

# SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS: SPIRITUALITY IN A GLOBALIZED AND HYBRIDIZED WORLD

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I did my PhD studies at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, California, an institution on the Pacific Rim (where Asia and the Americas meet) that, in collaboration with its famous next-door neighbour (CAL), prides itself on forming scholars who can truly let “religion meet the world.” The unique exposure to certain realities that I experienced at Berkeley stamped me irrevocably. Ever since, I have followed keenly the process of globalization happening everywhere at an increasingly rapid pace, the widescale movement of people through migration, and the mixing of different cultures and religions that results from all that. With those contexts in mind, I have devoted a great deal of research, reflection, teaching and writing to the endeavor of grasping more deeply the contemporary phenomenon of hybridity and how it impacts our understanding, interpretation and living of religion and spirituality today. My two previous monographs, *How Immigrant Christians Living in Mixed Cultures Interpret Their Religion* (2012) and *Religious Language and Asian [North] American Hybridity* (2016) speak abundantly from and to this theme.

In recent years, I’ve been increasingly drawn to various phenomena commonly known as “Multiple Religious Belonging” (MRB), “Spiritual but not Religious” (SBNR), the religious “Nones” (people who do not identify anymore with any religious tradition) and the religious “Dones” (people who are “done” with all religion!), among others. I regularly teach a course called “Spiritual but not Religious?” It is clear to me that this present academic and personal interest of mine is an offshoot of my work in globalization, migration, hybridity and the relation of these phenomena to religion, as I will explain below.

Some burning questions about these phenomena that drive my research include: Why is it that a significant number of people nowadays (including myself!) are no longer content with just one religion but want to identify with more than one religious tradition (MRB)? Why do more and more people, especially young adults, demarcate “religion” from “spirituality,” rejecting the former as irrelevant or even toxic, and embracing the latter as valuable, whereas the two should actually be inseparably linked (SBNR)? Why are institutional religions in the West hemorrhaging membership through disaffiliation at an alarmingly rapid pace (the “Dones”)? As a result of a sharp decline in religious membership and interest, more and more people do not identify anymore with any particular religious tradition (the “Nones”). What is surprising despite all this is that spirituality is one of the “hottest” fields among many people today, as evidenced in the incredible popularity of certain contemporary teachers of spirituality such as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Richard Rohr, Eckhart Tolle, or even the popular talk-show hostess Oprah!

If the traditional type of religious sensibility is rapidly changing and evolving in such trajectories, what type of religiosity and spirituality would be more relevant and life-giving to a new generation?

The contemporary observer of spirituality David Tacey has suggested that, since the 1960s, there has been an increasing dislike among people in Western societies to belong to exclusive “clubs” marked by a “tribal mentality” (especially in religion). Nowadays the key values, particularly for many young people, have decidedly shifted to “connectivity,” “diversity,” “inclusivity,” and the like. We can see this dislike for exclusivity in the fields of religion and spirituality expressed in different ways. One is a turn towards MRB. I am becoming more and more convinced that this phenomenon might very well be a movement *towards a freedom from exclusive*

*belonging*—ironically, to give people greater access to many or all kinds of religiosities and spiritualities.

The “Dones” and “Nones” phenomena can also be traced to this dislike for exclusivity. Many “Dones” and “Nones” are so because they feel that institutionalized religions are too exclusive, requiring loyal membership and strict adherence to a set of orthodox beliefs, not to mention regular participation in community life. All these requirements are topped up with a kind of superiority complex towards “the Other.” Nowadays, many people find that kind of religiosity off-putting and too limiting of their freedom to pick and choose what seems to be more relevant and appropriate in an often very hectic and irregular lifestyle.

Among people who feel alienated from religious institutions are the so-called SBNR types. Although they have largely abandoned institutionalized religions, many of these “dones” and “nones” still feel the strong attraction of spirituality which is, I argue, nothing but the drive, hardwired in humans, to seek our deeper and more transcendent dimensions. What is fast becoming the norm today for many people who seek to walk a spiritual path is something akin to putting together one’s own “spiritual playlist” from a multitude of sources and not buying, as it were, the whole album from a single (religious or spiritual) source.

Let me state here one preliminary yet major hypothesis of mine on this matter. These contemporary trends in spirituality seem to indicate that, in order to understand a large segment of contemporary Western spirituality today, it might be more helpful to look at them through a paradigm of “freedom from belonging” rather than a traditional paradigm of institutionalized belonging, which often entails exclusive commitment. Of course, it is clear that this is still the preferred way for some. However, for an increasing number of spiritual seekers (especially among the young),



spiritual quests seem to follow a very contemporary market model. That is, the phenomenon is something like a huge, spiritual iTunes/Google Play/Windows Store where seekers can find practically anything, and where they simply download *one suitable song or app at a time*, not the whole album or package.

Despite the naysayers, I am interested in finding the silver lining in this situation. Hence I ask: What is the redemptive aspect of such a contemporary spirituality? My preliminary response is that this may be an invitation to religions to break down barriers between “us” and “them” and embrace inclusivity and hybridity more willingly. In fact, there is much that is theologically pertinent about present trends in spirituality that would help traditional religions to see their blind spots. One can understand contemporary trends not so much as a turn away from religion but as the emergence of diverging narratives of religious and spiritual experience that, in theologian Elizabeth Drescher’s thinking, move through *more diverse*

*conceptions* of what it means to be human. In short, the emerging spirituality and religiosity in the West does not necessarily mean a loss of values, morals, or community because, surprisingly, people today (particularly the non-religious) *are neither more nor less spiritual or moral than explicitly religious people*. However, their spirituality is considered challenging for traditional religions because of the latter’s narrow way of thinking about what it is that comprises being religious and/or spiritual.

That too narrow definition of religiosity and spirituality might be the factor that scares many people away from religions and leads them to seek a “freedom from belonging.” If religious belonging could be redefined to be wider, more inclusive, more human, more ethically and less doctrinally focused, more porous, more hybrid, then many more people might again entertain the idea of “belonging” in some way to organized religions—yes, even in our globalized and hybridized world.

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Julius-Kei Kato is an Associate Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at King’s. Identity-wise, he is a proud Filipino-Japanese-Canadian hybrid. He was born and raised in Manila, the Philippines, but left his mother’s country to live, study and work in Japan, his father’s country, for twelve years. He did graduate studies in Jerusalem (Hebrew University) and Rome, where he obtained a Licentiate in Sacred Scriptures (S.S.L.) from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in 1998. After teaching at his alma mater (Sophia University in Tokyo), he moved to Berkeley, California, where he received a Ph.D. in Systematic & Philosophical Theology from the Graduate Theological Union in 2006. He is currently writing his third monograph on how to relate with the Bible “as its grown-up child.”