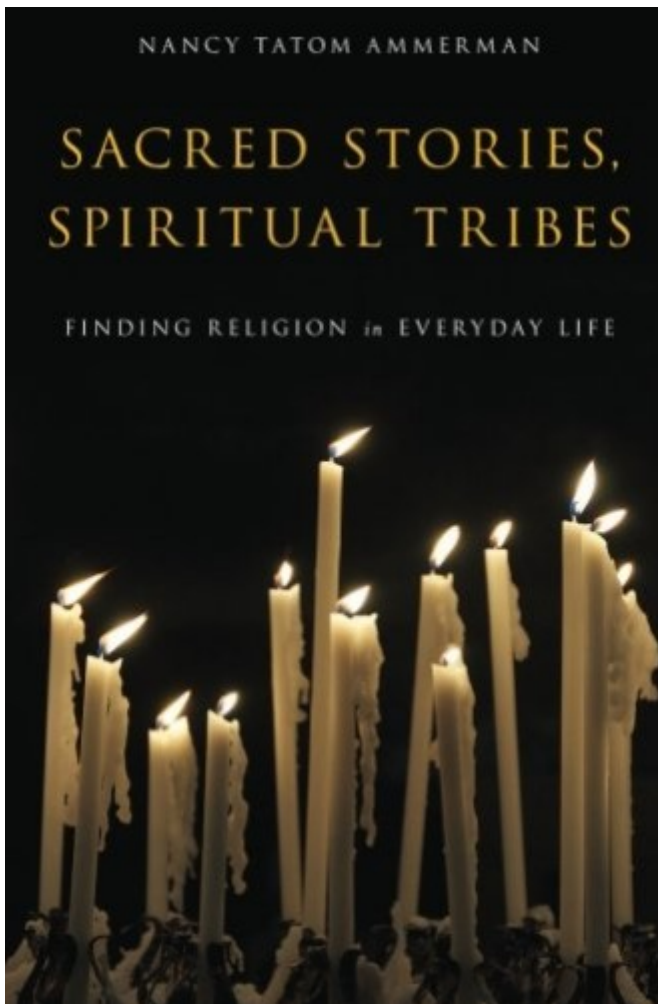


Not religious, not spiritual

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [February 4, 2015](#) issue

## In Review



### **Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes**

By Nancy Tatom Ammerman  
Oxford University Press

If any concept is accepted as given in the general discussion of religion these days, it is the distinction between being religious and being spiritual. The all-too-familiar line “I’m spiritual but not religious” has spawned a new acronym, SBNR. Publishers

have identified the SBNRs as a key market, and preachers flitter between testily putting them down and fawningly attempting to court them.

So it comes as a bit of a surprise to hear the eminent sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman conclude in her new study of religion in everyday life that the SBNR is a unicorn—a species that does not exist in reality. For most people, Ammerman found, organized religion and spirituality are not two separate realms but one. Respondents who were “most active in organized religion,” she reports, “were also most committed to spiritual practices and a spiritual view of the world.”

The other side of the coin is that those who invoke the distinction between religion and spirituality (“I’m spiritual but not religious”) turn out to be neither. For the most part, such language is what sociologists call boundary-maintaining discourse. It is a way that people who want nothing to do with religion have found to say to religious people or institutions, “Don’t bug me.”

So how has this distinction between being spiritual and being religious come to be so widely accepted? Maybe the development is media driven. Dominant U.S. media don’t seem to know how to talk about religious congregations. Lacking such capacity, they pretend that congregations don’t exist.

Or perhaps the SBNR theme came to the fore because religious groups had become players and pawns in the culture wars. Faced with the stupidity of the culture wars and with sometimes violent religious extremism, growing numbers have rejected both sides in the debates.

But it is also possible that this distinction between religion and spirituality provides a clue to what is going on religiously in America. What Ammerman and her team found is that the old categories don’t work very well. The old models tended to assign religion to one clearly defined compartment of life and society, often with a denominational or organizational label and a related set of doctrines. But it’s not like that any longer. Maybe it never was like that.

Ammerman and her colleagues’ in-depth study of 95 subjects who mirror the religious makeup and diversity of the United States revealed that the way people experience religion and practice spirituality—or in Ammerman’s preferred term, “sacred consciousness”—is far more fluid than has previously been understood. Sacred consciousness, an awareness of a transcendent or more-than-mundane dimension to life, shows up in the home, in hospitals, in recovery groups, in art, in

nature, and in the workplace. It is one of the narratives people develop and use to interpret life. Seldom can it be whittled down to adherence to a creed or understood through the doctrinal statements of a particular faith.

In such a fluid time, when old categories and distinctions don't work, we look for new ones. The distinction between the religious and the spiritual represents a faulty attempt to redescribe where we are. It does get at part of what's changed—namely, that religion has been deregulated. A religious landscape once dominated by, in Will Herberg's famous 1955 formulation, "Protestant, Catholic, and Jew" has itself given way to many forms and expressions, often determined by shifting individual choice.

Does this mean that the organized congregation is no longer important? Have individualism and choice in matters of faith rendered congregations irrelevant and obsolete?

No. It turns out that congregations remain important. They are the settings or vessels that give shape and encouragement to the spiritual life and practice of individuals and families. "One of the most striking results of this research has been the degree to which participation in organized religion matters," Ammerman writes.

To sum up her team's findings, one might say that with a congregation a person is more likely to be spiritual, and without such a community of spiritual discourse and practice, individuals tend to be less spiritual or not spiritual at all. "The people with the most robust sense of sacred presence are those who participate in religious activities that allow for conversation and relationship," concludes the author.

Though the congregational expression and shape of religion remains significant, it plays a different role than it did 50 years ago. Congregations are probably less definers of religious truth than framers of sacred experience and consciousness—less theological courtrooms and more spiritual communities. Ammerman names three dominant ways in which patterns of self-understanding and affiliation are evident: theism, extra-theism, and ethical spirituality.

The theistic perspective can be summed up simply: "It's about God." An active God is the subject and referent. For the extra-theists there is sacred consciousness without reference to God. This difference does not mean that theists and extra-theists don't get together. They do. Some are part of mainline religious groups. Others frequent New Age centers, Wicca fellowships, or recovery groups or are part of some organized pagan religion. While the theists speak of an active God, the

extra-theists talk more about nature and beauty, unity and meaning.

The third perspective—ethical spirituality—sometimes stands alone, but more often it is a common denominator between the theistic and the extra-theistic. “The one thing almost everyone agrees on,” Ammerman notes, “is that real spirituality is about living a virtuous life, one characterized by helping others, transcending one’s own selfish interests to seek what is right.”

Ammerman casts aside standard theories and explodes distinctions that strike her as too neat or too easy. She finds that reality is more complex than theory. To arrive at her conclusions, she looks for spiritual language and practices in places others might not look: in living rooms and backyards, on the streets and in the buildings of ordinary life.

For this study she interviewed her subjects multiple times. She had them keep diaries. She armed them with cameras to take shots of places and events that were part of their spiritual narratives. She examined people’s experiences of life being interrupted and explored the ways religious congregations form a powerful presence in people’s lives at such times. She is less interested in what priests, scholars, or theologians say that people ought to think or do than she is in what people actually think and do and how they talk about it.

Years ago H. Richard Niebuhr said that the first question of ethics is not “What is right?” or “What is good?” but “What is going on?” Nancy Ammerman helps us get a handle on what’s going on.