

# The Evolving Spiritual and Religious Landscape of American Culture

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Many sociologists see society as a machine by which several smaller elements comprise a greater whole allowing it to function as a single unit. In this sense, it can be seen that every mechanical part of a given society ultimately has a unique effect that helps to define the greater entity. That is, with any change, the external make up of the society also changes due to its interconnectedness. In terms of social movements, we can then explain the nature of major social changes from the micro level projected onto the macro level to understand how societies develop and change. That is, we can examine individual social contingencies (historical events, major leaders, etc.) and then understand their impact on the society at large. This theoretical framework, called the structural functionalist paradigm—which was formulated by sociologist Emile Durkheim—can be used to explain any institutional aspect of society. For instance, stemming from the past fifty years, there has been a major change in the idea of American religion and spirituality. That is, religion in America has become less socially dictated and there has been less stress on religious conformity on the whole.

One prime example of this change from the status quo is evident in the New Age movements that have been developing in America (and even abroad) for the past fifty years, and have become most evident in the last ten years. This New Age movement, which includes religions such as

Wicca, Druidism, Shamanism, and many others, has certain characteristics that seem to embody this spiritual shift in common American theological thought. This is not to say, however, that this shift is only evident in this movement for it also transcends mainstream religions such as Christianity as well. Rather, for this study, the New Age movement will serve as a model to explain the nature of this societal change in its present form and to see where religion and spirituality may be heading in the future. To discover the nature of this movement, we will trace religion and spirituality over the past fifty years in terms of generational spiritual growth, which can then be used to define the nature of the New Age movement. Also, the pattern of these changes exists in a dialectical cycle that illuminates the nature of social conflict and transformation.

To label a group of individuals as a generation is a massive generalization. After all, individuals not only act as products of their histories, but as reactors of the current moment. The current moment plays a great role in dictating the collective actions of a generation while history differentiates the experiences from one generation to another. That is, one born during the late 1980s can never truly empathize with one born in the 1960s due to the different experiences they were socialized into. Also, while specific age groups may change with the passage of time, they still are a product of their unique historical experience differentiated against the different historical experiences of other generations. In this paper, we will merely focus on the historical experiences of each generation's 'coming of age' to assess their religious values as a product of that history.

According to Amanda Porterfield, author of The Transformation of American Religion, American religious history can be characterized “in terms of revivals or awakenings” (228). In other words, the religious attitudes of this nation exist in a conflict between periods of dwindling religious values and periods of revitalization. However, in slight contrast to Porterfield’s framework, the spiritual changes that have been occurring in America throughout the past fifty years show a revitalization of a different nature. The levels of church attendance and the amount of clergy have been on a downward slope, yet many sociologists and theologians are observing an increase in the ‘spirituality’ of Americans. The Gallup Organization, for instance, has been collecting statistics on church attendance and religious beliefs that support these inferences. In the 1950s, the percentage of individuals that had attended church in the past seven days was consistently in the upper forties, while from the late 1960s through the 1980s, that percentage declined toward the lower forties and the upper thirties. The Gallup Organization has also been collecting information on Americans’ view on religion and its importance in one’s life. Over the past fifty years, the percentage of Americans that believe religion is important in one’s life has remained in the mid-fifties and has even been slightly rising. These statistics suggest that even though Americans are beginning to stray away from religiously dictated constructs, such as going to church, they still hold a value for religious beliefs. Furthermore, these facts demonstrate the difference between being ‘religious’ and being ‘spiritual’ that characterizes this dwindling of religiosity and increase in spirituality. Henry Pierre, author of the article, “Baby Boomers and the Transmission of

Faith," best defines the nature of this difference in reference to his distinction between the "external justification" of God through religious institutions against an internal one characterized by "personal choice and spiritual awakening" (6). That is, religious beliefs are defined by organized religion while the individual defines spiritual beliefs. The revitalization of Americans over the past fifty years is that of a spiritual one and not of a religious one and was rooted years before it began.

The decades before the 1950s were dominated by war and depression, as was the majority of early American history. Foremost, the early twentieth century began with World War I, which was followed by the ethical controversy of Prohibition, then by the Great Depression, and finally by World War II. Robert Elwood, author of the book, 1950: Crossroads of Religious Life, sees religion as being the backbone of surviving these ordeals (2). The children who grew up through these trials were raising children during the 1950s and gave them a unique pessimism during optimistic times. Their children were the Baby Boomers and their pessimism would develop into a social revolution that would force this nation to reconsider the authority of its institutions. However, the rebellion of this generation was foreshadowed by the strange indifference of the one directly preceding it. This generation was the one which fostered the literature of the Beats, typified by Jack Kerouac's novel, On the Road. That novel signified a generation with nothing by which to stand where the lead characters aimlessly travel the country looking for the intellectual answers about life. Elwood defines this generation as being "not rebellious" while "waiting for the next move of fate"

(222). What made this generation different from its predecessors was a lost enthusiasm for the nation which was destroyed by the ethical problems revolving around the dropping of the atom bombs in Japan and the over dramatized paranoia of McCarthyism against Communism. This lost enthusiasm for the institution of American government planted the seeds for the rebellion of the Baby Boomers during Vietnam which would develop into a widespread skepticism against institutions in general, including religion.

With the seeds of skepticism planted after World War II, Porterfield describes the attitude of the Baby Boomers during Vietnam as "a break down of belief in the sacred canopy of American culture" (93). While historically, Americans were known to rally together for war, many Baby Boomers found themselves rallying against war during Vietnam, displaying the rebellious attitude that the previous generation ignited in their pessimism. These rebellious attitudes were fueled by the traditional transcendentalist literature that was being taught in High Schools following World War II. Baby Boomers went through high school reading *Walden*, *The Crucible*, and *The Scarlet Letter*, all works that embody the idea of civil disobedience and the act of questioning authority (Porterfield 94). The Baby Boomers grew up learning the values of questioning the morality of authority which in fact was being taught to them by their preceding generation that was dominated by the Beats. Ironically, a great amount of Beat literature makes reference to transcendentalist literature, such as Allen Ginsberg's poem "Love Poem on a Theme by Whitman." The title itself introduces a reference to the transcendentalist poet, Walt Whitman. Such values derived from this

education sent the Baby Boomers on a quest where they would “stand up against society for the sake of conscience” (Porterfield 95). This quest, which began with questioning the greatness of American government, evolved into questioning the greatness of organized religion with another catalyst that would also facilitate such questioning: increasing religious pluralism.

With the potency of religious institutions already in question by the Baby Boomers, the increasing religious pluralism of the nation gave this generation somewhere else to find spirituality. This pluralistic increase began with the loosening of immigration laws during the 1960s (Lippy 156). These legal changes brought a large influx of immigrants from Asia bringing with them Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The Hippie subcultures of the Baby Boomers were quick to embrace these religions which the Hippies saw as having a more openly intellectual approach to life than the dogmatic religions of Christianity. Another religion that the Hippies embraced was Wicca that was brought to the United States from England which had recently repealed its Anti-Witchcraft laws. Wicca was accepted among the Hippie subcultures for its deep reverence for nature, an ideal that was greatly valued by the group. Wicca, as stated, along with other New Age religions would continue to exist sub-culturally in the United States until its pop culture surge in the 1990s (the surge which this project attempts to explain). With these new religions growing in the nation, the Baby Boomers were able to turn away from the currently suspect religious institutions in the United States that had been the status quo for so long.

Author Wade Clark Roof in his book, A Generation of Seekers, focuses on a number of individual Baby Boomers who exemplify the generation's suspicion of religious institutions. One of his examples is a man named Barry Johnson. Clark quotes Barry commenting on his life during the social revolution of the 1960s as being a time of the "rejection of old values" (12). Barry, like many others of his generation dropped out of church during his teen years. Now in adulthood, he would only join a church that "doesn't have rigid beliefs or guidelines" (11). Wade accredits Barry's skepticism to a "loss of confidence in governmental and social institutions" (12). Such skepticism against institutions parallels Elwood's ideas about the lost enthusiasm for American institutions as well as Porterfield's "breakdown of belief" in American culture. Barry's skepticism was fueled by his resistance to the Vietnam War and the events of the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s. With these historical events, Barry lost faith in the reality with which he was raised and forced him to begin questioning the world around him. Many Baby Boomers share this experience having shared the same history. Barry's accounts exemplify the attitudes of most Baby Boomers during their early adulthood and their present beliefs.

The religious skepticism of the Baby Boomers soon transferred into Generation X, which is associated with children born between the years of 1960 and 1979. Tom Beaudoin, author of Virtual Faith, sees Generation X as being unique in that it had nothing to fight for. The generation is characterized by single parents, latchkey children, and a thirst for pop culture to replace the nuclear

family. In terms of religion, the generation is described as being "lost" and "irreverent" (Beaudoin 175). Beaudoin also cites a cynicism of "Xers" that stems from the perceived failures of the Baby Boomers to create change in society. Despite Beaudoin's insistence of the generation's unique qualities, there seem to be many connections between Generation X and the Beat Generation of the 1950's. Both generations have been described as having nothing to fight for and as being cynical against the status quo. In Generation X's case, these individuals were cynical about the rebelliousness of their predecessors. However, the Xers are on a even larger search for spirituality because they were raised without it. Charles Lippy, in his book Pluralism Comes of Age, notes, "individuals construct a world of meaning through which they understand and interpret their own human experience" (159). Perhaps the great search for spirituality among Xers stems from the fact that their parents did not transfer a world of meaning to them. Therefore, the search to perceive reality (especially through God) is left solely upon the individual.

On his website, John Barich, a Generation Xer himself, makes reference to ideas similar to the concept that Generation X lacked a "world of meaning" in his discussion about his views of his generation and it's upbringings. According to Barich, he and his fellow Xers grew up in a time "devoid of standards." This lack of standards may also have provided a deeper conflict within the generation while young parents encouraged personal choice and the current conservative Reagan administration preached traditional values. Barick also notes that his generation was not forced to "develop a religious and philosophical belief system that would allow [Generation X] to engage the world in a

constructive manner.” (Barich 1). Without a religious background, this generation has no language for religious belief. This lack of a “world of meaning” concerning religion makes Generation X’s search for spirituality much more difficult than that of the Baby Boomers who had a basis for comparison concerning what provides spiritual needs and what does not.

Tom Beaudoin also cites examples of Generation X’s sense of lost spirituality in his references to the generation’s pop culture which was shaped by songs such as “Losing My Religion” by REM, “One of Us,” by Joan Osborne, and “Like a Prayer,” by Madonna. Such culture is indicative of the generation’s desperate search for a sense of spirituality which their preceding generation more easily attained. Specifically, Joan Osborne’s song “One of Us” thoroughly displays the cynically religious attitude of the generation. In the song, Osborne asks “If God had a face, what would it look like/ And would you want to see/ If seeing meant that you would have to believe/ In things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints/ And all the prophets?” In particular, the line stating, “if seeing meant that you would have to believe” demonstrates Generation X’s reluctance to accept religion as reality. The verse on the whole even suggests that perhaps an individual might not want to see the face of God because it would force him to believe “in things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints.” Also, Osborne conveys a very cynical attitude toward religious rhetoric when she opens her chorus with “Yeah, Yeah, God is great/ Yeah, Yeah, God is good.” Her language suggests that she is merely brushing off or perhaps rejecting the commonly accepted ideas of God when she sings “yeah, yeah.” The

song was so controversial that the Papacy of the Catholic Church officially condemned it.

However, America's most recent generation, Y, perceives religion and spirituality in a very different and less cynical manner. Despite the youth of this generation, which is just starting to go through college, some characteristics have been noticed about its tendencies. With the internet predominating the early teenage years, they are very appreciative toward diversity and also very skeptical of what is given to them (Neuborne 83). In this sense, Generation Y is similar to the Baby Boomers due to their reluctance to trust the reality that they are given. However, this reluctance includes the idea of rebelliousness that their parents held. Like Generation X, this generation has an apathy or complacency toward change. Abraham McLaughlin, author of the article "For Today's Teens, Rebellion is Passe" points out that teens today "seem to be getting more conservative," although there may be another explanation for this observation (2). Generation Y also seems to be more interested in institutionalized religion than its preceding generations. McLaughlin cites Gerald Celente, the director of the Trends Research Institute as saying: "Kids are desperate for a spiritual guide—a model of true morals" (McLaughlin 3). Again, similar to Generation X, this generation was not given a "world of meaning" concerning religion from their parents. However, instead of sifting through spirituality and self-help books, Generation Y is returning to religion, but in a pluralistic manner. For instance, Wade Clark Roof discusses the appearance of "multilayered beliefs and practices" in the 1990s (245). This mixing and matching of religion is rooted in the religious

pluralism that has been evolving in America since the 1960s.

In a sense, it seems that Generation Y may be returning to the old religious values of the early twentieth century. This is the view of many conservative Christian authors such as Beaudoin and McLaughlin. However, by finding a pattern of development between each generation, it is possible to discover how Generation Y is merely taking the next step with spirituality that its predecessors laid out. During the 1950s, the Beats began to develop a skepticism toward institutions that was soon further developed by the Baby Boomers during Vietnam. With this, the Baby Boomers abandoned their religious backgrounds and began to sift through other religions (and their own minds) for spirituality. However, the generation still had a solid upbringing in religion to provide a platform for spirituality. Generation X did not receive such a platform. On the whole, the Xer's parents left religion up to their children for their ideals of free choice—and possibly the fact that with single working parents, there was no time to bring religion into the home. For those reasons, Generation X was left to find spirituality without a constructed “world of meaning.” In other words, they did not have the vocabulary of spirituality to be able to embrace it on their own. Generation Y had a very similar upbringing and is also searching to construct a world of meaning, but simply in a different manner. This Generation is returning to institutionalized religion, but with a choice, which is the most valued ideal held by the previous generation. In having a choice of religion, there is no large stress for conformity.

Generation Y's syncretism is not only indicated by the fact that teens have been returning to church. New Age publication sales are growing exponentially and are being marketed for teens. Reference to New Age cultural paraphernalia seems to be everywhere in the generation's pop culture. For example, bracelets with stones each symbolizing an abstract quality are very popular among teenagers and movies such as The Craft and Practical Magic are becoming common titles in video stores. However, the question arises of why a movement that was embraced by rebellious Hippies for its reverence of nature is now surging (and causing some controversy) in mainstream culture. The essence of this phenomenon is possibly within the choice that Generation Y has as it reconsiders religion for American culture. This generation may possibly be attempting to syncretically unite religion and spirituality (the external religion and the internal spirituality). For instance, in Wicca, a New Age religion, there are influences from a wide variety of religions in its rituals including Jewish Kabbalah, Shamanism, Druidism, and even Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Specifically, the common Wiccan belief of acosmic pantheism is rooted in Jewish Kabbalist theology. Much of the stones with mental attributes from the aforementioned bracelets are derived from Shamanism, while Wiccan herbalism stems from Druidism. The "multilayered beliefs" of New Age religions embodies the type of spirituality Generation Y is searching for. In addition, most New Age religions can be practiced individually or communally through a coven giving practitioners another spiritual choice. Therefore, New Age religions allow for the syncretism of external and internal religion and spirituality.

Sociologist Max Weber provides a more focused theory of this type of dialectic concerning the nature of this cyclical conflict that is occurring through these generations. Weber sees institutionalized aspects of societies as being of a "traditional authority" which is "on the basis of the sanctity of the order and the attendant powers of control as they have been handed down from the past" as if they had "always existed" (341). In this state of authority, members of a society accept the institutions that they were raised in as being commonplace and moral because it is more than likely the only state of affairs they have ever known. In dialectical terms, traditional authority serves as the thesis because it is the dominating force in power. Abstractly, this authority in terms of American religion is the idea of institutionalized religion where children receive their religion from their parents and follow it accordingly. Moreover, the actual institutions of the Christian churches in the United States also are within the traditional authority.

The antithesis, in Weber's terms, is the charismatic authority. Weber refers of charismatic authority as being "outside the realm of everyday routine" and "sharply opposed to [...] traditional authority" (361). This opposition is a rejection of a society's set norms and standards and a suggestion of a new mode of thought. This authority is similar to the antithesis because it is "sharply opposed" to the thesis. The charismatic authority of the religious sphere in America exists in distrust of religious institutions and the tendency toward individual spirituality. The appearance of New Age religions and the encouragement of pluralism in religion among individuals are products this type of authority. While Weber defined

charismatic authority as being led by one specific individual who is "set apart from other men," the evolving spirituality in American does not seem to have a specific leader driving the movement (361). The theme of the era of the Baby Boomer generation is that of going against the status quo as demonstrated by the prominent figures of the time such as the Beat writers and others who questioned the status quo at that time.. These figures serve as the many individuals "who [are] set apart from other men" to combine into a charismatic type of authority. Their ideas permeated into all aspects of society, including religion, and all helped to dismantle the "sacred canopy of American culture" that Porterfield discusses.

The final step the dialectic is the synthesis, which Weber would describe as the "routinization of charismatic authority." The idea of charismatic authority "in its purest form [...] may be said to exist only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized" (Weber 364). Therefore, the charismatic authority must adjust to the mainstream society. After all, this type of authority exists "outside the realm of everyday routine." Generation X's discontent with a lack of religion demonstrates the charismatic authority's inability to maintain itself historically. The syncretism of Generation Y therefore serves as the synthesis or the routinization of the charismatic authority. In summation, spirituality alone does not suffice the spiritual and religious needs of the masses. Generation Y has found this in religions such as the New Age ones and others that provide a certain religiously social cohesion while still maintaining an amount of individual spiritual freedom. In dialectical theory, this "routinization of the charismatic authority" will

continue to institutionalize itself until a new antithesis rises against this idea of religion and spirituality.

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