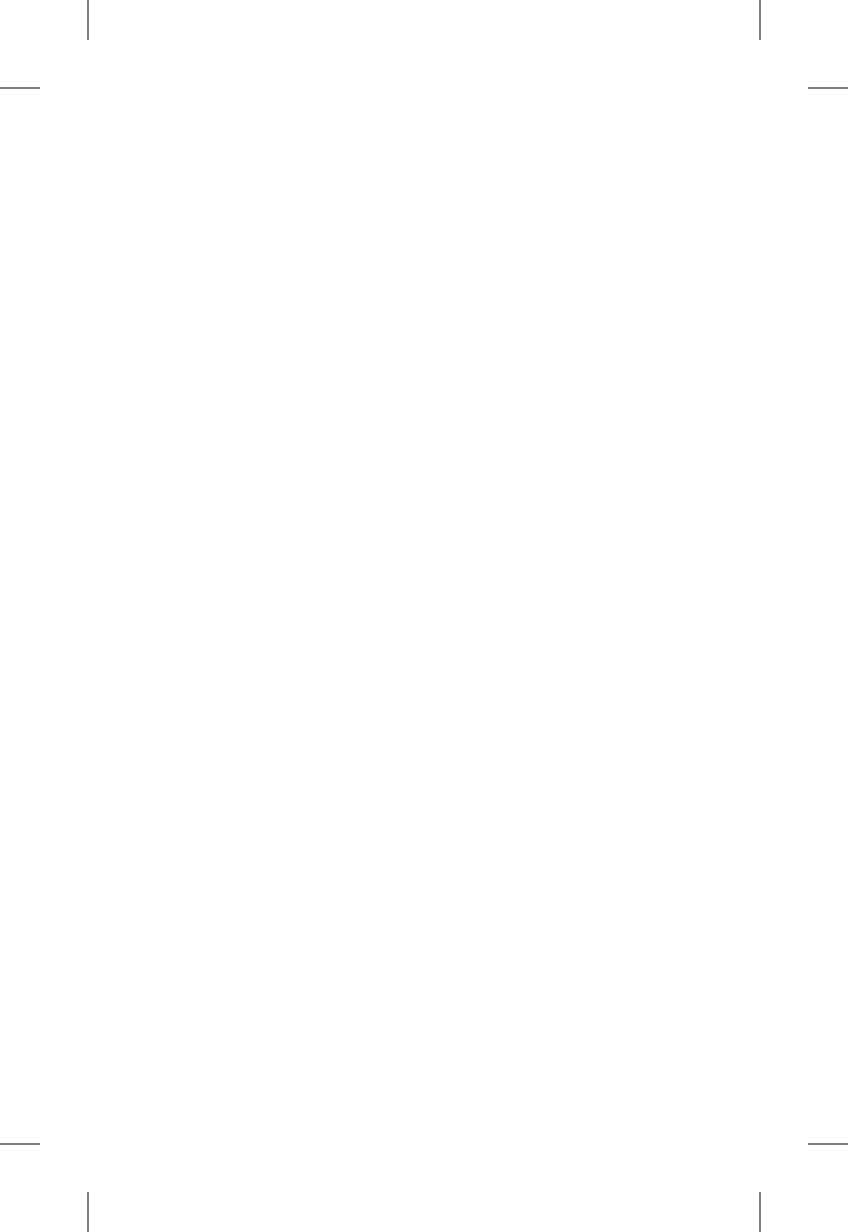


A BIBLICAL VIEW ON

# False Spirituality



*Kerby Anderson*





# False Spirituality



You have probably heard some people say that they are “spiritual but not religious.” It is more than a phrase. Some sociologists and psychologists even use the acronym SBNR to identify individuals who have some spiritual desires but don’t pursue them within a religious context.

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When some of the original studies were begun by Carl Jung, most people in Europe fit into one of two categories. There were those who practiced a religion (including Catholics, Protestants, Jews) and those who did not. Emerging was a separate group that rejected organized religion but reported having a spiritual life.

### **Who Are The Spiritual but Not Religious?**

According to a recent Pew Research Center article, nearly a quarter (22%) of all Americans fit into the category of spiritual but not religious. They think of themselves as spiritual or at least consider spirituality very important in their lives. But they don't consider religion important.

About one in five (21%) fit into the category of neither spiritual nor

religious. They aren't involved in religion, and they don't consider spirituality very important.

A majority (58%) of Americans fall into the category of religious, but they divide into two groups. Most (48%) would define themselves as both religious and spiritual, but a few (10%) describe themselves as religious but not spiritual.

Here are five characteristics of people who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.

- ◆ They emphasize a personal, subjective connection to something beyond themselves.
- ◆ They avoid religious institutions and groups and don't like to be labeled religious.
- ◆ They believe they have a relationship with God but aren't involved in organized religion.

- ◆ They are more interested in the present life than in the afterlife.
- ◆ They utilize a variety of spiritual practices (including yoga, meditation).

In a previous booklet on *A Biblical Point of View on The Next Generation*, I talked about the fastest growing segment of the younger generation known as the “nones.” These are individuals who are religiously unaffiliated. This group overlaps with those who identify as spiritual but not religious.

For example, among the “nones” are a small percentage of young people who identify as atheist and agnostic. They probably would not identify as spiritual but not religious. The larger percentage of “nones” identify themselves as “nothing in particular.” Probably a majority of those individuals would

also identify themselves as spiritual but not religious.

One survey by Pew Research asked those who identify as “nothing in particular” if they are “looking for a religion that would be right for you.” The vast majority (88%) said they were not looking, while a small percentage (10%) said they were looking.

This finding confirms what I described in the previous booklet. Young people aren’t looking to organized religion to find answers to their questions or to make their lives better. It isn’t that they are hostile to religion in general (or Christianity in particular). They just don’t think religion (or the church or the Bible) is relevant to their lives.

One other finding confirms what pastors and church growth speak-

ers have known for some time: The percentage of infrequent churchgoers who describe themselves as unaffiliated is growing. If an individual or a family no longer goes to church frequently, a significant percentage stop going at all and become another statistic of the unaffiliated.

## **Bad Theology**

It stands to reason that individuals outside the church would not have a biblical theology. They were never in church, and therefore never had an opportunity to understand the basic foundations of Christianity (God, Jesus, sin, salvation).

But there is also good evidence that even those inside the church adopted a false theology that led to this false spirituality. Two decades ago, we did an interview with Christian Smith. He was the

lead researcher in the National Study of Youth and Religion (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). His study examined the religious beliefs of American teenagers. His findings were summarized in the book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.

He concluded that these teenagers had adopted a worldview that could be described as: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). He broke it down into five components:

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over us on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

4. God is not involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

After the researchers conducted 3,000 interviews with these teenagers, they asked them specific questions about faith and their beliefs. Often the answer they received was: "whatever."

Smith explained that even when the teenagers did manage to articulate what they believed religiously, they really didn't have a grasp of why they were supposed to believe it. He concluded they were not that interested in upholding the beliefs of their faith traditions. And it appeared that their church had failed to educate them about basic doctrine.

How is this significant today?

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Those teenagers with bad theology two decades ago are adults in their 30s today. They believed that Christian faith was about spirituality. Their lives rested on the false theology of moralistic therapeutic deism, and they carried those ideas into adulthood and likely have been teaching it to their children.

## **Mental Health**

Is it possible that bad theology can also lead to poor mental health? That is a question that was discussed in a *Psychology Today* article last year. John T. Maier discovered these key points. First, “Many people today report having a spiritual life while disavowing any particular religious practice.” Second, “Research shows that being spiritual but not religious significantly predicts mental distress.”

His article is a summarization of two different studies: “Religion, spirituality and mental health: results from a national study of English households” in *The British Journal of Psychiatry* and “A lonely search?: Risk for depression when spirituality exceeds religiosity” in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*.

He concluded that people who claim to be spiritual and not religious have higher rates of anxiety, irrational fears, general neurotic disorders, and depression. Of course, we must be careful not to conclude cause and effect. It could be that spiritual practices outside of traditional religion are a cause of mental distress. Or it could be that people in mental distress seek out spiritual non-religious practices. I think both may be true.

And let's also acknowledge that

people do not seek out religion because of its mental health benefits. They are drawn to religion for a variety of reasons, but Christians should not be surprised that true Christian faith also leads to sound mental health. Being spiritual but disconnected from God is not the same as having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Following one's heart and trying various forms of spirituality isn't going to bring you a "peace that passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). Only a true relationship with God can provide that.

### **Biblical Response**

The Bible clearly warns us about the dangers of false spirituality, which is disconnected from God. Paul even warns us to avoid such people who have "the appearance

of godliness but deny its power” (2 Timothy 3:5).

Individuals who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious have a false theology and a flawed worldview. First, they lack a proper understanding of God. God is holy and righteous (Leviticus 19:1-2 and 1 Peter 1:14-16). Human beings are not. Because of that we are separated from God, and all our spiritual attempts are described as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

Second, these individuals usually have an unbiblical view of human nature. We are sinful and separated from God (Isaiah 59:2 and Romans 3:23). That separation from God is due to our sinful rebellion against God and His purpose for our lives (Jeremiah 17:9). Paul warns, “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Third, these individuals often ignore their need for salvation. The bad news is that we cannot save ourselves. The good news is that God sent His Son to die a sacrificial death on the cross for our sins. He paid a debt He did not owe, because we owed a debt we could not pay. Because of His death and resurrection, we can experience true forgiveness and have a personal relationship with God. Moreover, we can know that we have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

### **Action Steps**

Individuals who identify as spiritual and not religious do not believe that the church and the Bible have any relevance to their lives. Pastors and Christian leaders must work to show the relevance of Christianity through their preaching and teaching. Most of these individuals are looking for answers but they

don't believe they will find them in church and in the person of Jesus Christ. We must work to make the gospel relevant to them.

We must also make sure we prevent those inside the church from leaving their congregation because they no longer see the relevance of the gospel to their lives. Pastors and Christian leaders need to teach about the basics of the Christian life. We may assume that everyone in the congregation or Bible study believes what we believe. Yet, in the latest surveys, we discover that many in our churches or in our Bible studies do not hold to biblical truths.

We also need to prepare our young people for a hostile, secular world. Consider sending high school students to the Probe Mind Games Camp or to Summit Ministries. They need to know how to

confront the false teaching they will encounter at college and in society.

The current cultural circumstances of today should encourage all of us to diligently teach God's word (Deuteronomy 6:7). We must equip (2 Timothy 3:17) this generation with biblical truth (2 Timothy 2:15).



## **Additional Resources**

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