Research Article

Linda Mercadante*

Clergy Becoming Spiritual but not Religious

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Abstract: Changes in beliefs among former clergy, who have now left the ministry, may add an extra dimension to research on church decline. In fact, there are changes in belief among thirty former clergy interviewed for this study that show remarkable similarity to the beliefs of previously interviewed non-religious "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) persons in the author's qualitative research, as reported in *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford University Press).

Keywords: former clergy, theology, beliefs, church, spiritual but not religious, SBNR

Ordained clergy are probably the last persons one would expect to become "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR). In the past, clergy have been more interested in reaching out to the non-religious than joining them.[1] Yet studies show there is a significant increase in clergy who depart the ministry or seriously consider leaving.[2] In fact, some of them are now identifying as SBNR.

Clergy are very different from the hundreds of SBNRs I talked with in my previous research.[3] Many of those SBNRs – especially younger persons – had little exposure to organized religion, knew little about the depth of beliefs, or had left before learning much about the faith. Most critiqued stereotypes of Christian theology, but they also focused on hypocrisy, irrelevancy, and outdated morality. Against common assumptions, few described explicitly traumatic experiences.[4] The same cannot be said of clergy, especially those from Mainline denominations. They normally have the Masters of Divinity degree, know theology and liturgy well, and have spent much of their lives in organized religion.[5] However, their withdrawal from organized religion often does include negative experiences.

1 It has not been lost on clergy and denominations that nearly a third of Americans claim no affiliation with organized religion and that many of them self-identify as SBNR. Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated."

2 The Barna Group reports that: "As of March 2022, the percentage of pastors who have considered quitting full-time ministry within the past year sits at 42 percent. This is consistent with data from fall 2021 when Barna first reported on a sharp increase in pastoral burnout, and it confirms the growing number of pastors who are considering resignation – up 13% points from 29% in January 2021. https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/. (accessed March 6, 2024). Evans, for *Word&Way* reports that: "A wave of older clergy will retire in the coming decades, with fewer seminary students in the pipeline to replace them. Those students are likely to find few churches that can afford a full-time pastor of any kind." https://wordandway.org/2023/07/31/as-churches-shrink-and-pastors-retire-creative-workarounds-are-redefining-ministry/ (accessed March 6, 2024).

3 Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*.

4 Of course, much depends on one's definition of "trauma," to such an extent that religious trauma can be turned into a popular, even comic, theme. See, e.g., Riley, *Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome*.

5 Although there are some independent churches (such as The Vineyard) and denominations (such as Amish and some Mennonites) which do not require a seminary degree – sometimes training their ministers locally or simply appointing those who seem particularly gifted – most large Mainline Christian denominations (such as United Methodist, Presbyterian Church, USA,

*** Corresponding author: Linda Mercadante,** Department of Theology, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Delaware, United States, e-mail: lmercadante@mtso.edu

Since I worked as a professor of theology in a United Methodist seminary for 32 years – primarily training prospective Protestant clergy and often following their progress after graduation – I wanted to understand how those eager, devout beginners in my classes had devolved into discouraged cynical, sometimes even traumatized, veterans. Using existing contacts and then expanding my pool, I reached out to thirty clergy who have left active ministry, or are considering it, and now feel drawn to the SBNR label.

Perhaps, this shift in clergy identity should not come as a surprise since the prognosis for organized religion, especially Mainline Protestantism, is not a happy one. Still, American religion, especially Protestantism, has always worried about its survival. In fact, since our country's founding, leaders have preached a "jeremiad" in which American Christianity is claimed to be in imminent danger of decay.[6] But while American religion has always had its ups and downs, the current cycle seems dramatically different. The core difference is that in earlier ages, preachers of "jeremiad" warned that congregants' sinfulness would provoke God's displeasure, thus leading to a lack of holiness *within* the church. Today, the problem is not a lack of member piety, but sheer membership loss. Since the 1990s, there has been a significant reduction in churches, members, respect, and interest in organized religion. This is particularly true regarding such Mainstream denominations as the various versions of United Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, and United Church of Christ.[7]

As real as this decline is, it seems even more serious when the most dedicated are leaving. It is reported that 50% of pastors will not last five years in the ministry.[8] Even just in my own experience, I note that more of the recent seminary graduates I know are leaving the ministry rather than, as in years past, serving until retirement. In addition, fewer are signing up to earn the Master of Divinity degree, and many seminaries are merging, going virtual, or closing altogether.[9]

1 Being Clergy

Being a clergy person has always been a difficult, even if often rewarding, vocation. Ministers are present at both the memorably high and dreadfully low points in congregants' lives. They are often "on call" for members' crises, hospital stays, births, and deaths, as well as shepherding the church in its economic and administrative needs. Given there has never been a designated state-funded religion in the United States, the ministry is largely an entrepreneurial vocation. Ministers – hopefully with the help of the congregation – essentially have to recruit and retain members as well as provide instruction, missions, and community-building. In the past, however, this was helped by the fact that clergy were often highly respected members of society. Their sermons were printed in newspapers, and the leading ones were often household names. In fact, congregants sometimes felt the clergy had the "keys to the kingdom," meaning that following their pronouncements could spell the difference in where one ended up in the afterlife.

Things have changed considerably. With lessened respect, the presence of more women in the pulpit regrettably revealing the hidden sexism in many congregants, and the added stress of less members, lowered

Lutheran, and Episcopal denominations – groups with which this study is concerned) require a Master of Divinity degree before fully appointing a pastor to a particular congregation.

6 Matthewes and Nichols, *Prophesies of Godlessness*. This has been an ongoing topic including among theologians, refer to Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*.

7 Gallup, POLLING MATTERS, 7/16/19, Newport, "Why Are Americans Losing Confidence in Organized Religion?" https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/260738/why-americans-losing-confidence-organized-religion.aspx (accessed February 2, 2024).

8 ExPastors reports that: "50% of the ministers starting out will not last 5 years. 1 out of every 10 ministers will actually retire as a minister in some form. And 4,000 new churches begin each year while 7,000 churches close."

9 Gin, Deborah reports that as of May 2020, The Association of Theological Schools finds that: "A total of 45 schools have merged, closed, or withdrawn since 2009." https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/predictive-modeling.pdf (accessed February 19, 2024). The ATS supervises the accreditation of its 276 member schools.

salaries, and decades-old deteriorating church structures, the ministry has taken a turn for the worse.[10] In addition, the changing morality of American culture, accepting things formerly considered taboo, like same-sex relationships, transgenderism, abortion, sex, and childbirth without marriage, has left more conservative ministers seeming woefully behind the times.

To further complicate matters, ministers serve either at the will of their congregation or the directives of the denominational hierarchy, yet without much legal protection. This is because federal anti-discrimination employment laws do not apply to religious institutions – a fact often unknown to ministers or congregations. This lacuna, known as "the ministerial exemption,"[11] means that while clergy malfeasance can be internally disciplined by removing, firing, or relocating the minister, there is nothing governmental to protect clergy whose congregations, institutions, or authorities arbitrarily or unexpectedly turn on them.[12]

2 Interviewees

I wanted to uncover some of the reasons for clergy departures and explore potential changes in theology, self-identity, and work choices. I chose one-on-one interviews and qualitative analysis which, although it cannot claim to be representative, often reveals aspects that quantitative surveys are not suited to disclose. As in my previous research, I used a "snowball" or "convenience" method to gather interviewees,[13] starting with former students and clergy colleagues, then getting recommendations from them for additional interviewees, as well getting volunteers through Facebook and other social media.

Interviews lasted an hour or more as I asked these thirty ministers about their personal religious background; the path they took to becoming clergy; what their professional experience in the church had been; why they departed, and what they are doing now. But in addition to this practical information, I was especially interested in how much they identified with the label "spiritual but not religious," and if and how their beliefs might have changed. I focused largely on Mainline denominations, especially United Methodist and Presbyterian, both because I have many contacts in that world but also since the exodus is greater there.[14] I did, however, find some similar narratives in smaller Christian groups, such as Mennonites.

Nearly fifty percent of the pool were United Methodist, a fifth were Presbyterians (PCUSA), and the remainder included smaller denominations such as Mennonites, American Baptists, and Vineyard. Nearly fifty percent of my pool consisted of Millennials, almost evenly divided between men and women. Gen Xers made up a little more than a quarter, with more men than women. Baby Boomers, many of whom entered ministry as a second career, made up another quarter, mostly women. The fact that so many Millennials answered my call for interviewees has a distinctly negative implication for the future of Protestant ministry.

As I began these interviewees, I wanted to know if these departing clergy were attracted to an SBNR identification because of difficult work experiences – was it simply a label to indicate disappointment with the church – or did it indicate a real change in beliefs? I wondered about this because all my earlier SBNR interviewees claimed theological reasons for rejecting organized religion, Christianity in particular. Many non-religious SBNRs have said they rejected particular religious concepts because they considered them implausible, harsh, or unfair. The majority, for instance, rejected teachings that claim a personal, unpredictable, and authoritarian God, that humans are born sinful, and that there exists an exclusivist heaven and interminable hell. While these conservative teachings are not widely held by many progressive Christians, especially in Mainline churches – and are often stereotypes that many evangelicals would also reject – I understood that many SBNRs with little real-world church experience might have narrow or limited versions

10 Earls, *Lifeway Research, "Americans' Trust of Pastors Hovers Near All-Time Low," Insights, Faith & Culture*.

11 Kynes and Leishman, McGuireWoods, 7/10/20,"U.S. Supreme Court Broadens Ministerial Exemption to Employment Discrimination Claims."

12 Mercadante, "I Wasn't Planning on Becoming Spiritual but not Religious." See also Rediger, *Clergy Killers* by G. Lloyd Rediger.

13 Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, Appendix, On Methodology, 263–69.

14 Davis and Graham, *The Great Dechurching*.

of what Christianity teaches about God, human nature, human imperfection, and afterlife. However, the clergy I interviewed were all trained in the depth and breadth of Christian theology.

It is worth noting that although no religious professionals were included in my previous book on SBNRs, during the process of gathering interviewees for that work, occasionally a minister would sidle up to me after I spoke about my research during a service and privately insist that she/he thought of themselves as SBNR. In addition, over the last 5 years or so, there has been a gradual reduction in speaking invitations from clergy and denominational leaders wanting me to advise them on how to attract "nones" and SBNRs into the church. Now, instead, I often hear from clergy eager to explain why they now identify as SBNR, why they are so discouraged about the future of the church, or asking how they can be spiritual without being part of a church community.

3 Religious Background

Most of the current interviewees – nearly ninety percent – were raised, to a greater or lesser degree, in the church. Not everyone had highly devout parents, but all were taken to church on a regular basis at some point in their young lives. A significant number were "PKs," that is, "preachers' kids." Almost all interviewees took church attendance as a regular part of life, and few complained of bad experiences. Many claimed to be "church kids" in that they enjoyed their religious practices, youth groups, and Sunday services. One Gen X man said, "I led chapel services in high school and went to church several times a week. I had faith in all of it." One Millennial woman said, "I was there every Sunday for both services, the choirs, Sunday School, hand bells, youth groups… I had always been noticed for leadership because I'm an over-achiever. I was told to consider ministry."

Even for those few who were not raised in religious homes, they showed great interest in spiritual matters early in life, sometimes attending church on their own. One Millennial man, who as a child went through his parents' divorce, illness, and job losses, said gratefully that it was his "dark night of the soul… But the church community showed up for me," adding "[Church] mentors were steady presences in my life." A Baby Boomer woman said "I joined the church at age twenty-six and couldn't get enough of it. I was very active and felt called to ministry very early but couldn't recognize it at first. I was just drawn to churches and was deeply spiritual from early age."

This helps explain why many found their way to seminary after college, with a few entering as second-career students. Some found the schoolwork more challenging than expected, but most of them enjoyed the community, studies, and opportunity to question and refine their earlier beliefs. One Millennial man who had been raised Mennonite but attended a Presbyterian seminary said "I loved it… The professors were incredible and the program exactly what I needed. It was hard, rigorous, fantastic." While there, some who had belonged to conservative churches reconsidered some of the doctrines or practices they were taught, but rather than divesting themselves of religion, they instead found more palatable theological alternatives. While this did not always serve them well once in ministry – as One Millennial woman said, "what they teach you in seminary is SO progressive and you are not trained to bridge that gap. You can't win a lot of hearts that way", the point is that in seminary and early ministry theological difficulties were ironed out, rather than being the cause of rejecting the church.

4 Ministry Experience and Reasons for Leaving

Most interviewees entered ministry after graduation, and many claimed to have retained close ties with their former classmates and sometimes their professors. Although there were a few who changed denominations as adults, the majority of those raised religiously ended up becoming ordained in their original denomination. All interviewees began their clergy careers full of hope and energy. A second-career Baby Boomer who had been raised non-religious felt she had found a home in Presbyterian ministry. As pastor, she "loved ministry, especially mission work and women's retreats… I built strong relationships with most of the people there. We had a sense of family." A Mennonite Millennial said that in her first appointment she found "My 'magical unicorn congregation.' It was a really good place for me to be." The congregation was "more progressive (and

all members) were in the giving professions." Another Gen Xer said "My congregations were always wonderful, as supportive as they could be."

But eventually disillusionment set in. The main reasons for clergy disappointment fell into several categories: gender discrimination, prejudice against LGBTQ+, institutional and hierarchical practices, congregations' desire to simply be supported rather than challenged, and sometimes sheer bullying by members. All of this added considerably to the normal stress of ministry. The narratives included such problems as a woman associate passed over for a promotion in favor of a less experienced man; a new female pastor trying to deal with a male member who sexually abused a young woman only to have the congregation side with the man and push the minister out; ordination being made more difficult because of an ordinand's sexual identity; being given a dwindling church which was slated to be closed; having one's salary dramatically reduced (mostly reported by women); being accused of a controlling leadership style without being allowed to defend oneself; and even stories of ministers being attacked during service or experiencing threats of harm from members. More than a few complained of being bullied out of their vocation by a small group of members who led a challenge against them. To one woman clergy, it happened when she was away for a few weeks, taking a short denominationally encouraged sabbatical after many years of successful service.

Many women clergy and some men were surprised by the amount of latent sexism and other prejudices that still exist in the church. One Gen X man complained: "I wanted to believe… that racism, sexism, ableism existed [but] we were… going in a positive direction. Now we've taken backward strides." Many United Methodist clergy felt they could no longer represent a denomination that fought over LGBTQ+ (and eventually split because of it). One straight Gen X man said that "witnessing the results of the fifty-year struggle for sacred Queer rights in the UMC has taught me that… the institution seeks to protect itself over its marginalized members." One bisexual Millennial woman said, "I can't be part of a denomination… that's going to start a homophobic church."

Both men and women complained that their call to ministry was hampered by "too many hoops to jump through." One United Methodist Millennial said, "The process of ordination really disillusioned me." The main problem, she said, is "toxic institutional hierarchy." Some were frustrated over congregational inaction or expectations. Two women encapsulated many of these complaints. One Gen Xer said, "I feel I was 'sold' lies in what ministry and the United Methodist denomination is set up to accomplish." She saw how "ineffective" the church was, relying "so heavily on volunteers to keep our large church running." The problem included "asking people to bow down and cater to archaic systems" or others who "were resistant and did terrible things to one another and to clergy." And a Millennial woman who left ministry early in her career said, "As a UM clergy, I have bumped into this gender wall many times. It is my primary reason for not returning to active ministry."

Several clergy, especially women, were honest about how all this affected them. A Gen X woman said, "I was… seeing my mental health decline in the pastoral role due to unreasonable expectations, feelings of futility and lack of inspiration." A Baby Boomer second-career woman said, after being bullied out of the Presbyterian church she had successfully served for many years: "I never want to serve another church again. I don't even want to preach. When I go, I cry." And the Millennial who had found her "unicorn congregation," but was eventually turned on by some members, said, "My church had been best place ever and then they almost destroyed me. I can't give that much of myself again." A Gen X woman who now works in chaplaincy, said "I was being hurt really badly, gaslighted, scapegoated. I had no support in the congregation or acknowledgement of my pain and suffering from wider church structures. This is not unique to me." A Gen X man said of his bad experiences: "It has crushed my own faith."

While the pandemic exacerbated the whole situation, it actually just hastened what was already happening.[15] So, it is not surprising that when a congregation witnesses declining membership, reduced income, family and friends leaving religion, and are surrounded by societal cynicism, polarization, and diminished trust

15 Karlson, Patheos.com, "How to Deal with The Decline in Church Attendance After the Pandemic" June 30, 2023. "Even if there never had been a pandemic, many of them would have stopped going because they were already becoming disillusioned with their faith community. The pandemic only served as a catalyst to speed things up." https://www.patheos.com/blogs/henrykarlson/2023/06/how-to-deal-with-the-decline-in-church-attendance-after-the-pandemic/ (accessed April 4 2024).

in institutions, they expect the pastor to rescue their church and return it to the 1950 glory days. When that does not happen, their disappointment often lands on the leader. More than one interviewee brought this up. A Baby Boomer woman who remembered earlier times summarized it: "Clergy used to have more respect but now people feel so powerless in other parts of their lives that that's one place where they could" exert power. She added, "I've never been anywhere where people feel less constrained about unleashing their venom."

5 Post Ministry and Identifying as Spiritual but not Religious

What are the interviewees doing now? Although just a few interviewees, mostly older ones, still remain in the ministry, often for economic reasons, the majority of the interviewees had moved on. Whether because they lacked additional training or because the new work was built on ministerial skills, six had moved into chaplaincy or counseling. Five of these were women. Another nine – six of these being men – had moved into non-profit work, often reviving the earlier ideals that had led them into church ministry. Some younger interviewees who could re-train or build on pre-ministry skills moved into various jobs such as attorney, paralegal, business manager, farmer, or IT.

Importantly, five – all women – had moved into types of "spirituality work" often identified as "New Age." This usually meant opening their own practices, offering such things as "body work," Reiki, non-religious "healing" sessions, nature excursions or "forest bathing," spiritual counseling and/or leading non-religious spirituality services and retreats. One Baby Boomer built on previous experience to start an informal healing practice, saying: "I have felt called to a ministry of healing for a long time. When I would visit folks in the hospital, I felt drawn to place my hand on their arm and when I did there was a warm energy exchanged between us." Now out of church ministry, she says she uses "body tapping to promote… focus on areas that are out of sync… doing that for people I know."

These and many other former clergy now find themselves identifying as spiritual but not religious. Seventeen were firmly in the SBNR camp. A Gen Xer said, "The institutional church has been harmful to many, including myself, and continues to be so. This is why I identify as SBNR. I enjoy the spiritual aspects that feed my soul, but the institution has harmed my soul." A Millennial woman was especially enthusiastic: "I'm excited about the SBNR movement… I believe there's a living energy force that unites us all. If enough people will say 'no' to religion, religion will lose its power and that's exciting… What I like about SBNR is to explore, stay open, try this and then move on."

Nine others, perhaps reacting to, as one man said, the church "stigmatizing" the SBNR term, were sympathetic to the meaning, but did not fully adopt the label. Several said they had a "foot in both worlds" because "community is really important." A Millennial man reinforced this hesitation to fully identify, saying: "In my experience with people who identify as SBNR it's a very individualized and private notion of your life." Only a few completely rejected this identification, two because they fully identified with Christian spirituality, and two because they now claimed to be *neither* spiritual nor religious. Some lamented that they adopted the label by default because they could not find a place in the church anymore. One Gen X man said, "I'm a spiritual person who wants to be religious, but I find that the church isn't a place where I fit in well anymore. The church has failed to move."

Many interviewees are in a liminal place. They were drawn to the ministry for very deep and valid reasons. They are often torn up about having to leave. Some are left with sadness because of anger, disappointment, or hopelessness about the church. Others feel relieved to be out of it. Some say they continue their call and ministry in other ways – working for a nonprofit, doing counseling, bringing spirituality to other venues. A small number still identify as Christian yet are also drawn to SBNR ethos.

6 Theological Findings and Compared to Non-Religious SBNRs

But what about belief? In the interview, I asked about possible changes in their theology, focusing on the same four concepts that I had used in my previous research: God/Transcendence, Human Nature, Church/

Community, and Afterlife. Most started their ministry with more or less traditional Christian beliefs: A God who hears, cares, is transcendent but active in the world; human nature created good but choosing to turn away from God; church as Jesus' representative in the world; a promise of eternal life with God through Christ. What was stunning, however, was that in spite of their theological educations and beginnings, many of the interviewees' beliefs changed considerably after they became disillusioned with ministry. In fact, often their views became more similar to the beliefs of the non-religious SBNRs that I interviewed earlier.[16]

7 God/Transcendence

Non-religious SBNR interviewees in previous research refrained from using the word God; did not see a higher power as communicative, intentional, relational, or in charge; and sometimes used words like Energy,[17] Source, Life Force, or Universe. Their view of transcendence – a power greater than themselves – was more "horizontal," seeing it in nature, humankind, the world, or a special divine presence inside themselves and other people.[18]

As for current interviewees, there were some former clergy who retained a distinct belief in an intentional compassionate God and would use that word. Even these clergy, however, were also prone to substitute words such as Energy, Force, Universe, or Source. Like previous SBNRs, their God concept edged closer to being more abstract, benign, non-judgmental, monistic, omnipresent, and/or non-communicative. They leaned more toward immanence – God's presence in the world – rather than transcendence – God over and above the world. One Millennial woman said, "I no longer believe God is in control and that I have to take a subservient role." A Baby Boomer's idea of God was changed when she took a course in Tarot reading. She said, "The conversation was about the 'Universe.' It is a power beyond. It has some sort of power but not the kind we ascribe to God."

Several said they were impressed with Tillich's description of God as "Ground of Being." Others said they were drawn to process theology, with one Millennial summarizing it as "God is source, relationship, the connective tissue between all things… God lives within me. We are participating in co-creation. God is growing in consciousness through us." This same thought about consciousness was expressed by several in my previous research.[19] Another said, "God is not a separate thing from us," echoing previous SBNRs who claimed to have divinity within them.[20] These concepts seemed to move away from the intentional, self-determining, sovereign God of traditional theology. Some interviewees were not sure anymore what they believed, while several others – similar to many non-religious SBNRs –were influenced by attending Twelve Step groups which promoted the idea of a Higher Power "of your own understanding."[21]

As for Jesus, similar to many non-religious SBNRs, many former clergy saw Jesus as more of a "good guy," "one of the great teachers," or a role model rather than the pathway to salvation.[22] Echoing a liberation theology, one Millennial Mennonite woman said, "It seems pretty obvious that Jesus' ministry was undoing the structure of empire." A Millennial man discarded most of the core teaching about Christ, saying: "Doctrines around Christology or pneumatology or atonement – I could take them or leave them. I'm more concerned with the communal practice of individual believers. Are we loving God and our neighbors?… The divinity of Christ is not the main thing." Several others lamented that their congregations were upset when they did not preach Jesus as the way to salvation. Thus, although a few insisted Jesus was God incarnate, most clergy's

16 Martcandante, *Belief without Borders.* Also, many of the beliefs in both samples echo what Galen Watts has found. Watts, *The Spiritual Turn*.

17 Ibid., e.g. 119–21, the theme of "energy" was common throughout earlier and current interviewee comments.

18 Ibid., chapter 5, Transcendence

19 Ibid., 108–13.

20 Ibid., e.g., 232–4.

21 Ibid., e.g. 173–7.

22 Ibid., e.g. 103–6.

Christology was "low" meaning they questioned the divinity aspect of the traditional "fully human, fully divine" Christ of historical Christian theology.

8 Human Nature

Previous SBNR non-religious interviewees all, to a person, began explaining their beliefs in human nature by saying "everyone is born good."[23] Whether or not aware of it, they were likely protesting against "original sin" which means humans have a predilection to turn away from God. None liked or used the word "sin," but instead explained human dysfunction as a result of troubled upbringing, abnormal brain chemistry, or a history of trauma. They were not without hope, however, offering a goal for human betterment through this-worldly healing, self-actualization, and authenticity.

Most current clergy interviewees agreed that all humans are created good by God. While this is a traditional Christian belief, there is still a need to explain human dysfunction and evil. Some clergy were more convinced than ever that sin is real. One Millennial woman said, "Humans suck. Even before all this [church]… I knew the very worst and best can happen in people. [But] I'm now more aware that this can co-exist in one person. How even the best people can screw up. I don't trust anymore." A second-career Baby Boomer said that before entering ministry, "I lived in a fantasy world for a long time. Now I know the reality of our brokenness. I've always had hope for humanity, that we would improve in our effort to be more Christlike." But her beliefs have changed, she said.

Still, a large majority of the group rejected the idea of "original sin," and like non-religious SBNRs, leaned toward explanations of difficult upbringing or other therapeutic explanations. One said, "we are born with capacity to be good, and it's beaten out of us early. Too many people are damaged. We are born good and then evils of the world just create monsters." A Millennial woman agreed: "We all participate in sinful systems… [but] we don't have a predilection to turn away from God." Some also refrained from using the word "sin" altogether. One Millennial woman said, "The church attracts insecure people needing healing. But sin is a term I'll never use after leaving church. Such a dirty, manipulative word."

Christian theology does speak of a remedy for human dysfunction, that is, salvation – forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God through Christ's life and work. While a few clergy interviewees believed in a traditional understanding of salvation, others tweaked it. One United Methodist Baby Boomer claimed John Wesley as her authority, saying: "Salvation? No, this is not needed in an orthodox sense. Jesus died for our sins? No. Instead… [as Wesley said] life is working out our salvation." Others echoed SBNR beliefs that the real goal was self-determination and integrity. A Millennial woman explained: "Salvation sounds like a sense of self-awareness to live into truth clearly… Not in the 'everlasting arms' [of God] but living into truth and authenticity." For another Baby Boomer, it was the reason to identify with SBNRs: "I object to the way churches have weaponized salvation. This keeps me in [the] SBNR [world]."

9 Church/Community

The one thing all the clergy interviewees agreed on is that the church is a mess. In seminary, they were taught an ecclesiology (doctrine of the church) that claimed that a healthy congregation, led by the Spirit and functioning as the "body of Christ," could do good both inwardly for members and also outwardly in the world. Many had had early experiences of effective church community so most entered the ministry enthusiastically. Their goals were congruent with the theology they had been taught. One Baby Boomer said, "My goal was to nurture faith from the pulpit." A Gen X man said, "The church has the greatest power to effectuate

23 Ibid., chapter 6 Human Nature.

God in this world. Ideally, this should be the church. If I'm just by myself and actualize the potential of God, I can try very hard, but we need each other." One Millennial woman said, "I entered ministry believing the local church was the hope of the world. I thought the church was the best entity for love and an invaluable resource for community."

But their difficult experiences eventually made them change their minds. One Gen X man related how he had tried to enliven the congregation, to no avail. He said, "As a pastor, I was forced to… make people happy. It was less about the mission of the Gospel. I found myself in more of the storekeeper role… I thought my role… at least partially… was to challenge them to wrestle through their beliefs… Most people don't want to wrestle. They want a sermon that makes them feel good and to be told that everything is ok." A Millennial woman entered ministry with a clear understanding of the Gospel mission, but left when the church did not deliver:

> Clearly the church too often failed to live out its mission: loving your neighbor, feeding the hungry, offering forgiveness, being open to the leading of the Spirit, while caring for the needy and those considered 'less than'… During this time, I struggled with church rules and theology and discovered there was no room for error. The rules were more important than living into genuine faith.

Some felt the church could rebound, but not without a lot of effort. A Gen X woman said, "The church needs to change. The hierarchy, the rules, those pull the church down and its leaders down. How can you be your best when you're being crushed by that?" A Mennonite woman said, "I'm interested in transformation not just maintenance." Many interviewees felt love should be the main principle in the church, but instead, as explained above, they found bad behavior. A Gen X woman says: "I left the ministry because I find the local church and denominational religious model to be completely ineffective and a breeding ground for abuse, dysfunction and hate…"

Some went further, giving up on religion in general. A Gen X woman explained: "I have drastically changed my viewpoint of church and organized religion… Now I can speak my true beliefs without having to worry about angry emails or jeopardizing my leadership authority with my congregants." A Gen X man who now runs his own non-profit said, "I am now suspect of organized religion in all its forms… institutionalism wrecked the church… I worked so long and so hard to change things, but I failed. I was doing the right thing… but things got worse… The structure was hurting too many people. Just by me participating, I gave it validity." For many, it was their bad experiences that caused them to change their self-identity. One explained: "The institutional church has been harmful to many, including myself, and continues to be so. This is why I identify as SBNR."

Both non-religious and clergy interviewees said they wanted community. The non-religious wished for a group that would support them but also allow them freedom of belief and action. Most admitted they had not found such a community, but all agreed they would not expect to find it in church.[24] The clergy interviewees had a more deeply spiritual and theological understanding of the church as a community. But even after positive childhood experiences, rewarding seminary training, and some satisfying early ministry experiences, in the end they became disillusioned.

10 Afterlife

Traditional Christian theology insists that God promises eternal life through Christ's work. While views differ on who is included in this, and what it might look like, the promise is a core characteristic of this faith. Earlier, non-religious SBNR interviewees also often believed in some kind of life after death. While a few just had a "recycling" belief that their body would return its energy to the world, many believed in some form of reincarnation. Unlike Eastern religious views, however, it was a more American version where people would

24 Ibid., chapter 7 Community.

advance onward and upward.[25] However, I found very few clergy interviewees who believed in any kind of reincarnation.

Even so, many were like the non-religious SBNRs in roundly rejecting the idea of hell and sometimes heaven. One Gen X man who had rejected organized religion entirely still had views on the afterlife. He said that the afterlife would be a "melding into a global consciousness [but] heaven and hell? No, don't like those terms… that sounds too individualistic. I don't believe in reincarnation. My view is more linear, growing into something new, evolution." Another built on the energy theme common among SBNRs, insisting that "Energy is not created or destroyed, it just changes form." Similarly, another said, "We can keep each other's memory alive, but all our atoms go back into circulation, so no one is really gone."

Some interviewees, though, retained a concept of the afterlife with God. A Baby Boomer woman said, "At the end of our life, we are face to face with God. We see God and everything we've done in light of God's love." Others, however, felt the afterlife was more an absorption into the Godhead, possibly echoing their understanding of process theology. One Millennial man said he did not hold a "belief in personal soul or spirit that will persist or continue" Another reiterated: "To the extent we are from God, we will return to God, but as a part of who God is." A Millennial woman held a merging of beliefs, similar to nonreligious SBNRs, saying it is "Right and good to return to the earth and become mushroom food. I'm a drop of water returning to a wave in the ocean. Consciousness does not go with it. It's a gateway to another layer of density. There is no reincarnation but a kind of cellular memory."

11 Deconversion or Deconstruction as an Aspect of Church Decline

What does it mean when formerly committed clergy are drawn to the SBNR label? For some, it may qualify as deconversion. Although only two claimed to now be neither spiritual nor religious, many others refused to self-identify with the church. Still, most interviewees seemed hesitant to say they were no longer Christian. While almost all were very disappointed that the church had not lived up to what they expected of it, many retained their attraction to Christian social principles, the reality of a transcendent something, and the egalitarian or progressive aspects of its morality.

Instead, there is much in these interviews that qualifies as deconstruction. Even with their chosen and educated understanding of Christian beliefs, these thirty interviewees were unpacking aspects, discarding some others, and reinterpreting what was left of their earlier theological repertoire. It is posited that many formerly religious are now simply (as Grace Davie says) "believing without belonging."[26] Given the significant changes in the beliefs of these former clergy, this current research has not borne this out. While a thirty-person sample cannot claim to be representative, it may nevertheless mark an additional factor in church decline. Although it is unclear where these clergy interviewees will land – theologically, spiritually, or institutionally – the similarity of what they reject and how they reinterpret what is left is in many ways very similar to the beliefs of the non-religious SBNRs interviewed earlier.

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25 Ibid., chapter 8 Afterlife.

26 Davie, "Believing without Belonging," 455–69.

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