but overlapping relationship between religiousness and spirituality found here is also consistent with definitions of spirituality in world religions literature and theology (see, for example, King 1997, 1998; Sheridan 1986; Ingersoll 1994; Fairchild 1987).

9. In fact, the first “scientific” study of spirituality appeared at the turn of the century (Coe 1900). Coe concludes that the spirituality of the churches and “prayer-meetings” tends not to nurture the “altruistic, active or intellectual qualities” but, instead, the “social, passive and contemplative.” It is striking that Coe, like Marty and Noll at the end of this century, characterizes spirituality as superficial, faddish, and, in large part, a reflection of weakness within religious institutions.

REFERENCES


