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Making Sense of and Supporting Fluidity of Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Identity on College and University Campuses

By Lawrence A. Whitney

Grappling with the Scale, Scope, and Contours of Religious Unaffiliation

In October, the Pew Research Center (2019) published its latest demographic analysis of religious trends in the United States, entitled *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*. The main thrust of the report, unsurprisingly, has to do with the rapidly declining share of the U.S. population who identify as Christian. Of course, the corollary to this finding is that other identities are growing. Indeed, the most significant growth in identification is among the religiously unaffiliated – frequently dubbed "nones" – which includes atheists, agnostics, and those who identify as "nothing in particular."

The decline of Christian identification as reported by the Pew Research Center, from 78% in 2007 to 65% in 2018/19, and concomitant growth of the unaffiliated, from 16% in 2007 to 26% in 2018/19, is significant enough in the general population. It is even more pronounced among the youngest generation to appear in the report, namely Millennials (b. 1981-1996), among whom Christian identification declined from 68% to 49%, and unaffiliation grew from 25% to 40%, over the same interval. Alas, us data junkies had to wait all the way until February for Melissa Deckman (2020) to publish her data showing that unaffiliation seems to be holding steady at about 38% among both Millennials and the subsequent generation, GenZ (b. after 1996). Paul A. Djupe and Ryan P. Burge (2020) add credence to this finding by comparing three other datasets, though there remain plenty of reasons to be cautious about making overly strong claims about

GenZ, beginning with the fact that the generation itself remains as yet unbounded. If anything, it appears that many survey instruments may be generating significant undercounts of unaffiliated persons, to the point that the real share of the population may be as high as 31% (Burge, 2020).

As fascinating as the sheer demographics are, things get even more interesting when we begin to dig a little deeper. What does it mean to be religiously unaffiliated, anyway? The category includes atheists, which seems straightforward enough, as the definition of an atheist is someone "who does not believe in the existence of a god or any gods" (Lipka, 2019). It turns out, however, that 18% of atheists in the United States do believe in some kind of higher power or spiritual force (Lipka, 2019). Moreover, when the Pew Research Center (2018) tried to suss out *When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?*, they confirmed that no atheists believe in God as described in the Bible, but 3% of agnostics and 28% of those who identify as "nothing in particular" do believe in such a biblically described deity. The blossoming of recent literature on the unaffiliated (e.g., Drescher, 2016; Mercadante, 2014; Oakes, 2015; and White, 2014) continues to frame the meaning of affiliation or not on the basis of what individuals do or do not believe.

The literature in religious studies for the past 20 years especially is replete with analyses of how this focus on belief as fundamental to religion derives from Protestantism (Mcconeghy, 2020). Frequently such points serve as a means of redirecting the field to focus instead on practices in order to escape such parochial modes of analysis. Indeed, when salvation becomes dependent upon holding right beliefs, as in much of Protestant Christianity, then determining which beliefs are right and which are wrong becomes paramount, as does evaluating the beliefs of others.

One of the nice things for social scientists about this alignment of religion and belief is that it makes writing surveys very easy: "Are you a:" followed by a long list of religious identities such as Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, etc. Inevitably, the list will end with the categories of atheist, agnostic, and none. The problem is that the latter terms are not entirely like the former, which are not entirely like one another either. In *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, Nancy Ammerman (2014) excavates the contours of these nuanced categories to elucidate aspects of identity that have become taken for granted in the lives her study subjects. Indeed, the so-called turn to everyday life as a focal point of sociological analysis (Sztompka, 2008) puts pressure on the sorts of surveys that lump so many categories together. Nevertheless, an underlying assumption still lurks that everyday activities have a rational basis in at least implicit beliefs that can be interpreted so as to make them explicit.

Fluidity: Reframing Unaffiliation with Reference to Confucianism

Studies such as those identified above that describe and interpret the expansion of the categories of unaffiliation seem themselves to take for granted the novelty of this shift in the religious landscape. Those that do seek to make connections to other social contexts usually turn to comparisons with the rapid secularization experienced in Europe since World War II and the Holocaust. Little attention has been paid to an ancient religious tradition that has consistently defied demographic accounting according to the typical categorical scheme, namely Confucianism. Indeed, according to the *World Religions Database*, there were only 200,000 Confucianists in China in 1900, or 0.04% of the population, in spite of the fact that, as the database notes, Confucianism was the state religion of China. By 2015, according to the database, the Confucians had grown to 1,749,914, or 0.13% of the population, in spite of the change to the virulently anti-religious, and especially anti-Confucian, Communist leadership in 1949. The problem with these numbers is that they are derived from a survey method in which people are asked to check a box next to an identity category label, in this case, "Confucianist." Anna Sun (2013) provides a magisterial account of the problematics involved in taking an identity category label approach and how they have played out across numerous survey instruments.

A proper sociological analysis of Confucianism requires a different survey approach guided by a different methodological framework than the Protestant framework of religion as belief. Sun (2013) notes:

> Do people who pray to Confucius actually have belief in the supernatural power of Confucius's spirit? This is indeed a wrong question to ask; the right question is, does it make sense to people who pray to Confucius that they are offering their prayers without having a firm or clearly articulated belief in the divinity or supernatural power of Confucius? The answer seems to be an unqualified yes. (p. 168)

Even this question, however, only pertains to what Sun (2013) identifies as the "minimal criterion" of Confucianism (p. 127), namely various forms of Confucius worship in a Confucius temple, which forms an inner core surrounded two more expansive concentric circles that together circumscribe what might be understood as Confucianism. The next wider circle is delimited by the "inclusive criterion," (p. 127) which has to do with the practice of ancestral rites. The widest circle, defined by the "extended criterion," (p. 127) is also the most diffuse, including expressions of cultural Confucianism such as practicing Confucian virtues (e.g. filial piety), Confucian spiritual exercises (e.g. reading classics, quiet sitting meditation), and other Confucian social rituals (e.g. family rituals). Unlike in considerations of other cultural religious expressions, e.g. cultural Catholicism or cultural Judaism, however, cultural Confucianism is not meant to impute that this type of religiosity is less authentic, sincere, or fervent. This is because, as Sun notes, Confucianism is a "diffused" form of religion that "does not exist separately and apart from the secular social settings in which it is practiced" (p. 123). Moreover, many of the practices of the minimal criterion historically would have been reserved to elite classes, whereas the practices of the inclusive and extended criteria were available more widely. In each of these latter senses, Confucianism would have been socially assumed and individually taken for granted as simply the reality of Confucian-influenced societies.

This framework results in a very different set of survey questions than would be asked to ascertain the religious identity of Protestant Christians and their ilk. The *Spiritual Life Survey of Chinese Residents*, while abiding primarily in the realm of religion as belief, nevertheless provides an example of some of the sorts of questions that have to be asked in order to uncover the Confucian religiosity at play in China (Yang et al., 2019). One revealing set of questions invites respondents to rate the importance of six domains in their lives: family, friends, entertainment, politics, work, and religious belief. Only 2.7% of respondents identified religious belief as "very important," and another 9% said it is somewhat important. Meanwhile,

19.8% said it is somewhat unimportant, and 62.5% said religious belief was not at all important. By contrast, 85.5% identified family as very important, and another 13.6% said family is somewhat important. Only 0.9% said family is somewhat unimportant, and only one person (0%) said family is not at all important. This emphasis on family is further confirmed by the identification of happiness with the accomplishment of children (30%), the good health of family members (53.4%), and a harmonious family life (4.5%), far more than with the well-being of the self in terms of health (6.3%) and success (3.8%). Given the centrality of the virtue of filial piety for Confucianism, this remarkable devotion to the importance of family locates the vast majority of respondents within the extended criterion for identifying them as Confucians, in spite of the fact that 81.5% of respondents say they have no religious belief, and only 0.2% self-identify as Confucian.

Another set of questions in this survey has to do with ancestor veneration and ancestral rites, the hallmark of the inclusive criterion for identifying someone as Confucian. 72.4% of respondents said that they participated in the veneration of ancestral spirits by their graves. Perhaps even more interesting is that 43.2% of respondents indicated that they worshipped God or gods/spirits at the graveside of a deceased ancestor or in ancestral temples, and another 17.4% said they did so in conventional religious settings (i.e. churches or temples), in spite of the fact that 75.2% of respondents said that "There is no such thing as God, gods, spirits, ghosts or Buddha in this world." Clearly, the notion of justifying practice on a rational basis in belief fails to account for the reasonableness of the practice in spite of lack of such rational justification in the case of the practice of these ancestral rites in China. Also notable is that 79.4% of respondents indicate that they participate in religious activities with family members, revealing that filial piety is intertwined with ancestral rites and other religious activities. Finally, unlike the classic survey assumption that degree of devotion correlates to frequency of religious activity, 72.3% of respondents indicate that they participate in religious activities "only during religious and/or traditional holidays such as Grave Sweeping Day (or Festival for Tending Graves) and Spring Festival," and another 21.7% say they do so "only occasionally."

From questions that never mention the name Confucius or the category of Confucianism, this survey reveals remarkably high adherence to Confucianism according to the inclusive and extended criteria outlined by Sun (2013). Ethnographic research that she presents in the last chapter of *Confucianism as a World Religion* indicates increasing involvement in Confucianism according to the minimal criterion as well. This is in spite of the fact that only 12 out of 7018 respondents (0.2%) to the survey self-identified as Confucian. Thus, Confucianism clearly makes important contributions to self-understanding and collective coherence in China, but does so while

remaining largely taken for granted and thus apart from any identity category label. Insofar as identity is understood to necessarily involve self-appropriation of the categories and labels employed to interpret it, an important dimension of religious studies scholarship, Confucianism as elaborated here does not qualify as a category of identity. In this sense, then, Confucianism may serve as a nonidentity contrast example to the Protestant emphasis on categorical identity in formulating an understanding of religion and religiosity. As Sun notes (2013),

> to become a Confucian in China has not been about the renunciation of other religious beliefs or the exclusion of other religious practices but rather a deepening of one's bonds in a given community and tradition and a consolidation of one's different social and cultural identities. (pp. 120-121)

Confucianism understood in this way is not about adopting a label; it is about establishing and maintaining bonds capable of embracing a variety of labels in a more or less coherent yet loose frame. Notably, the establishment and maintenance of such elastic bonds that exceed identity category labels is what the religiously unaffiliated are often seeking as well. As Elizabeth Drescher (2016) points out, "being None is also a matter of social identity—of who a person understands herself most authentically to be in relation to others" (p. 53). The prevalence and potency of identity category labels in our Protestantized society, however, means that being disaffiliated takes on a dual aspect. Identifying as unaffiliated is positive in the sense that nones "consistently [see] themselves as active creators in the story of their own spiritual lives." That said, unaffiliation is largely negative in that the identity is rooted in what it is against as "the emotions associated with the shift from affiliated to unaffiliated map to the religious tradition in which a person was raised" (p. 53). This duality results in a further category conflation, as many who identify against the "religious" label employ the word "spiritual" as a contrast to religion, even as many who embrace the "religious" label also identify as "spiritual." Given this categorical confusion, it is especially important to center the commonality among Confucians and the unaffiliated in the desire for more elastic bonds. Indeed, as the literature attests, what the religiously unaffiliated reject in religious identification is the taut bond that, as a result of its tension, is unable to extend to embrace those who identify otherwise on something at least resembling their own terms.

Fluidity Framework in Practice

Over the past couple of decades, in part in response to the growth of the category of the religiously unaffiliated, offices of religious life on college and university campuses across the United States have been renamed to something along the lines of the "Office of Religious and Spiritual Life." The goal in expanding the nomenclature is to embrace the increasing fluidity of students' ways of expressing and enacting the religious, spiritual, and spiritual aspect of their identities. The elasticity of the bonds implied in this fluidity is articulated in the operational definition of spirituality offered in Cultivating the Spirit:

> [Spirituality] involves an active quest for answers to life's "big questions"; a global worldview that transcends ethnocentrism and egocentrism; a sense of caring and compassion for others coupled with a lifestyle that includes service to others; and a capacity to maintain one's sense of calm and centeredness, especially in times of stress. (Astin et al., 2011, p. 137)

Notably, belief is radically decentered in this conception of spirituality, to the point that not only those who identify as "nothing in particular" but even self-identified atheists and agnostics could find shelter under its umbrella. It is little wonder, then, that so many unaffiliated students identify as "spiritual but not religious" when spirituality is understood in this sense.

The primary way in which newly baptized offices of religious and spiritual life have operationalized their

expanded mandate is under the rubric of interfaith programming. In embracing an interfaith mandate, these offices begin to take a significant step away from the Protestant Christian character of their religious life predecessors. Nevertheless, while with the best of intentions and some signal successes in improving engagement across lines of difference, the interfaith paradigm is not entirely suited on its own to support students operating in the framework of fluidity exemplified by the unaffiliated. This is because, as Alexander Astin (2016) points out,

> Most of the rest—the "spiritual but not religious" ("SNR") students—may believe in a deity or in some sort of reality beyond the physical world of matter, but for various reasons have found themselves unable to embrace either the theological claims, code of conduct, or rituals of particular religious denominations. For this reason, educators need to keep in mind that most SNR students would probably not see themselves as participating in an activity that carries the label "interfaith." (Astin, 2016, p. 18)

While intending to be broadly inclusive, it is understandable that the label of "interfaith" would provoke an allergic reaction in those who either were never part of or are explicitly moving away from the kind of "faith" identity that would be suitable for being "inter." Indeed, the very notion of interfaith seems to presuppose the kind of fully determinate identity category label characteristic of the religion as belief paradigm.

In order to effectively deploy programming amenable to both affiliated and unaffiliated students, chaplains and religious and spiritual life professionals on college and university campuses must adopt the inclusive orientation the turn to interfaith intends. Actually achieving the goal of inclusion, while avoiding provoking allergies among the unaffiliated, however, requires eschewing identity categories entirely. Instead, programming should directly address areas of common concern, focus on the level of individual authenticity rather than group representation, enable exploration of belief apart from preconceived categorial schemes, and be deeply contextually relevant to the needs of students within their institutions. While imagining such programming may at first glance seem an insurmountable task, four practical examples demonstrate that, to the contrary, success is readily available with resources already at hand.

Both standing apart from and the very process of moving away from religious communities and belief systems that provide a framework for making sense of human mortality provokes questions among unaffiliated students about death, dying, and the afterlife. Of course, students who do identify as religious in one way or another also

Programming to include unaffiliated identities:

1. Death Cafe (**deathcafe.com**)
2. The People's Supper (**thepeoplessupper.org**)
3. The Parable of the Sower reading group
4. Study Retreat

have questions about these topics and may feel insecure exploring them in the context of their religious communities due to the risk of being labeled deviant and stigmatized. Notably, this topical interest among students is prevalent even when they are not dispersed from their campuses due to a pandemic. Thus, a Death Cafe (https://deathcafe.com/) can be an excellent way of fostering an inclusive conversation about an area of common concern focused at the level of individual authenticity. According to the website, "A Death Cafe is a group directed discussion of death with no agenda, objectives or themes. It is a discussion group rather than a grief support or counselling session." The goal is "to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives." Fostering a culture of open and inclusive conversation about death is an important contribution to improving campus climates by overcoming societal taboos about discussing our shared mortality, so as to enable help-seeking from both peers and professionals.

One of the breakdowns that some unaffiliated people identify as spurring their movement away from religious communities is the bedrock of trust that enables cooperative action. As Drescher (2016) quotes one former Catholic, "I didn't leave Catholicism. The church left me. It abandoned me. It cast me out. And I was heartbroken" (p. 53). Indeed, there are plenty of reasons not to trust that religious institutions and leaders always have the best interests of their members at heart. At the same time, extreme social polarization across a number of identity matrices – from economic class, to race, to sexuality, and especially politics – erodes trust in all sectors of society and culture. The People's Supper (https://thepeoplessupper.org/) uses "shared meals to build trust and connection among people of different identities and perspectives." While food has been a hotly contested area of both intrareligious and interreligious infighting throughout history, this agonism arises precisely from the importance of food and shared meals in religious communities for fostering trust and belonging. As the architects of The People's Supper note,

> For millennia, sharing a meal has stood as one of the few things that all of us—whoever we are and wherever we come from—have in common. Suppers are a place where we can come together over one of humanity's most ancient and simple rituals. A place where we can share meaningful stories, good food, and a sense of community. A place where we can build the relationships and trust on which our work depends.

While a People's Supper event may be explicitly interfaith, focusing on religious differences, the program is potent for addressing a wide variety of fractures and fissures in campus communities, focused as it is around the question of "What needs healing here?" The narrative approach of the program allows for focusing on an area of common concern, empowering students to explore and express their beliefs through stories so as to skirt the imperative to categorize. Storytelling also privileges authenticity over representation. And, of course, the contextualization in a meal fulfills the dictum, "if you feed them, they will come."

The fact that unaffiliated persons are not readily accounted for on the basis of belief-based categories does not mean that belief is outside their scope of interest. Unaffiliated students, and others, do have a tendency, though, to be less interested in belief systems instituted, codified, and promulgated by religious authorities and institutions. Instead, they are more prone to engage in exploration of belief in conversation and dialogue with texts and ideas that run against the grain of established canonical traditions. One excellent example of this is the theospiritual vision developed by Octavia Butler (1993) in the voice of the protagonist of *The Parable of the Sower*, Lauren Oya Olamina. Contrary to classical theism, which envisions God as perfect, immutable, omnipotent, and omniscient, Butler begins her novel with a poem:

All that you touch

You change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God Is Change.

Due to the rampant and racist inequalities exacerbated by global climate change racking her society, Olamina develops a spiritual vision from this basic insight that she employs to gather and lead a remnant toward a new, renewed, and mature human flourishing. The story has recently been rendered as both a graphic novel (Duffy & Jennings, 2020) and in operatic form (https://www.parableopera.com/), making it especially apt for engaging students across a variety of modalities.

It is hard to imagine anything more central to an academic community than study. Pressures related to study are also one of the stressors leading to declining mental health among students on many college and university campuses in the United States (Liu et al., 2019). Reduction of stress levels generated by study may be achieved by improving study practices and lifestyle factors that contextualize study. Both of these tactics are addressed in the form of study retreats, which employ the monastic practice of dividing the day into a series of hours, each dedicated to particular tasks. The day begins with breakfast, followed by a morning meeting with introductions and meditation. Accountability is provided as students are invited to list what they intend to accomplish over the course of the day on a poster hung on the wall, crossing off completed items as they gather for successive meetings. The midday gathering includes another meditation and then lunch, followed by another block of study time. The evening gathering has yet another meditation practice and then dinner. After a final block of study, students gather for dessert and a bedtime story, with a final enjoinder to in fact go home and sleep so that all they have studied has a chance to seep into memory. The goal is to set a rhythm for study accented by the meditation practices, drawn from a variety of sources, and grounded in regular table fellowship. Eating regular meals, taking breaks, moving, and having communal accountability all contribute to far more healthy study patterns than are commonly characteristic of college students, to say nothing of the emphasis on the importance of sleep. The rhythms and practices of spiritual traditions are thus rendered directly relevant to the purposes of the academic community and the thriving of students

in a way that is inclusive and noncoercive.

Given that unaffiliation is most pronounced among younger generations with higher educational attainment, the prevalence of unaffiliation among students, faculty, and staff on college and university campuses is likely to be at least a plurality, if not in some cases a majority, at most higher education institutions in the United States. Thus, it is incumbent upon those responsible for attending to the religious, secular, and spiritual aspect of identity on campuses to properly appreciate the dynamics of this cohort and provide support and programming that are responsive to their needs while also attending to the needs of the more traditionally religious. The sort of identity unaffiliated persons cultivate is characterized by what they take to be far more elastic bonds, capable of stretching to include and incorporate a wide variety of views, practices, and the people who subscribe to them, than what they associate with being religious. This fluidity requires a reorientation in religious and spiritual life offices to provide programming and services that are neither tradition-specific nor interfaith but rather nurture exploration at the intersections of relevance and authenticity, so as to tap into a variety of forms of wisdom and practice without needing to categorize and label them.

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