

## BOOK REVIEW

## Review of *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious*

*Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious*, by Linda E. Mercadante. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014

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*Belief without Borders* is a welcome and valuable addition to a mushrooming literature on secularism and nonreligion, making two distinct contributions. First, Mercadante highlights not atheism or “secularism” per se, but the Western “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) movement—building on her previous work on addiction recovery movements as well as her own past experience as an SBNR. With contemporary survey data showing that a majority of Nones (individuals who select “none” as their religious affiliation on surveys) do not consider themselves atheists (many subscribe to belief in a supreme being or other spiritual presence), a study of SBNRs is critical for understanding Nones. Moreover, as Mercadante suggests, the SBNR phenomenon may itself be a reaction against a perceived secularizing trend or an overconfidence in science (p. 34).

Second, rather than adding to the social scientific literature that has diagrammed changing patterns of religious affiliation at the macro level, Mercadante has chosen a new and productive approach: participant interviews with over 100 individuals who self-identify as SBNR. The rich collection of interviews offered in *Belief without Borders* makes it a treasure chest of data about the SBNR movement. By compiling perspectives from SBNR practitioners in their own words, Mercadante has built an indispensable handbook for research in this field.

Mercadante uses a few key sociological categories to help classify these data, annotating the gender, generation, race (though she admits she had difficulty recruiting participants other than whites to her study), and geographic region of her participants. She also develops a new and very helpful five-part typology to classify the varieties of SBNR: Dissenters actively resist religious affiliation. Casuals’ “religious or spiritual practices are primarily functional”; they never commit to any particular practice or tradition and spirituality remains a subordinate theme of their lives (p. 55). Explorers and Seekers both tend to circulate from one set of spiritual practices or ideas to another, a comfortable condition for Explorers, a troubling one for Seekers. Immigrants have landed in a new

tradition and are actively making it a home. By indicating where all of her interviewees sit along these various dimensions, Mercadante opens the door for productive comparisons within her data set—and valuable new directions for further research.

Mercadante also applies her own training as a theologian to these data, and this framing produces both strengths and weaknesses. In a sense, the book is an apologetics for theology itself: Mercadante wants not only to argue against the claim that SBNRs are indifferent to theology (in which she is successful), but to suggest that SBNR is intrinsically nonviable in part because it lacks a communitarian theological core. The advantage of her emphasis on asking theological questions is that it highlights precisely how much “theological” work is being done within SBNR conversations. A rich set of ideas surrounding theological topics are current within SBNR, and Mercadante artfully lays them out in the four inner chapters of her book: Transcendence (Chapter 5), Human Nature (Chapter 6), Community (Chapter 7), and Afterlife (Chapter 8). By displaying these dialogues, she not only proves that SBNRs are engaged in theological work—rather than being merely anti-intellectualists—but highlights major zones of tension within the polyvalent field of SBNR discourse: the simultaneous embrace of world-embracing pantheism and world-denying Gnosticism (p. 122), of an indifferent chaos-God and a providential God intimately concerned with our individual destinies (p. 101), and a repudiation of moralism while still making moral judgments (p. 140).

There are valuable insights here that could only have been unearthed precisely by spotlighting theology. This emphasis also produces blind spots. At times, the book risks coming across as a highbrow critique of a popular mode of religious expression. Using a set of highly developed intellectual standards belonging to her own tradition, she presupposes that a theological core is a necessary anchor for a tradition. Just after insisting that religions must be respected for their “unique visions” (238), she asserts that “all of them give us ways to recognize and bond with Ultimacy, even if the Ultimate is conceived differently in each tradition” (p. 246). Here she imports a Protestant frame that sees an authentic commitment to a theological axis as the *sine qua non* of a viable

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tradition—then uses this standard to dismiss SBNR. Rather than taking up a concern with the political, colonial, or racial implications of SBNR dabbling in Asian and Native American traditions, for instance, her critique of this “cut flower culture” is that it is “inauthentic” or that it “trivializes” religion. Ultimately, Mercadante concludes that the lack of theological coherence of the SBNR movement—as well as its tendency to focus on self-formation rather than community generation—is an existential flaw. “[I]f one does try to distrust or eliminate all external sources of authority,” she asks, “how does one avoid the drift into nihilism? If all truth lies within, where do you turn when confused or in doubt?” (p. 237).

My response would be to ask whether the fluid, polymorphic field of theological dialogues within SBNR shows, precisely, that theology is a subordinate—not to say irrelevant—dimension of this “tradition.” Perhaps SBNR is better understood as a “style” than a system. This shift away from demanding theological consistency may be a way of maneuvering out of the tension between preserving authority and permitting legitimate transformation

that Mercadante wrestles with in her prescriptions for the Christian church in her final chapter.

Nonetheless, Mercadante's analysis is indispensable, so long as the presuppositions it brings to bear are kept on the surface. For me, the most fascinating part of the book came in Mercadante's demonstration that SBNRs often leave the traditions of their birth because they feel “honor-bound” to exit when they confront a major discrepancy between their beliefs and the theological milieu within which they were raised. What is this sense of “honor” that attaches to intellectual consistency? What is the relationship between theological frames—as they collide and coalesce—and identity? How are communities made and unmade by the play of discourses? Is an articulate intellectual core necessary for a tradition to flourish? Further exploration along these lines may well shed light on the complex dynamic between theology, community, and what gets called “spirituality” capably charted by this book.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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