The Hunger for Depth and Meaning Among Millennials

Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston

Two Ministry Innovation Fellows at Harvard Divinity School reflect on how young adults are partnering with women religious on the spiritual journey. What might these new relationships mean?

Neither of us ever thought we'd go to divinity school. Casper grew up in England among a largely secular family and worked in climate change advocacy. Angie was raised in a spiritual home without a denominational affiliation and worked in the arts. Yet both of us were compelled by the question – where does our generation go to belong to a community and become the person they want to be?

Both of us are religiously unaffiliated millennials. We belong to the growing group of Americans who, when asked what religious identity they hold from a long list, answer "none of the above." Among our peers, one in three is now religious un-housed.

What is so important to remember is that the language of negation used to describe us "nones" never does justice to the depth of our experience. Indeed, two-thirds of us believe in God or a higher power, and one in five of us even prays every day![1] The "Spiritual But Not Religious" generation is not leaving religion behind, it is simply no longer being served by the institutions of religion.

This trend is true among those born into Catholicism, but alarm runs across faith lines - even among traditions that are growing. Young Muslims watch celebrity imams on YouTube instead of going to mosque.[2] Buddhist practice is split from tradition in corporate mindfulness programs.[3] And more than 70% of non-Orthodox Jews marry outside the faith.[4]

At the same time, religious-like communities are bursting forth in unlikely places. Many such groups form and spread as if boundaries between religions did not exist at all. In fact, the constructed categories of what is "religious" and what is "secular" are no longer the most helpful ways to understand how we are gathering and making meaning of our lives.

In our first report, "How We Gather,"[5] we profiled these communities—from fitness groups to maker-spaces, work co-ops, justice groups, and adult summer camps—that fulfill traditionally religious functions in the lives of unaffiliated millennials. We found that young people experience meaning and belonging in organizations like The Dinner Party, CrossFit, and AfroFlow Yoga. And though the organizations count themselves secular, they demonstrate elements of religious polity, liturgy, and even spirituality. In fact, many unaffiliated participants in these communities have not left religion behind; rather, they are finding religious life wholly outside of its institutions. We hear of engaged couples asking their Soul Cycle fitness trainers to lead their wedding ceremony, or of arts leaders being asked for pastoral care that went far beyond what they had expected to offer.

What Millennial Community Leaders are Looking For

Though some of the forms of gathering are new, this shift shouldn't surprise us. To the rising generation, our dominant culture of materialism says: your value is your capacity to consume. At their best, religious institutions show us there is more to life than this. Whether you call it the profound, the transcendent, or even God, young America thirsts for that which forms the ground of our being. In everyday language that our nonaffiliated colleagues can hear, we mean what matters most: our love for family and friends, our guiding values, and our sense of connection to the natural world and all that is bigger than ourselves.

Though these new secular groups succeed at building community, and are growing fast, they often struggle to find the language, imagery, and ritual to engage their communities in making meaning of their experience of transcendence. As expected, overtly religious language makes them nervous – but in our experience, in the context of trust and safety – there is deep joy in engaging, and reclaiming, traditional religious forms.

Our work at Harvard Divinity School is often to serve as the bridge between institutional religion and the emerging landscape of spiritual community innovation and creativity. So, in December 2016, we convened a group of 80 innovative community leaders to build that bridge. They came in response to this invitation:

> "There is a crisis of isolation in America. We are working to build support systems for those, like you, who are bringing people

into meaningful, life-giving, transformative communities. As fewer and fewer young people feel comfortable affiliating religiously, we are invested in exploring how to support the spiritual dimensions of community life and leadership."

Our assumption was that whether some identified with a religious tradition, or whether they saw their work as secular, all of them were doing very similar work – building communities of meaning and belonging. They came from Buddhist, Muslim, evangelical and mainline Christian, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Mormon, other religious, and nonreligious backgrounds.

During our four days together we learned that, more than anything, these millennial leaders yearn to be less alone and more spiritually supported. They want to share their leadership journey with peers and receive witness and wisdom from elders. They are looking for spiritual leadership development. The gathering revealed a diverse field united by an experience of leading transformative communities – and just how hard and lonely that work can be.

While recognizing the uniqueness of their own contexts, innovators honored that their work is as old as community itself. They conceded, with laughter and sober nods, that their genius ideas will not inoculate them from the human messiness that always emerges when humans gather.

Many of these leaders lack connection to trustworthy sources of insight into the deep questions they are asking and the thorny problems they face. Our working assumption is that the most valuable insight will come not from resources but from relationships.

In particular, the community leaders expressed the desire for relationships with elders and mentors to support their progress. They were eloquent about their yearning for spiritual authorization to lead in meaning-making spaces. And they testified to longing for practices that nurture their spiritual development, strength, and resilience - especially practices rooted in wisdom traditions.

For many who see themselves as non-religious, to have their leadership even recognized as spiritual was a new and compelling experience. When we gently offered definitions of "formation," "theological reflection," "discernment," and "pastoral care," murmurs of recognition and delight filled the room. There was little resistance to using traditional language to describe what they hunger for, though it seemed clear that new language must eventually emerge from the innovator landscape.

Work with Women Religious

This work has led to numerous surprises. Presenting to a room full of Methodist bishops, visiting retirement communities and Jewish ritual baths. But perhaps most wonderfully, spending Casper's 30th birthday with seven women religious in a far-ranging two-day conversation.

The purpose of this conversation, this gathering – shaped by Rev. Wayne Muller and Adam Horowitz - was to invite two unlikely communities to meet one another, hear one another's stories, learn from each other – and to re-imagine a possibility of deep collaboration, working together in response to a call shared in common: to serve the unmet needs of the world. Both of us experienced an extraordinary form of "eldering" in the presence of those sisters who gathered to share the stories of their religious life together -- the struggles, joys, and lessons learned. These women religious came to the table completely comfortable in the knowledge that their current expression of religious life was coming to an end, and thrilled to learn about emerging forms of what they called "God's work."

This gathering of "Nuns and 'Nones'" led to a joyful recognition that we were kindred souls. All of us were seeking to transform ourselves in the context of community in order to transform the world.

Women religious shared the wisdom of their experience with a new generation, building new forms of community, and thirsty for good company, finding meaning, purpose, and fresh ways to hold those eternal questions at the heart of all life. For the millennials in the room, the power of the women's stories was deepened by their hard-earned spiritual

Participants in the two-day gathering of "Nuns and Nones" at Harvard Divinity School, including LCWR member Anne Curtis, RSM; and former LCWR presidents Carol Zinn, SSJ; Mary Dacey, SSJ; and Nancy Schreck, OSF

maturity. And they were similarly curious about us, unthreatened by us, actively praying for our wellbeing, even before we met. We are not used to being prayed for like that! We felt witnessed, honored, challenged, and inspired to be like them when we grow up. Their generosity of spirit was astonishing.

What Might We Do Together Now?

The inspiration of this gathering has led to a few concrete ways in which women religious might partner with millennials on an ongoing basis:

1. One-on-one eldering relationships with millennial community leaders

We have started several pilot projects, one of which brings together spiritual mentors, or elders, to accompany younger community leaders, over a six-month period. On this journey of spiritual leadership formation, they meet together once or twice a month for an hour. If you or others you know are interested and well-suited for this role—which is about listening well, asking good questions, and witnessing the joys and challenges of leadership—we would love to hear from you.

2. Participating in future gatherings and subsequent collaborations

Both communities wanted the "Nuns and Nones" gatherings to continue. Wayne and Adam have organized four more gatherings over the next year, to seed a diverse, innovative mixture of collaborations, joint projects, and coordinated efforts. Local working relationships between two different communities reveal that, as Sr. Mary Dacey, SSJ said, "We have much more in common than would ever keep us apart." Each community has some of the wisdom, experience, energy, and resources the other needs. Their call to serve together challenges our increasingly fractured world, as some of these projects already bear fruit around the country. If you are interested in joining this growing movement in any way, please contact Rev. Wayne Muller at wayne@nunsandnones.org.

3. Creating inter-generational spiritual communities

We are already seeing examples of women religious partnering with millennials to create dynamic intergenerational spiritual communities. The most potent example is the Community of the Holy Spirit, a group of eco-feminist Episcopal nuns in New York who have partnered with Prime Produce, a millennial-led co-working collective, to bring people together for regular spiritual salons at Bluestone Farm and Living Arts Center since 2014.[6] In Grand Rapids, millennial Katie Gordon has brought her peers together in partnership with local Dominican Sisters on a collaboration initiative at the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

We would love to see more such communities emerge. If you have ideas or know about initiatives underway, we would be delighted to hear from you.

More than anything, we hope you know how grateful we are to be in relationship with you and that we are filled with excitement about what the future holds!

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Casper and Angie are Ministry Innovation Fellows at Harvard Divinity School, supported by the Fetzer Institute, where they support a growing network of innovative Millennial community leaders.

Endnotes

1. Pew
2. Conversation with Yusufi Vali, Executive Director of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center.
3. "The Mindfulness Business: Western capitalism is looking for inspiration in eastern mysticism," The Economist, November 16, 2013, http://www.economist.com/news/business/21589841-westerncapitalism-
4. looking-inspiration-eastern-mysticism-mindfulness-business.
5. "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," Pew Research Center, October 1, 2013, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.
6. www.howwegather.org
7. See *The New Yorker*, "The New Guided Age," http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/the-new-guilded-age