

## Spiritual, But Not Religious?

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by Matthew W. Bassford

A few weeks ago, one of the members at Jackson Heights asked me to write about one of those cultural catchphrases, “spiritual but not religious,” hereinafter **SBNR**. I agreed, but I had a few misgivings. To be honest, I wasn’t really sure what it meant. Does it merely mean, “I believe in God, but I don’t feel like going to church,” or is there something more to it?

In an attempt to alleviate my confusion, I Googled the phrase. This did not help. As far as I can tell, the only thing that unites **SBNR’s** is that they aren’t naturalists. They have some sense that observable reality is not all there is. Maybe they’re awed by looking at a redwood grove in California. Maybe they believe that they have some kind of inner potential that they want to unlock.

Regardless, there’s Something, and the definition of Something is not at all consistent from person to person. Such variations exist because **SBNR’s** don’t come together with congregations of like-minded individuals, nor even are particularly concerned whether like-minded individuals exist. That’s the **NR** part. **SBNR’s** find their spiritual experiences in solitude.

This is almost incomprehensibly different from my religious/spiritual experience. I believe in objective truth. I believe that God is. I believe that Christ died, was buried, and was raised on the third day. Everything else flows from that.

By contrast, there is nothing [objective](#) about spirituality to an **SBNR**. There are no truth claims. Redwood Guy is not going to argue with Inner-Potential Girl that his way is better. What’s important is not the truth, but *my* truth, *my* experience.

With no objective truth about God, there can be no objective morality. I believe that I ought to love my neighbor as myself, and that I ought not commit adultery with my neighbor’s wife. Why? I can come up with all sorts of ethical justifications, but fundamentally, I believe those things because God said so. What God says is right is always right, and what God says is wrong is always wrong.

None of that can stand up for an **SBNR**. Nobody has ever managed to come up with an objective system of morality independent from religion because objective morality depends on authority. Otherwise, we are all our own authorities, and what makes your authority any more authoritative than mine?

I think human life is precious; Hitler thought whole races ought to be exterminated. What makes Hitler wrong? My say-so? If the Germans had won World War II, would that have made them right?

I’m not denying that **SBNR’s** can behave morally, any more than that atheists and agnostics can behave morally. At least some people in all three groups view themselves as moral people. The problem is that their morality can have no stronger foundation than *tradition* and *personal preference*. It’s Judges 21:25 again. One also suspects that if your morality is based on preference, it will tend to exhibit a certain flexibility according to the impulses of the moment. I *ought* not commit adultery with my neighbor’s wife, **but** if my neighbor’s wife is especially good-looking. . .

Third, without *objective* truth and *objective* morality, it’s tough to have an *objective* purpose. I want to inherit eternal life. Either I will succeed in that, in which case my life will have been a success, or I will fail, and my life will have been a failure. Even if an atheistic nothingness awaits me, I will be of all people most to be pitied.

I struggle to see how **SBNR’s** can have a

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