
In Search of the Sacred

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The author of this selection looks at the changing face of religion in the United States. She notes that baby boomers are especially more willing to pick and choose elements of various religions and then fuse them together to form a “personal spirituality.” As you read, notice the role that Eastern and other non-traditional religions play in this process.

Rita McClain's spiritual journey began in Iowa, where she grew up in the fundamentalist world of the Pentecostal Church. What she remembers most about that time are tent meetings and an overwhelming feeling of guilt. In her 20s she tried less doctrinaire Protestantism. That, too, proved unsatisfying. By the age of 27, McClain had rejected all organized religion. “I really felt like a pretty wounded Christian,” she says. For the next 18 years, she sought inner peace only in nature, through rock climbing in the mountains or hiking in the desert. That seemed enough.

Then, six years ago, in the aftermath of an emotionally draining divorce, McClain's spiritual life blossomed. Just as she had once explored mountains, she began scouting the inner landscape. She started with Unity, a metaphysical church near her Marin County, Calif., home. It was a revelation, light-years away from the “Old Testament kind of thing I knew very well from my childhood.” The next stop was Native American spiritual practices. Then it was Buddhism at Marin County's Spirit Rock Meditation Center, where she has attended a number of retreats, including one that required eight days of silence.

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These disparate rituals melded into a personal religion, which McClain, a 50-year-old nurse, celebrates at an ever-changing altar in her home. Right now the altar consists of an angel statue, a small bottle of “sacred water” blessed at a women’s vigil, a crystal ball, a pyramid, a small brass image of Buddha sitting on a brass leaf, a votive candle, a Hebrew prayer, a tiny Native American basket from the 1850s and a picture of her “most sacred place,” a madrone tree near her home.

Maybe it’s a critical mass of baby boomers in the contemplative afternoon of life. Or anxiety over the coming millennium. Or a general dissatisfaction with the materialism of the modern world. For these reasons and more, millions of Americans are embarking on a search for the sacred in their lives. Not all have a journey as extreme as Rita McClain’s. Some are returning to the religions of their childhoods, finding new meaning in old rituals. Others look for wisdom outside their own cultures, mixing different traditions in an individualistic stew.

The seekers fit no particular profile. They include Wall Street investment bankers who spend their lunch hours in Bible-study groups, artists rediscovering religious themes, fitness addicts who’ve traded aerobics classes for meditation and other spiritual exercises. No matter what path they take, the seekers are united by a sincere desire to find answers to profound questions, to understand their place in the cosmos. “Living in a secular world is like living in an astrodome with a roof over the top,” says Roy Larson of Northwestern University’s new Center for Religion and the News Media. “The temperature is always 70 degrees and the grass is always green. Even in a place that holds 70,000 people, you feel claustrophobic. You need to breathe some fresh air.” Americans have always been a religious people, of course. Even during the past several decades, when it seemed like the prevailing culture was overwhelmingly irreverent and secular, legions of the faithful filled pews every Sunday. But for baby boomers in particular, spirituality was off the radarscope. Instead, as a generation, boomers embraced political activism, careerism, even marathon running, with an almost religious zeal. Now it’s suddenly

OK, even chic, to use the S words—soul, sacred, spiritual, sin. In a *Newsweek* Poll, a majority of Americans (58 percent) say they feel the need to experience spiritual growth. And a third of all adults report having had a mystical or religious experience.

Check out the barometers in the cultural marketplace. Bookstores are lined with spiritual missives. Music stores feature best-selling Gregorian chants. Hollywood salts its scripts with divine references and afterlife experiences. Want to give that special seeker on your winter-solstice list a crystal? Be sure to wrap it in angels gift paper. These are amazing times: Pope John Paul II's new book, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope," tops the best-seller list, beating out Faye Resnick's raunchy tell-all about Nicole Brown Simpson. James Redfield's spiritual novel, "The Celestine Prophecy," is at the top of the fiction list. In the music world, Motown no longer has the monopoly on soul. Since March, Angel Records has sold 2.8 million copies of the CD "Chant" by the Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos. The Beastie Boys included a Buddhist rap on their last album; gospel rap is competing with the usual misogynistic fare.

Something's going on, and people want to talk about it. Celebrities as different as tennis star Andre Agassi and playwright David Mamet tell interviewers how they've found God in their lives. Kathleen Norris's 1993 book, "Dakota: A Spiritual Geography," is on the paperback best-seller list. She has received 3,000 letters from people wanting to share their spiritual lives—an amazing amount of mail for a book of reflective essays. *Newsweek* publishes a story about Czech President Vaclav Havel's speech on the search for meaning, and readers call for weeks, wanting to describe their own journeys.

Politicians, like Newt Gingrich, have pushed school prayer onto the national agenda. Talk shows, such as "Oprah," have featured spirituality. Physicists debate the spiritual significance of quantum mechanics. Attendance at religious retreats has skyrocketed. The Abbey of Gethsemani, 45 miles south of Louisville, Ky., is booked through the end of April. "For people who are really insistent," says Brother Patrick Hart, "we say we'll put you on standby, just like on the airlines."

Courses and lectures with spiritual themes are drawing standing-room-only crowds. Interface, a holistic-education center in Cambridge, Mass., offers 700 courses to 20,000 registrants this year, up from 13,000 just three years ago. This fall, 2,000 people showed up for a conference on body and soul featuring such heavy-hitting speakers as Dr. Dean Ornish, who advocates a diet-cum-spiritual cure for heart disease, and Dr. Bernie Siegel, author of "Love, Medicine and Miracles." "People are really hungry for this," says program planner Anne Arsenault. "They're hungry for meaning in life."

For entrepreneurs with a keen sense of the Zeitgeist, this is an obvious opportunity. Deja Vu Tours, based in Berkeley, Calif., specializes in "spiritual adventure" travel. It boasts that its clients have "seen the sun rise at Stonehenge, visited the 'Room of the Spirits' at the Dalai Lama's Monastery, participated in rituals led by a shaman at Machu Picchu, sung a greeting to the Kumari, the Living Goddess of Nepal, and received baptisms in the Jordan River." Susan Hull Bostwick, who started Deja Vu Tours 13 years ago, says her clients are people who have a sense that they've lived before and want to stand in the sacred places of their past.

There are spiritual seekers of all ages, but baby boomers are at the head of the march. Wade Clark Roof, a professor of religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says that as the boomers enter their 40s, they must face the inevitable: neither jogging nor liposuction nor all the brown rice in China can keep them young forever. "As our bodies fall apart, as they weaken and sag, it speaks of mortality," says Roof, author of "A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation." Boomers, says Roof, "are at a point in their lives where they sense the need for spirituality, but they don't know where to get it." Another trigger: parenthood, and the desire to give children a moral and spiritual foundation.

The boomers' search is eclectic, as befits children of a skeptical age. "Each generation is trained to look at spirituality differently," says Rabbi Robert N. Levine, 43, of Congregation Robert Sholom in Manhattan. "Our generation participated in civil-rights and Vietnam

marches. Now we want to have a dialogue.” That dialogue can take place within a traditional denomination. Yvette Perry, 39, a member of Rabbi Levine’s congregation, celebrated her adult bat mitzvah earlier this year. Perry says she needed to step off the fast track; her career, running a music-marketing firm, just wasn’t enough. Studying with Levine, she says, is “all about dealing with learning and growing and changing. . . . You can read something and the rabbi can read it and there are different viewpoints and you get to argue about it. It’s a quest for knowledge.”

While Perry is able to integrate her spiritual and professional lives, other seekers find their search means a radical new path. In 1989 Mary Helen Nugent was a 33-year-old hospital administrator in Michigan. She had a master’s degree, earned a healthy salary and was very career-minded. In her personal life, she says, “I thought what I wanted was marriage, family and all that.” But that year, she gradually began questioning all her assumptions about the direction of her life. No single experience brought this on, she says; rather, it was a slow process of self-discovery. “I came to the conclusion,” Nugent says, “that a religious life was something I wanted to try and needed to try.”

Today Nugent is a nun, living with two other nuns in a single-family home in Dallas, Pa. Her paycheck from Mercy Hospital in Scranton goes directly to the Sisters of Mercy. In return, she gets a small stipend for living expenses. “I’m not running away from anything,” she says. “I’m trying to share a life and a faith.”

At the other end of the spiritual spectrum are seekers who move beyond conventional boundaries, to a kind of cafeteria religion, a very American theology. In a pluralistic society, “one institution feels a little spiritually claustrophobic,” says James W. Jones, a religion professor at Rutgers University and the author of the upcoming book “In the Middle of This Road We Call Our Life: The Courage to Search for Something More.” Jones recalls deriding this kind of pick-and-choose religion as frivolous and narcissistic a decade ago. But now he believes that a person who has synthesized different traditions can

find a path that “may be as spiritually profound as traditional religions or even more spiritually profound.”

At the very least, adopting a cross-cultural spirituality brings an appreciation of very different worlds. As an English major at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s, Edward Bednar was on the usual college-career path. But after nearly dying in surgery, he dropped out of school and studied with a Zen master. Meditation helped him “find truth” in the details of everyday life, he says. Eventually, Bednar discovered he could also find truth in a place he had long abandoned, the Roman Catholic Church. He found new inspiration studying the mystics and the saints. Now 50 and living in Brooklyn, N.Y., Bednar teaches meditation to businessmen on Wall Street and goes to mass on Sundays. He also integrates spirituality into his everyday work at the New York Association for New Americans, an organization that resettles 20,000 refugees each year. After meeting the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader, he helped bring 1,000 Tibetan families to this country and is helping them set up new communities here.

Inevitably, there’s a high-tech component to this phenomenon, too. On the Internet, devotees can find Bible-study groups, meditation instruction and screens of New Age philosophy. A self-described futurist in Amherst, Mass., who calls herself Doctress Neutopia, has created her own online religion. Anyone with a modem can join her congregation. In Sunnyvale, Calif., Jeff Manning, 37, has produced a CD-ROM version of the tarot—and taken up Siddha Yoga, which he considers the most spiritual tradition he has encountered. As his two young children grow older, Manning is considering “doing an organized-religion tour”—exposing them to major denominations the way wealthy parents once took their offspring on a tour of Europe.

As we approach the millennium, some theologians expect an increase in spiritual seeking. The calendar watershed itself inspires anxiety and soul-searching. At the same time, more baby boomers will be approaching dreaded middle age. Spirituality could be just another boomer passion, stuck in the closet next to the rowing machine—or it could be a powerful force for personal growth. “A lot

has changed in the last half century,” says Charles Nuckolls, an anthropologist at Emory University who studies religion and healing. “We’ve stripped away what our ancestors saw as essential—the importance of religion and family. . . . People feel they want something they’ve lost, and they don’t remember what it is they’ve lost. But it has left a gaping hole.” That, in essence, is the seeker’s quest: to fill the hole with a new source of meaning. Why are we here? What is the purpose of our existence? The answers change in each generation, but the questions are eternal.



Questions

1. Why might Americans be searching for the sacred? Is there a particular profile for spiritual seekers?
2. The author quotes Wade Clark Roof, who gives reasons for why baby boomers are spiritual seekers. What sociological factors have influenced boomers’ desire for spirituality, according to Roof and the author?
3. Think about your views on religion and spirituality. What has influenced your views? Have your views changed over time? Why?
4. Why do you think people today are more able to synthesize elements from Eastern religions and traditional Western ones? Do you think this phenomenon will increase, decrease, or stabilize over time? Why?