



# UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

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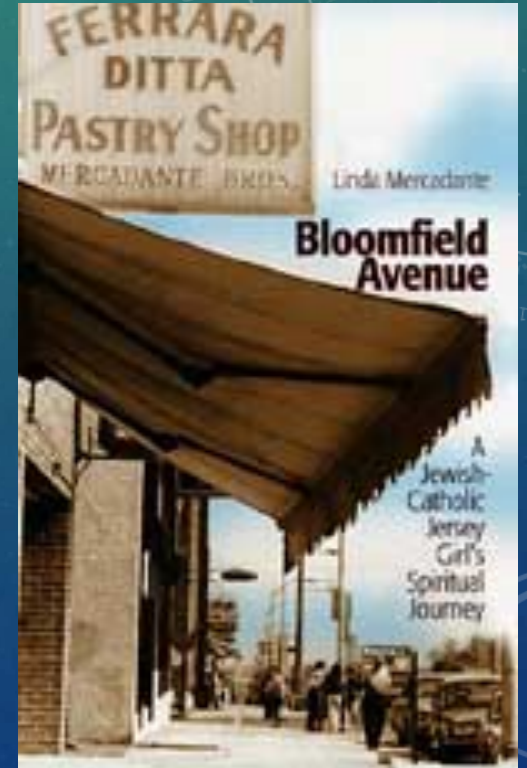
## SOME “CREDS”

- Why Do I Care?
- How Do I Know?

# Bloomfield Avenue: A Jewish-Catholic Jersey Girl's Spiritual Journey

Rowman & Littlefield, 2006

## WHY DO I CARE?



AN OFFICER ON THE TITANIC??

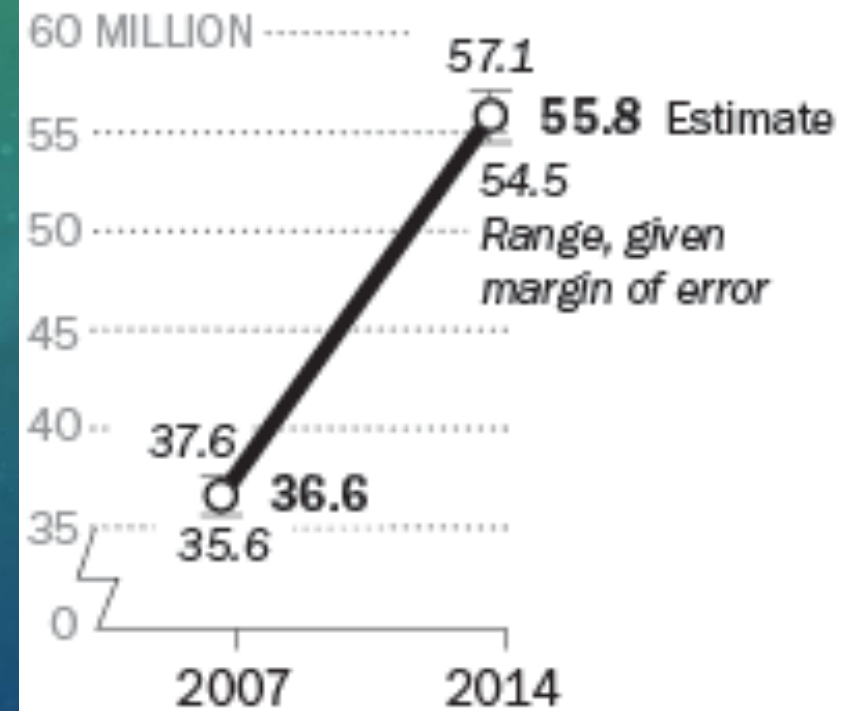




## RAPID DECLINE IN:

- Religious involvement
- Religious affiliation
- Religious loyalty
- Confidence in religion
- Religious beliefs
- Religious upbringing

## Rapid Growth of Religiously Unaffiliated



Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Unaffiliated Make Up Growing Share Across Generations

*% of each generation that identifies current religion as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular*

	2007	2014	Change
Silent generation (b. 1928-1945)	9	11	+2
Baby Boomers (b.1946-1964)	14	17	+3
Generation X (b. 1965-1980)	19	23	+4
Older Millennials (b. 1981-1989)	25	34	+9
Younger Millennials (b. 1990-1996)	n/a	36	n/a

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. All changes are statistically significant.

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# AWARDED HENRY LUCE FELLOW IN THEOLOGY

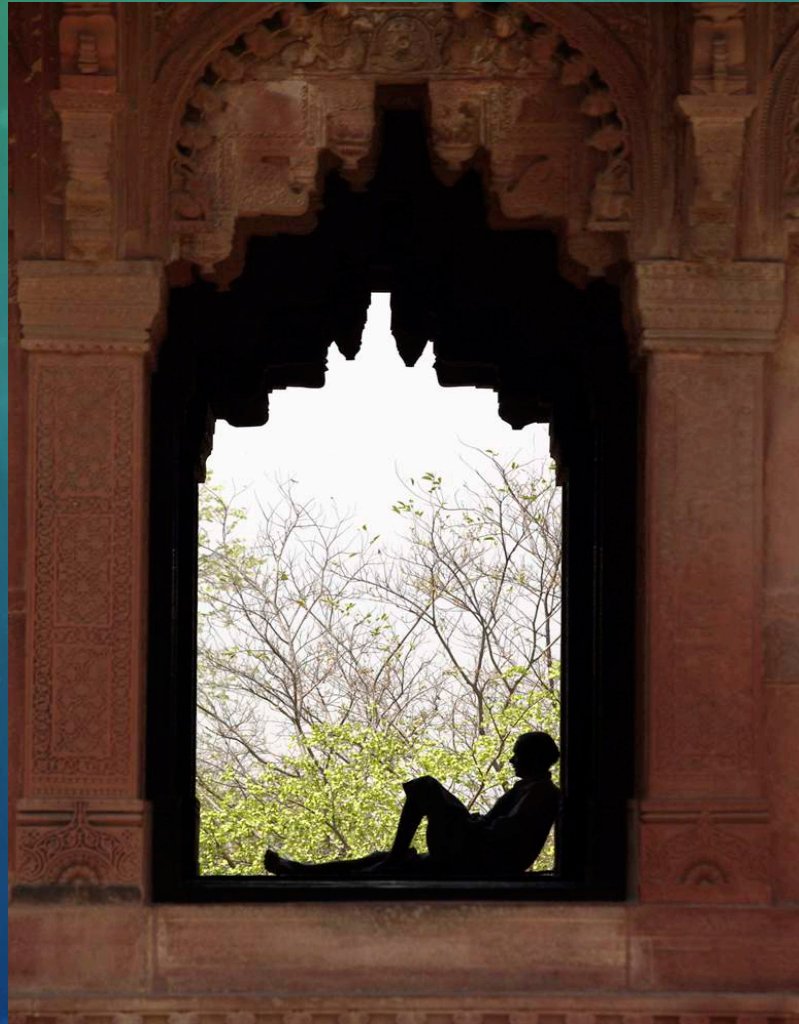
“UNFETTERED BELIEF, UNTETHERED PRACTICE”

## Investigating an ethos which:

- Rejects or minimizes organized religion
- Insists all religions are the same or equally limited
- Minimizes belief or practices “hybridity”
- Highly individualistic
- Often non-theistic
- Experiments with monism, pantheism, paganism, dualism



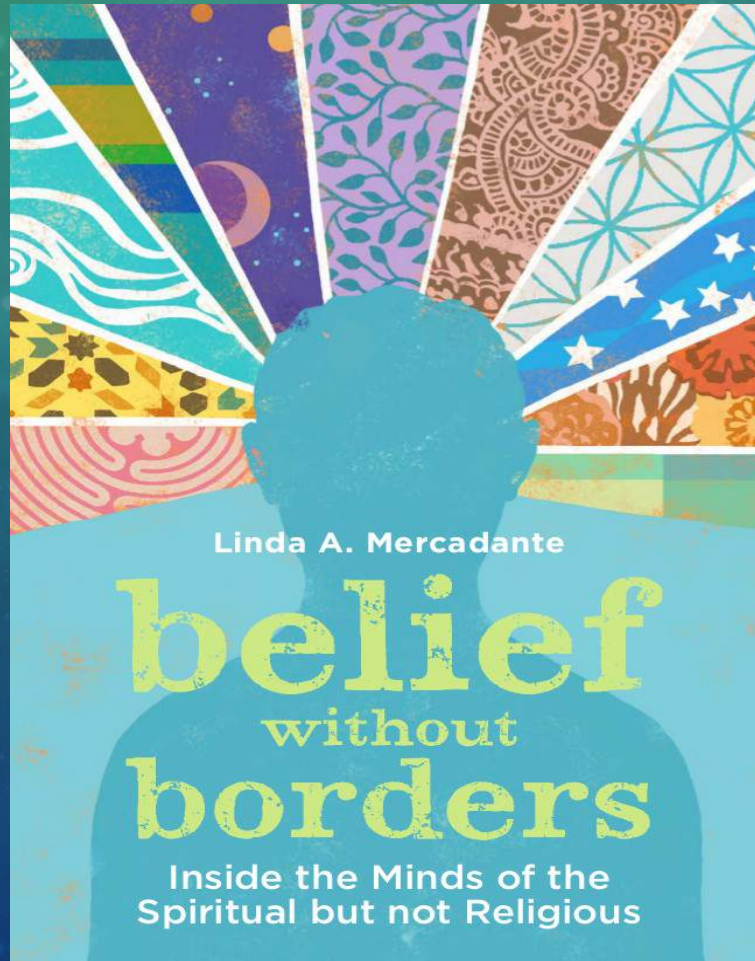
# THE INTERVIEWEES



# MY CONVERSATION PARTNERS

- ▣ 100 recorded interviews
- ▣ Focus groups and 100s of informal conversations
- ▣ Geographic Diversity
- ▣ Age, Gender, Racial/Ethnic, Sexual Diversity
- ▣ Education and Occupation Diversity
- ▣ Socioeconomic Diversity

***BELIEF WITHOUT BORDERS:***  
***INSIDE THE MINDS OF THE SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS***  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014





# WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT THE BOOK

- “Far and away the richest study...to date of the SBNRs.”
  - Phyllis Tickle, founding religion editor of Publishers Weekly
- “Breaks new ground...[with] an analysis of...belief in...America”
  - John C. Green, Senior Fellow, Pew Foundation
- “Affirms the power of spiritual experience as a force remaking... contemporary faith.”
  - Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity After Religion* and others



## ENTHUSIASTIC REVIEWS

- *The New York Times*
- *NBCs The Today Show*
- *Beliefnet.com*
- *Publishers' Weekly*
- *Spirituality & Practice*
- *First Things*
- *CNN Belief Blog*
- *CNN Belief Blog*
- *The Huffington Post*
- *The Columbus Dispatch*
- *National Catholic Reporter*
- *The Christian Century*
- *and others*

AWARDED AMONG THE “BEST SPIRITUAL BOOKS OF 2014”  
BY THE JOURNAL *SPIRITUALITY&PRACTICE*



# MY RESEARCH DISPROVES SOME COMMON ASSUMPTIONS

- ✗ Few stories of “religious distress”
- ✗ Few complaints about church as community
- ✗ Not just rich people, women, or whites
- ✗ Not “narcissistic commitment-phobes”

# MY RESEARCH DISPROVES SOME COMMON ASSUMPTIONS

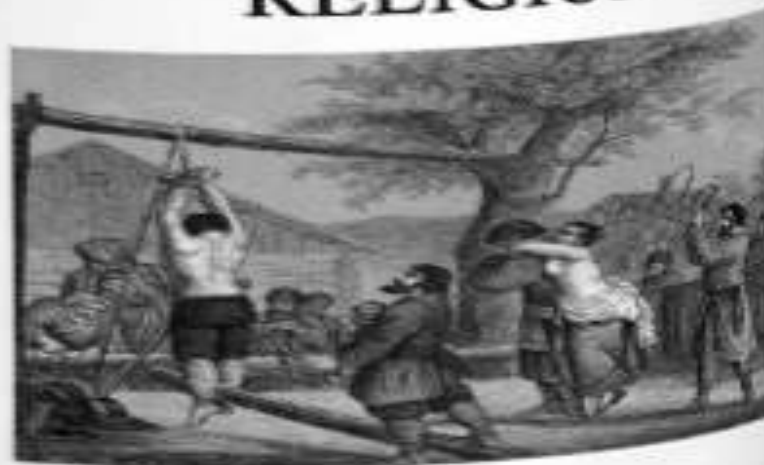
- ✗ Not nihilist, anarchist, loners
- ✗ Not uncritical of the “exotic” and non-western
- ✗ Not against belief
- ✗ Not shallow but very open to theological questions



# BUT WHY?

- Is This a Reaction against “BAD Religion?”

**GIMME THAT  
OLD TIME  
RELIGION**



- **Not exactly, because there are many factors at work.**

- Demographic changes
- Changes in our 'social landscape'
- Changes in Our 'intellectual landscape'
- Changes in "believability"
- Changes in morality





# CHANGES IN MORALITY

- Honor Culture [Shame]
  - Higher Purposes Culture [Guilt]
  - Self-Fulfillment Culture [Regret]
- See Edward L. Rubin, *Soul, Self and Society: The New Morality and the Modern State*



# THE SPIRITUAL SANDS HAVE SHIFTED

- Not “Where do I belong?”
- But “Who am I?”
- The quest is for “Meaning”
- The self is the arbiter
- “De-traditioning” seems the best choice
- The “locus of authority” has shifted from “out there” to “in here”

*And yet...*

*They are haunted by the echoes of religion and often long for it.*

- *They “live in the twilight of both gods and idols. But their ghosts refuse to depart, and every one in a while [they] might be surprised to find [themselves] tempted by belief, by intimations of transcendence.”*

James K.A. Smith *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*

# A SEARCH FOR “FULLNESS”



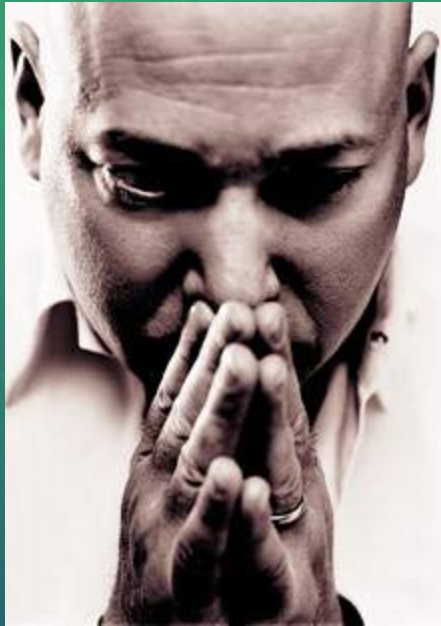


# THEY FEEL THERE MUST BE SOMETHING MORE

“Even the secularist is pressed by a sense of something more – some ‘fullness’ that wells up within (or presses down upon) the managed immanent frame we’ve constructed in modernity.”

James K.A. Smith *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* [Eerdmans, 2014]

# THE SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS



WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND

- SBNR Attitudes
- SBNR Theology



# ATTITUDES

- View religious/political/financial institutions as tainted by wrong values and self-interest
- Have trouble finding ones that mesh with their spiritual beliefs
- “Righteousness” for them means:
  - Resisting “religious enclosure”
  - Supporting progressive values



## MORE ABOUT SBNRS

- Not “secularists”
- Share ethical values
- Motivated by “issues” not institutions
- See religion as institutional, dogmatic, exterior, unessential
- See spirituality as personal, private, open, individualistic, core

## AND YET, IN A TIME OF RAPID SOCIAL CHANGE, SBNRS:

- Are often “morally lonely”
- Have learned to be cynical
- May not trust or commit easily
- See things “therapeutically”
- Are turned off by the liberal vs. conservative battle

## SBNRS WANT TO KEEP THEIR SPIRITUAL OPTIONS OPEN

- Less Joining
- Less Affiliating
- Less Committing
- More experimentation
- More exploration
- More choices

# YET THEY ALSO...

- Long for authentic, meaningful relationships
- Care about community and civic life
- Value inclusivity
- Seek genuine experience combined with clear explanation
- But often just don't "get it" re religion



# I'M SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

Now seems more:

- Reasonable
- Praiseworthy
- Courageous
- Necessary
- Acceptable



# SBNR AS A NEW MORALITY

- Rather than soul salvation ➡ the goal is self-fulfillment
- Rather than a morality of “higher purposes” ➡ this life is its own justification
- Rather than giving service to state ➡ the state is supposed to serve individuals
- Rather than mere hedonism ➡ this is seen as a new morality
- For more information, see Edward L. Rubin, *Soul, Self, and Society: The New Morality and the Modern State*.

# WHAT ABOUT BELIEF?

- ▣ The key is what they **don't** believe!
- ▣ Widespread **opposition** to certain concepts associated with Christianity and other religions
  - ▣ Exclusivism
  - ▣ Truth
  - ▣ Personal, self-conscious, intentional, involved God
  - ▣ Sin
  - ▣ Communal approach to spiritual growth

# BUT THEY ALSO HAVE A RANGE OF BELIEFS



- Transcendence and Immanence
- Human Nature
- Community
- Life After Death



# IMPERSONAL DIVINE ENERGY



# HUMAN NATURE



# COMMUNITY VS. FREEDOM





# LIFE AFTER DEATH





# AN EMERGING “META-NARRATIVE” OF OPTIONS

☐ We are all One.

☐ We are on our own.

☐ We are on a par with nature.

☐ Each person is divine.

☐ There is no personal God.

☐ A “Universal Energy Source”  
may exist but

☐ is not conscious

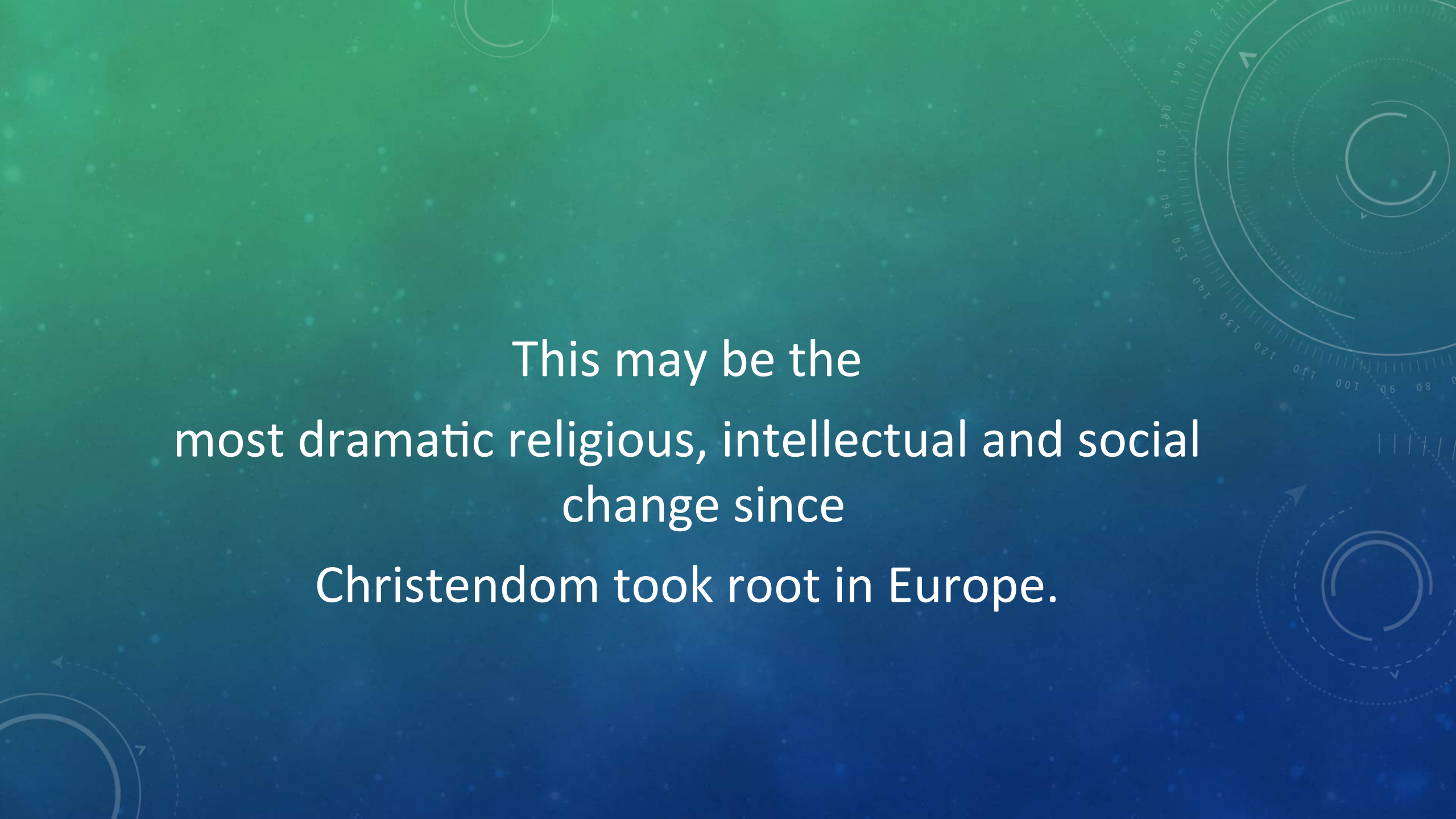
☐ Is impersonal

☐ does not communicate

☐ Is indifferent to us

# EMERGING META-NARRATIVE OF OPTIONS

- ❑ Your most important task is to find your “true self.”
- ❑ Tradition stifles the individual.
- ❑ Personal growth takes precedence over community.
- ❑ After death, we either get endless second chances, or we blend in with the universal energy.



This may be the  
most dramatic religious, intellectual and social  
change since  
Christendom took root in Europe.

# FACING FORWARD

- Good News



# A WAKE UP CALL TO AMERICAN RELIGION

- *SBNRs protest 3 things which also concern religious people:*
  - 1) Scientism
  - 2) Secularism
  - 3) Run-down Religion
    - A) Rigid version
    - B) Comotose version

# GOOD NEWS

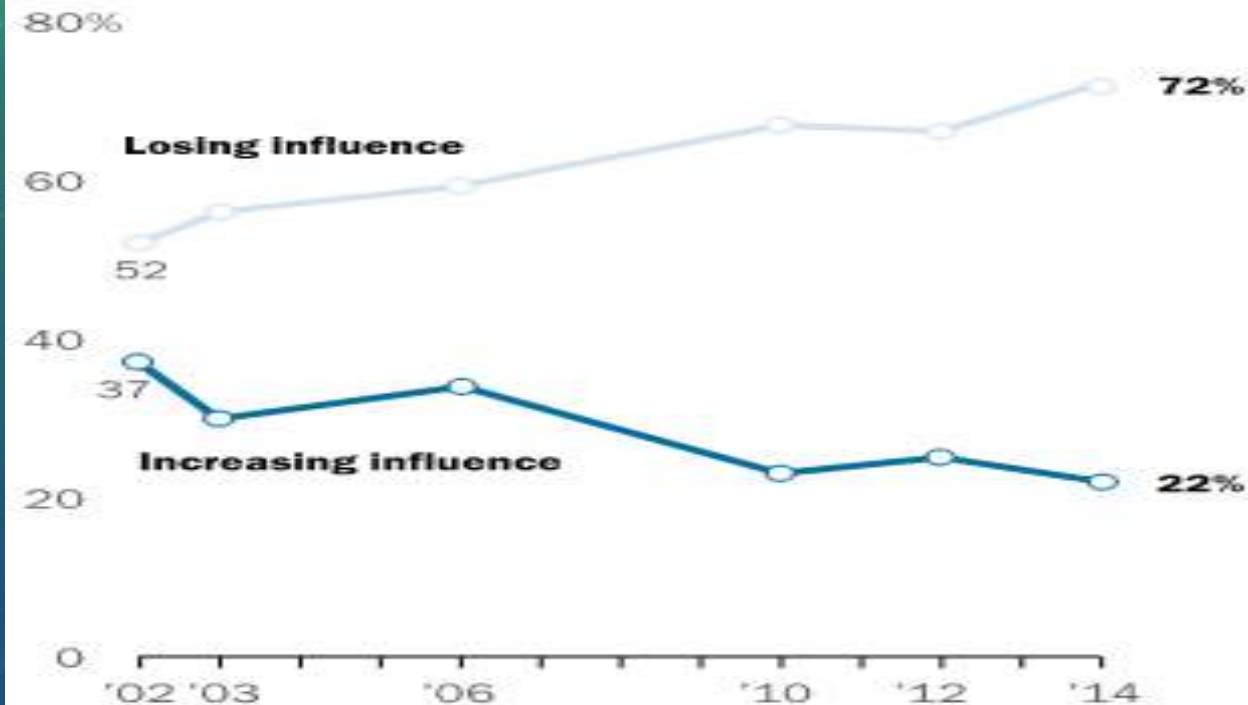
**Many SBNRs are:**

- **Very open to the sacred**
- **Grateful to be heard**
- **Excited to explore belief**
- **Open to theological discussion**
- **Thinking and questing**
- **Want tools for articulating and refining belief**

# AMERICANS CARE ABOUT THE WANING INFLUENCE OF RELIGION

## Rising Number Say Religion Losing Influence

*At the present time, do you think religion as a whole is increasing its influence on American life or losing its influence?*



Survey conducted Sept. 2-9, 2014.  
Don't know/refused responses not shown.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## AND WANT *MORE* RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE

- 72% of Americans believe religion is losing influence.
- Up 5% from 2010.
- 54% of religiously affiliated believe houses of worship should express views on social and political issues.

• Pew Research Center, Sept. 2014



# A CULTURE-WIDE SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION

- More people are spiritually searching now than previously.
- More are determined, dedicated, willing.
- Spiritual seeking is on the rise across generations
- Many are searching for meaningful spiritual practices
- Many are searching for a vital spiritual community
- Less religious upbringing = Less 'religious distress,' thus a new openness to religion.

# WHAT WE LEARN FROM SBNRS



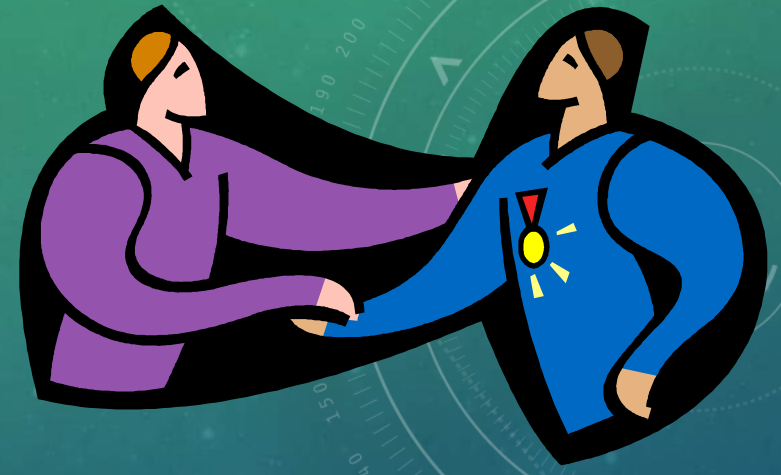
- Commitment must be gently taught
- Seekers need compassionate guides
- Doubts and questions should be welcomed
- Seekers want to be challenged
- Humble confidence is attractive
- Belonging may have to take precedence over believing
- The tools of theological thinking are desperately needed



# HOW CAN WE ENGAGE SBNRS AS ALLIES?



# TO CONNECT WITH SBNRS

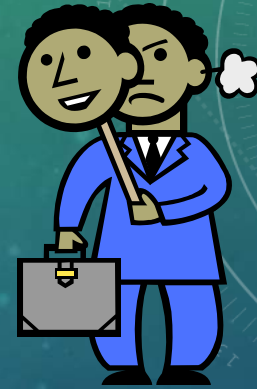


- ❖ Avoid stereotypes [of religion, of SBNRs]
- ❖ Avoid apologizing for religion
- ❖ Don't simply assume "religious distress"
- ❖ Be aware of the morality of self-fulfillment



## TO CONNECT WITH SBNRS

- ❖ Affirm their spiritual seeking
- ❖ Affirm their desire for authenticity
- ❖ Be available for meaningful relationships



# TO CONNECT WITH SBNRS

- ❖ Be open to their questions and doubts
- ❖ Be prepared to push thinking deeper
- ❖ Learn, respect, and use your theological resources**

# TRUE VITALITY ATTRACTS!



The SBNR movement is a  
new creative challenge for  
organized religion.

# FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please visit us on the web

Healthy Beliefs – Healthy Spirit

*“When your beliefs are healthy, your spirit thrives!”*

[www.healthybeliefs.org](http://www.healthybeliefs.org)

- To contact Dr. Mercadante: [Imercadante@mtso.edu](mailto:Imercadante@mtso.edu)