Abstract: Spiritual struggles are a distinct problem which have implications for psychological, social, emotional and physical health. They are not unique to religious persons; instead both the religiously unaffiliated (Nones) and those who call themselves “Spiritual but not Religious,” (SBNR) have struggles with existential issues common to all humans, and which can be identified as “spiritual”. Nones are a very diverse group and different types of Nones struggle differently. This qualitative study, based on interviews in North America with over 100 Nones, particularly SBNRs, explains the types of spiritual struggles, with many examples and illustrative quotes. Nones’ key struggles are in the areas of Self and Self-in-Relation. This is a vastly under-researched topic which will only grow in importance, given the rapid and continuing rise of the None population. The topic is of concern to social scientists, but is equally important for psychologists, counselors, medical personnel, chaplains and others in the helping professions given that Nones will come to them for assistance.

Keywords: Nones; spiritual; spiritual struggles; Spiritual but not Religious

1. Introduction

It is contended that all people, whether religious or not, have spiritual struggles (Pargament et al. 2005, 2013). Those who identify spirituality with religion may dispute this. But if one accepts that spirituality encompasses the existential issues every human faces—questions of self-hood, meaning, ultimacy, evil, death, and the like, then the contention holds. Unlike the assumptions of a previous era, we cannot reduce spiritual struggles to a simple “heaven or hell” choice. Neither can we do a contemporary reduction by limiting spirituality simply to well-being, happiness, or mental health, although these may accompany a beneficial spirituality. In the same way, we cannot simply reduce “Nones” to people with no religion (Drescher 2013). There are many varieties of Nones, and it turns out that different types of Nones have different spiritual struggles (Mercadante 2014, 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Peres et al. 2020; Saunders et al. 2020; Vittengl 2018; Weber et al. 2012; Huss 2014).

Nones include secularists, atheists, agnostics, humanists, the never affiliated, the disaffiliated, and even the loosely affiliated. The term “None” can be offensive, since it is identifying someone by a lack, rather than a quality. To be unaffiliated with any religion is often not a conscious choice or decision. It is not a movement or an organized revolution against religion. Instead, the diversity within this group is so great that the major commonality is simply checking “no religion” on a survey or census (Saunders et al. 2020; Woodhead 2017; Pew Forum 2012, 2019).

The most complex type of none is the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). These people define spirituality as personal, heart-felt, and authentic, while claiming religion is external, structured, and non-essential. SBNRs are particularly prevalent in the U.S. and represent at least a third of the non-religious. They are generally neither devoted atheists nor devout believers, instead occupying...
The middle space between these orientations. This makes them an especially intriguing population to consider regarding spiritual struggles (Mercadante 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

The topic of Nones’ spiritual struggles deserves investigation since their visibility and social influence keeps growing. In 1985 Nones made up only about 7% of the American population. (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017). But their numbers have been rising steadily at a rate of 0.5% per year. In fact, more than a quarter of Americans qualify as Nones, with the most increase among young adults (Hout and Fischer 2014; Pew Forum 2015). Today there are more Nones in the U.S. than mainline Protestants and are set to surpass Roman Catholics and Evangelicals (Religious News Service 2019; Jenkins 2019; Monahan and Ahmed 2019). Thus it appears that this trend will continue to grow in the U.S., and other Western countries, for the foreseeable future. The rise of Nones is also a global phenomenon (Houtman and Aupers 2007). However, it is predicted to decline in absolute numbers as a share of the world population because of sheer population growth (Pew Forum 2015). Nevertheless, the presence and influence of Nones in the U.S. will only become more prominent in the coming years.

More needs to be done to sort out the dilemma of how Nones struggle spiritually, especially because all sorts of areas are affected, including psychological, social and physical. In fact, “clear links have been established between various forms of spiritual struggle and indices of distress” (Pargament et al. 2005, p. 255). Therefore, social scientists, psychologists, chaplains, medical personnel, spiritual directors, clergy, and religious people alike, need to better identify and understand the spiritual struggles this rising population may have.

2. Method

The author first considered this topic as the rise of Nones became prominent in the 1990s. At that time, while doing research on the addiction recovery movement, the terms “none” and “spiritual but not religious” were frequently voiced by recovering persons (Mercadante 1996). By closely listening to all types of Nones, both in and outside the recovery movement, the author recognized serious theological concerns, spiritual struggles, and stances. These impressions challenged the stereotypes often heard in common conversation and in religious circles about Nones, particularly SBNRs, as eclectic, shallow, lazy, and self-focused.

The dedicated qualitative research for this project began around 2008 and accelerated in 2010 when the author was awarded the Henry Luce III Fellowship in Theology for “Unfettered Belief, Untethered Practice: Thinking Theologically about ‘Spiritual but not Religious.’” Thanks to this grant, the author was able to have hundreds of informal conversations with Nones throughout North America, using a “convenience” and “snow-ball” sample approach as well as making site visits to such places as yoga studios, retreat centers, meditation centers, alternative health centers and the like. Although more people were interviewed in one large Western and one large Midwestern city—chosen because they were very different regarding religious participation or lack of—the author also interviewed in Canada, Mexico, California and upstate New York.

2.1. Participants

The author chose over one hundred Nones who agreed to talk in-depth about their spiritual beliefs and practices. Most of them also self-identified as SBNR, some were atheists, a few used hybrid designations (such as Christian-Buddhist-Pagan), and some sporadically attended organized religion or alternative spiritual groups. The interview, created by the author, was open-ended and semi-structured, covering basic existential issues such as ultimacy, human nature, community and afterlife. Ninety people were formally interviewed and two focus groups added an additional

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1 All examples and quotes are taken from Nones I have interviewed. The full descriptions, background information and theories can be found in Linda Mercadante, Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
fifteen people. The age-range, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender-orientation, employment, and educational attainments varied widely.

About ten percent of the pool were from the Silent Generation (born 1925–1945) with even numbers of men and women. Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) comprised more than 40% of the interviewees, with more women than men. This demographic was the most enthusiastic to volunteer. Gen X (born 1965–1981) made up about one third of the interviewees, again with more women than men. Millennials (born after 1982) were about ten percent of the total, with equal numbers of men and women. Most interviewees came from a Judeo-Christian heritage with a few from Eastern or Native American/First Nations heritages. The racial minorities who volunteered were largely biracial. Gender orientation included straight, lesbian and gay, but no transgender volunteers. Given that the pool was made up of volunteers, the author was not able to fully control for diversity. Interestingly, however, about ten percent of volunteers were currently or had been involved in addiction recovery groups (Mercadante 2014, 2020).

2.2. Procedures

All interviews were conducted by the author, most in person and in public places, with a few via Skype or email. There were no incentives, payments, or gifts given, but even so, volunteers were eager and grateful to share their views. Interviewees were encouraged to begin by describing their previous religious socialization, if any, and their spiritual journeys. Then they were directed to questions about belief and practice. Interviews and focus groups lasted up to two hours. Interviewees were given much freedom to tell their own stories, but also informed ahead that they would be obliged to include the main questions. A few gave scant responses to some questions, but most interviewees covered all topics enthusiastically, commenting frequently that no one had ever given them a chance to voice their reflections. These interviews were recorded by the author and then professionally transcribed. The author loaded the transcriptions and demographic data into NVivo software. After an overview analysis, she coded this information by key words and phrases, letting themes emerge, finding clusters of linked categories having similar meanings. An effort was made to see if and how age, ethnicity, geographic location, religious background, and other socio-economic data affected the results. Amidst the diversity, interviewees voice surprising agreement in the key area of belief, including what was rejected and what paradigms were proposed as replacements or explanations for existential issues.

This research was overseen by the Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO) Human Subjects Review Committee. Interviewees signed a consent form, gave some demographic information, and were informed that their identities would be kept anonymous in any oral or written presentations. Demographic forms were separated from transcriptions. Interviewees were told about the topics ahead of time and all agreed to talk about them. All names used in the subsequent book and this article are aliases that the author devised approximating interviewees gender, generational and ethnic data. Because of the personal and identifiable nature of these interviews, the Committee does not permit them to circulate and they guaranteed interviewees anonymity. Much of the data can be found in the author’s book Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious (Mercadante 2014).

3. Literature Review and Study Findings

Although my work is interdisciplinary, my field is theology/humanities. A literature review in that field is usually done in context, rather than in a separate section, and interfaces with the results. Thus, what follows is the presentation of the findings from the interviews in the context of the current literature.

Four key themes were covered in the interviews—transcendence/immanence, human nature, community and afterlife—but results clustered around two main areas, Self and Self-in-Relation, with one area (Sin, Evil and Death) surprisingly causing less spiritual struggles than expected.
3.1. The Nones

There is much variety within the population of Nones. Unlike organized religions, Nones do not share a common culture and resources, internal communication, or identity the way a “milieu” would. Rather, Nones represent more of a statistical or “social aggregate.” That is, while there are some cultural similarities, there is not an organized internal communication or shared identity (Stolz 2017). Nor is it simply seculars versus religious persons, for some people shift their category at different times or on different surveys (Hout 2017). All of this impacts the extent and type of spiritual struggles that Nones encounter.

Despite None diversity, scholars have tried various ways to categorize them (Stolz 2017; Saunders et al. 2020). A study based on the U.S. General Social Survey found two distinct groups among Nones, the committed Nones who are consistent in claiming no religion and the inconsistent, that is, those who vary their responses. This latter group can be labeled “liminals,” for they stand on the “threshold; and are marked by ambivalence...committed neither to a particular religion nor to having no religion” (Hout 2017, p. 52). To make a sharp difference between secular and religious can be problematic. Although many Nones consider religion either irrelevant or harmful, some try various spiritualities linked to religious traditions, while others practice a form of “secular religion” (Vliegenthart 2020; Oakes 2015; Von Stuckrad 2013; Schnekloth 2017).

To understand the spiritual struggles of Nones, it is important to briefly consider some reasons why people claim to be non-religious. There are many factors involved in the societal increase in Nones, but the one previously predicted, that is, the total secularization of society, is not it (Brown 2017; Taylor 2007; Hout and Fischer 2014; Swatos and Olsen 2000; Cimino 2007; Von Stuckrad 2013). Instead, religious institutions, although many are declining numerically, continue. The main change, however, is that they are no longer the chief cultural arbiters of belief and practice. Instead, there has been a “subjective turn” in spirituality as people distance themselves from religious doctrines and institutions and value self-expression most highly. Within a pluralistic, consumeristic culture, religion becomes just one option among many (Heelas et al. 2005; Heelas 1996; Hanegraaff 1998; Albanese 2007; Bender 2010; Schmidt 2005; Drury 2004).

Added to this turn away from traditional authorities, there is now a great value placed on teaching children to “think for themselves” or “autonomy” (Hout and Fischer 2014) rather than adhere to any particular set of religious doctrines. I heard this repeatedly in interviews. Gen Xer Lisette Marshall explained: “Spiritual has less ‘you-gottas’ to it than religion . . . . I believe I should be able to question” (Mercadante 2016, p. 165). Mark Sharp, a Midwestern Baby Boomer, said “I don’t really need to go to somebody’s service and have people’s rules” (Mercadante 2014, p. 165). Alexandra Heim, a Millennial interviewee, explained that her father was “very, very dedicated to giving me a diverse platter of choices, which I appreciate a lot.” He told her: “It’s not about what you believe. It’s about what energizes you, which story inspires you” (Mercadante 2014, p. 48). She continues to follow his advice. This widespread tendency has left the self as touchstone of truth (Mercadante 2014, 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Heelas et al. 2005; Hanegraaff 1998).

Many social factors also contribute to the rise in Nones, such as later marriage, late or no childbearing, higher educational attainment, being from a mixed-faith family, being married to a non-religious person and/or acquiring close friends who are Nones (Baker and Smith 2009; Clements 2017). Political reasons for being None can sometimes be key (Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Braunstein and Taylor 2017). In fact, the current sharp political polarization in America is contributing to the growth in Nones. As Hout and Fischer state: “Religious preferences are now as much an outcome of political identification as political identification once was an expression of religious tradition and political mobilization” (Hout and Fischer 2014, p. 444).

A confrontation with cultural diversity and/or a valorizing of it, contributes significantly. Baby Boomer Deborah Gilmore had a non-practicing Protestant father and an Irish Catholic mother. Although the parents did not attend, they sent her and her siblings to Catholic Mass, but Deborah soon began to ask questions that no one could answer. Her mother did not object when she decided to try a
Methodist church instead. Deborah said, “I found a lot of their ideas were beautiful . . . I was very impressed that they actually taught us about other religions . . . rather than saying ‘Other religions are bad’” (Mercadante 2014, p. 41). In college, she took a course in Cultural Anthropology, was taught all religions were simply cultural, and decided to leave it all behind.

Many who come from religious homes become None through deconversion, disaffiliation and/or rebellion (Bengtson et al. 2018; Fazzino 2014). Angela Roman departed from her strict Roman Catholic background at the tender age of 10, refusing any more catechism classes or rituals. She said: “What they were telling me didn’t sound true” (Mercadante 2014, p. 79). But for those who come from non-religious homes, there is often less rebellion and more loyalty to this family “tradition” (Thiessen and Wilkins-Lafamme 2017).

A compelling reason to account for the steady rise in Nones is generational. Grandparents may have been regular religionists, their children less so—although perhaps retaining a “fuzzy fidelity” (Voas 2009)—and the grandchildren raised with only a residue of religion, if that. Both “intergenerational influences” and “cohort trends” (Hout and Fischer 2014; Bengtson et al. 2018; Thiessen and Wilkins-Lafamme 2017; Mercadante 2016) account for the movement toward None-dom. In examining the British data, Woodhead (2017) found that for people raised Christian, there is a 45% chance they will become Nones, while for those raised with no religion there is a 95% chance they will remain none.

In the end, however, for many it may simply seem easier to join the emerging trend than to adhere to previous religious ways. As Woodhead (2017) states:

> Social norms are salient. They have weight and momentum. More human life and behavior has to do with habit than reasoned choice, and however much modern liberals may think they are unique individuals they too generally try to fit in. Once something becomes the norm it becomes the default position—“just what you do”—and you have to opt out rather than opt in (p. 257).

### 3.2. Nones as Spiritual but Not Religious

In the U.S., many Nones self-identify as SBNR. My research finds that often they had some exposure to religion, whether strict or loose. The SBNR identity may be attractive because it allows both continuity and change. It also implicitly says to religious people—who sometimes believe morality only comes from religion—“I am a good person, even if I am not religious.” Given the highly valued quests today for “authenticity,” for finding one’s “true self,” and for self-determination, identifying as SBNR allows one to reject being confined within an orthodoxy that may impede these goals—and yet the individual can still claim they are not simply secular (Mercadante 2014).

In fact, since SBNRs often have practices normally considered “religious,” they may properly be called “liminals.” They may pray or read scriptures, occasionally attend religious services, or experiment with non-Western faiths. A few add on a second religious identity, becoming “spiritually bilingual.” (Homrighausen 2015; Mercadante 2017). They may believe without belonging (Davie 1994) or retain a “churchless faith” (Gerhardt 2018). They may take part in alternative spiritual communities, feeling free to participate on an “as-needed” basis, and/or changing groups at will. Often stereotyped as “salad bar spiritualists,” shallow or eclectic, they nevertheless do reflect on existential issues and often have spiritual struggles connected to theological dilemmas (Mercadante 2014, 2016, 2018a, 2018b).

In fact, I found belief to be the most common explanation SBNRs gave for being None. Unlike other research (Hout and Fischer 2014; Davie 1994), I did not find that traditional beliefs—such as in God and afterlife—remained among them. Instead there was a widespread rejection of a social narrative built around Christian principles such as sin, heaven/hell, exclusivism, a personal God, and individual salvation. This held whether they had been personally exposed to these ideas or not. The word “God” was mostly spurned by all, and exclusivism was especially offensive to them (Mercadante 2014, 2018a, 2018b).
As Deborah Wright, a young interviewee, said: “It almost makes my skin crawl to narrow it down
to Christianity and think that is the . . . only way” (Mercadante 2014, p. 186). Baby Boomer SBNR
David Kaplan said that even as a child “There were three words . . . I just hated . . . the word ‘wrong,’
the word ‘sin,’ and the word ‘Christ’” (Mercadante 2014, p. 79). Among the interviewees it was not
always clear whether intellectual disagreements were the reason for becoming religiously unaffiliated
or were used as justification for a non-religious identity. Even so, a set of principles around innate
human goodness, an internal “divinity,” afterlife and an impersonal justice principle or “karma” were
widely held and claimed to be integral to all religions. James Wolfe, a Baby Boomer, explained it this
way: “The differences don’t seem to be in the basic beliefs. The differences are in the outer part . . . A lot
of them are cultural. But if you look at the core beliefs, a lot of them are the same” (Mercadante 2014,
p. 187).

A significant percentage of the SBNRs I met had participated in some form of addiction recovery
group. In this, they had either been atheists turned “spiritual”—even accepting a Higher Power—or
they had come from a religious background but found new ways to make the God-concept relatable,
acceptable, non-punitive, and beneficial. For both types, this experience usually led them away from
organized religion and toward an SBNR identity (Mercadante 1996, 2014, 2020).

Millennial Kit Partin had become spiritual in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), but felt compelled to
distance himself from a religious perspective: “I do believe in a higher power. I don’t call it God. I
don’t call it Jesus Christ or anything like that” (Mercadante 2014, p. 175). Mark Sage, a Gen Xer and
recovering person, had a very mixed exposure to religion and ended up just being confused. Prior to
AA, “Any time the word God would come up, I would throw up my little defenses . . . [and] walk
away.” But now, after being in recovery, he said: “It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks that God is.
It matters what I think . . . My God should complete me” (Mercadante 2014, p. 115).

Other scholars have also found a close connection between addiction recovery groups and the
None and/or SBNR identity (Hahn 2019; Dossett and Metcalf-White 2020; Tonigan et al. 2002; McClure
and Wilkinson 2020). The addiction recovery model can be attractive because it presents a middle
road between None-dom and a religion-like spirituality, including a type of transcendence, community
support, an identity, and a set spiritual path (Mercadante 1996). Perhaps because of this, I found less
spiritual struggle among committed group members (Mercadante 1996, 2014, 2020).

3.3. Spiritual Struggles

Spiritual struggles are a distinct kind of problem, are not unusual, and should not simply be
identified as psychopathological, deficient brain chemistry, faulty upbringing or simply the result
of life stressors. One study defines religious and/or spiritual struggles as “tensions, strains, and conflicts
with respect to sacred matters” (Pargament and Exline Forthcoming). The definition of what is sacred
may vary, but everyone has an “orienting framework” that orders the search for “significant purpose
and meaning” in life, in other words, “destinations and pathways” that define one’s life journey. When
that “orienting structure” is challenged by life events, spiritual struggles happen (Pargament et al.
2005).

To those tutored in the world’s major religions, spiritual struggles are nothing new. There are
stories of great saints who struggled, stories often told so believers do not expect to be immune.
One does not need to be a saint to experience “the dark night of the soul,” the felt absence of God,
disillusionment with one’s tradition, or doubts about the veracity of one’s faith. These difficult
experiences may lead a previously religious person to embrace a None identity and/or forswear
organized religion. On the other hand, these struggles can instead lead to spiritual growth and,
perhaps, a new spiritual or religious identity (Mercadante 2014).

Those who have disaffiliated—whether the break was gradual, severe, or fairly untraumatic—may
reason they have escaped spiritual struggles, but often encounter them anyway. The transition can be
difficult and prompts these struggles. Community and family support may be withdrawn. Self-identity
can feel radically altered. Beliefs must be sorted, challenged, or changed. And experimentation with
new spiritual practices and ideas can cause internal conflict (Mercadante 2014). For SBNRs who continue to seek spiritual fulfillment, this is particularly the case if they are burdened by negative emotions, such as fear, distrust and anxiety, regarding the divine and religion in general (Szczesniak et al. 2020; Vittengl 2018; Pearce and Koenig 2016; Drescher 2013; Oakes 2015). Even those raised non-religious can have spiritual struggles—although they may fail to identify them as such. Different problems may emerge—such as an overwhelming array of life-meanings, group identities, beliefs about such things as afterlife, and/or ways to transcend the self (Mercadante 2014).

Therefore, while many have overthrown some spiritual struggles connected to organized religion—especially those related to exclusivism and heaven/hell—or pride themselves on never having endured them, other struggles often come in the back door. Whether these struggles originate in psychological problems or cause them is often unclear (Granqvist et al. 2014; Buxant 2010; King et al. 2013; Farias et al. 2012). However, many Nones continue to struggle long after their identity as non-religious is secured. For anyone, these spiritual struggles can lead to confusion, despair, and negative coping such as addiction, workaholism, or depression. Outside help is often needed, but it can be hard to find help that deals specifically with spiritual struggles (Mercadante 2014; Pargament and Exline Forthcoming).

Although there are many areas where spiritual struggles may arise (Pargament et al. 2005; Weber et al. 2012), I found that the Nones I interviewed—particularly SBNRs—had particular spiritual struggles in two main categories: Self and Self-in-Relation. In a third area where one might expect spiritual difficulties—“sin” (human dysfunction), evil and death—I actually found less struggle (Mercadante 1996, 2014, 2020).

3.4. Self

For many Nones, a premier goal is discovering one’s “true self” and then living “authentically” by being true to that self. In other words, “you be you.” Toward that end, most Nones I have met and continue to meet insist that no external authority has the right to define them or tell them how to live (Mercadante 2014, 2016). As Woodhead (2017) explains, looking at British data, Nones “seem to be unified by an ethical stance which is that every person... should be free to decide how best to live his or her life even if it involves bad choices.”

Unlike religions such as Christianity which defines the self as being “made in the image of God”—and offers an ultimate goal such as union with God plus associated behavioral principles—there is often no essential external referent for Nones. Selves are ‘sui generis’ and responsible for both discovering and crafting who that self is (Heelas 1996; Mercadante 2014). While this is freeing in opposition to religious strictures which can put parameters around legitimate selfhood, this over-arching principle can cause spiritual struggle (Mercadante 2014).

One explanation, offered by Taylor (2007), is that most people now live in the “immanent frame.” As “buffered selves” they are closed off from the transcendent. For them, many of the claims of religion are simply unbelievable. Some, especially those with previous religious socialization, may make theological adjustments, using transitional concepts such as “the Universe” instead of God, karma instead of sin, reincarnation instead of heaven. Even so, for many this approach can cause internal conflict as new assumptions and beliefs clash with or contradict older ones (Mercadante 2014, 2016, 2018a, 2018b).

Even though non-religious, some Nones feel they are looking for the “spark of the divine” within (Heelas 1996; Albanese 2007; Bender 2010; Mercadante 2014). Others feel they must ultimately discover their own truth deep inside, a truth which is true for them but not necessarily for others (Hanegraaff 1998; Fuller 2001; Heelas et al. 2005; Albanese 2007; Schmidt 2005; Mercadante 2014). The difficulty is that while Nones and particularly SBNRs may consult a variety of sources, in the end they often must rely on choice and personal preference. This can predict either a shortage of “believable” resources, or an overwhelming amount of diverse and often contradictory options when dealing with existential life issues (Mercadante 2014, 2018a; Heelas 1996; Bender 2010). In this struggle, some may consciously
question or reject the religious principles they were raised on. And others with a non-religious
background may have a suspicion of religious answers in general (Mercadante 2014). While many
Nones use the resources of professionals, self-help groups, and books to aid them in the task of
self-making, this, too, can cause struggles as the various forms of advice, standards and beliefs differ
(Mercadante 2014, 2016; Bender 2010; Heelas 1996).

Gen Xer Jenny Babcock had no religious background but found an introduction to spirituality
through 12-Step groups, as well as in psychotherapy. However, this mix proved upsetting because she
and her friends found that: “Our lives were almost always about what was wrong with us, and how
we were going to make it better, so a lot of our spirituality was around figuring [that] out” (Mercadante
2014, p. 56). When Millennial SBNR Kimberley Takahashi tried using the multitude of resources in
the self-help world, she felt frustrated. In the many books she read, she found that: “The author says
‘I am not your teacher. Do not follow’ . . . It’s a little confusing because . . . you’re supposed to kind of
discover it on your own” (Mercadante 2014, p. 56).

But the self is not always a trusted determiner, which presents an even deeper dilemma. Gen
Xer Jason Van Buren had a minimalist Protestant religious background. After his parents divorced,
he began searching on his own and joined a conservative church. But “it all came kind of crashing
one day.” Full of enthusiasm he went forward for a baptism in the Holy Spirit. He was surprised that
he “felt nothing” although he acted like he did. Later he began wondering why he faked it and how
many others also did. Jason left religion and moved on to alternative spiritualities, but his self-doubt
continued. “I want to make sure . . . I’m not just filling my own boat up with my own wants and
needs. I have to make sure it’s a legitimate search.” He worries he will never be able to “choose a path”
(Mercadante 2014, pp. 61–62).

While there are many critical and complex theological and philosophical issues related to the
idea of self, the above examples suggest some of the spiritual struggles Nones have as they try to
resolve the core contemporary problems of determining the authentic “true self,” the “spark within,”
and “thinking for yourself.”

3.5. Self-in-Relation

Many Nones report feeling isolated, alienated, or marginalized, especially in a country which
still considers religion important (Sedlar et al. 2018; Weber et al. 2012). This causes spiritual struggles
since it is difficult to know one’s place in relation to others, whether at the family level, in relation to
the larger society, or in relationship to some kind of ultimacy. Some Nones feel judged or pitied by
their family of origin or close friends since they no longer consider themselves either “believers” or
“belongers.” Some pretend to still belong (Mackey et al. 2020; Mercadante 2014). Others are honest
about their new status as None, with mixed reactions from others. And some purposely distance
themselves out of anger or integrity (Mercadante 2014).

Baby Boomer Jack Acker was someone who tried to pretend. Raised among conservative
Midwestern Christians, he did his best to fit in, even though “I never had that chill, that overwhelming
emotion” that he observed in others at church. Nevertheless, as a teenager, at his mother’s prompting,
he responded to an altar call. “That made her feel good, that I went up, even though it meant nothing
[to me]” (Mercadante 2014, p. 39). He always wondered why he did not have what others seemed to.
Now, although his mother is gone, he continues to hide his None status from his buddies at the rural
diner he frequents. He never lets on that he regularly practices past-life regression therapy, affirmations,
and other alternative spiritual techniques. He continues to feel responsible and inadequate since he
does not have the success other SBNRs seem to have. He figures he is “sending mixed messages to
the universe . . . . Any time you send conflicting messages, you are going to get conflicting results”
(Mercadante 2014, p. 148).

Many Nones, satisfied with transitioning out of Western religion, still struggle with finding a place
in the wider world. Some, particularly SBNRs, try to resolve this by finding a new spiritual home, but
often retain the feeling of alienation. Carole Bradford, a Silent Generation seeker with only a minimal
religions background, tried all sorts of religious options as an adult. After working her way through Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, never completely feeling like she fit in, she tried being part of a large, prominent Buddhist community. Again, she was disappointed. One day, the revered lama paid a visit to this sangha and Carole attended. “The shrine room was just filled with people . . . . [The lama] was seated on his throne . . . . [but] when . . . everybody started kissing his ring, I thought: ‘This is it. I’ve done this before.’” She was not ready to accept “the Roman Catholic church of Buddhism” (Mercadante 2014, p. 63). After that, Carole largely gave up her seeking and resigned herself to being a None.

Finally, for many Nones, there may be lingering struggles as they consider their relationship to the divine, to the transcendent, or to something larger than themselves. Many resolve this by a form of “horizontal transcendence” (Mercadante 2014), that is, by feeling a part of humanity, the cosmos, or some kind of immanent universal energy source. But some, especially those with a religious background, retain a lingering God concept—yet they often feel alienated from a divinity they consider distant, capricious and/or untrustworthy. Justin Cooper, a Millennial raised in mainstream Protestantism, had experienced the death of many close friends during his childhood so he chose to cut himself off from this God. “I just felt like he [God] needed to kinda leave me alone because he was hurting me” (Mercadante 2014, p. 54).

For others, giving up the idea of a personal interventionist God is difficult, even though budding Nones often hear that such a belief is childish, immature, or outdated. Patty Hoffman is a good example. A former seeker who tried Methodism and Unitarianism, she finally joined a Buddhist sangha. Although she tries hard to be a successful Buddhist, she still struggles spiritually with the loss of a God-figure. “That was my first big disappointment. [Losing the idea of] something bigger than me that would grant wishes if I was good enough.” She resigned herself to the teaching that spiritual growth requires multiple disappointments, but still was having great difficulty giving up the idea of a personal God. She said she “sort of buy(s)” into the idea that no one is “out there manipulating the universe,” but “at the same time my experience is that there are things that evolve that look like some manipulation is taking place” (Mercadante 2014, p. 103). Her spiritual struggle, essentially a wrestling with conflicting theological ideas of transcendence, continues to trouble Patty, as it did many others I interviewed (Mercadante 2014).

These are just some examples of spiritual struggles that Nones, in particular SBNRs, have as they transition out of former beliefs and relationships. I found the struggle more intense for those raised religiously. This may change, however, as less people experience that kind of background. Nevertheless, I suggest that struggles with selfhood will likely remain for Nones since many people find meaning and purpose in an identity held in common with others. This becomes especially difficult for both Nones and SBNRs, many of whom have a general distrust of institutions and thus find it hard to commit long-term to a spiritual home. Even if society becomes less religious, SBNRs may continue to struggle as those around them consign their spiritual quest to simply one lifestyle among many, rather than a moral exemplar.

3.6. Sin, Evil and Death

A religious person might expect Nones would struggle with the perpetual human dilemma of personal sin/dysfunction, systemic evil, death, and afterlife. I did not find very much of this among the SBNRs I interviewed. Virtually every SBNR I met rejected the Christian idea of sin, especially “original sin.” One hundred percent of the interviewees said, when I asked them their view of human nature: “Everyone is born good.” They (mis)understood the terms “original sin” to mean everyone is born bad and “sin” meaning everyone is responsible for it. They saw these ideas as unfair, denying human goodness, and portraying a punishing God. A few used the word “evil” but very cautiously, not wanting to label or make value judgements. Instead, they opted for the idea of human dysfunction as idiosyncratic, a problem of psychology, biology, or upbringing. As a result—and perhaps as a
reaction against religious views they considered harsh—many even stayed away from the terms “good” and “bad” (Mercadante 2014).

Gail Asher, a Baby Boomer who worked as a church secretary but did not attend, said “It’s not good, it’s not bad. People just do things that are not beneficial for everyone they are with” (Mercadante 2014, p. 137). Another explained: “Our experiences shape us and some end up on a path that is destructive . . . Is that evil? I don’t like to think of it that way” (Mercadante 2014, p. 139). Many instead relied on the idea of “karma,” an impersonal justice system which would make sure “you get what you pay for.” Daniel Nimitz, now involved in a Spiritualist church, explained that everyone has karma to work out in successive lives. “That’s one of the reasons why it’s really important to live the best you can so you don’t have to repeat it too much” (Mercadante 2014, p. 210). Alexandra Heim explained it this way: “A lot of people think they are victims of their situation, but you draw to yourself that which you are most like.” (Mercadante 2014, p.149).

As for what happens after death, again I did not find too many who struggled greatly. This is a core issue for Christians, however, as both theodicy (the quandary of a good and powerful God, yet the reality of evil) and afterlife prove frequent areas for spiritual struggle. But once SBNRs gave up the ideas of a personal God, the reality of heaven/hell, and the need for “salvation,” these potential spiritual struggles minimized.

The idea of reincarnation—very attractive to most of my interviewees—solved many potential struggles with afterlife. They claimed a very American version of reincarnation, however, where each person can expect to endlessly progress into better and better lives, with no going backwards nor final destination or “promised land.” They insisted this is achieved through “being a good person” and/or obeying the laws of karma. Carole Bradford, raised non-religious by parents fleeing their conservative religious background, said “it was such a relief to realize I didn’t have to do it all in one life . . . It’s a fairer system because I didn’t like the idea of anyone going to hell” (Mercadante 2014, p. 209).

3.7. Spiritual Growth

Just as with religious people who work through their spiritual struggles, Nones may do the same. However, their journey may be very different, less understood, and in need of new interventions (Saunders et al. 2020; Pearce and Koenig 2016). Unlike religion, in the None world there is no tried-and-tested roadmap nor recommended outcome. While Nones often feel less bound to external constraints, they have no common tradition, stable community, or universally accepted practices to aid them through spiritual difficulties. In fact, at this early stage in the research on Nones’ spiritual struggles, it is unclear what growth entails. Religious people would say there can be no spiritual growth without God or transcendence. Nones, on the other hand, may largely move away from religion/spirituality and insist that the reduced tension itself is spiritual growth. Others might choose a new path, even a somewhat religious one, and find growth. This dilemma will likely trouble the helping professions for some time as more and more Nones come to them for help in unraveling their spiritual struggles (Pargament et al. 2005; Pargament and Exline Forthcoming).

Thus, even though their numbers are growing, Nones still have issues to face, such as marginalization, prejudice, and often dramatic changes in support or belief. Existential issues in particular are hard to resolve. Psychological coping strategies may work for some problems (Szczesniak et al. 2020), but it may be hard to distinguish genuine spiritual growth from psychological coping. Particularly in the case of theological dilemmas—such as an explanation of evil or the nature of ultimacy—I have found that Nones (and religious people) often need a more dedicated and coherent approach. Less complicated approaches such as avoidance, distraction or substitution do not always deliver a person to a satisfactory and cogent spiritual resting place. Still, many Nones insist that they come out of their various spiritual struggles feeling freer and with more internal integrity (Mercadante 2014).

A member of the Silent Generation, William Willard had been raised a devout Anabaptist, a “PK” (preacher’s kid) and a loyal church member into adulthood. But through a liberalizing process where
he went to less and less strict churches, he came out the other end proud to be a None. Although he has maintained mostly cordial relations with his extended and devoutly Christian family, he knows they feel he is “lost.” But he is no longer worried about it. As the interview ended, he pointed to their houses up the road and said with a sly smile and satisfied chuckle: “I’m an utter disappointment to them.” (Mercadante 2014, p. 38).

Millennial Justin Cooper has no resentments about being raised Methodist and, after struggling with his religious doubts, still feels he fits in well with his family. Although honest about his divergent spiritual ideas, he stays part of the group. At mealtime prayer “I sit there and … kind of hold my hands … to try to make them feel good, you know.” He also goes to church with them on holidays because: “My mother wants us all to be there as a family” (Mercadante 2014, p. 55).

Some resolve their dilemma and turn the tables by “demoralizing religion” (Sumerau and Cragun 2016). Penny Watson, a Baby Boomer seeker, echoed some others when she said: “There has been an awful lot of evil done in the … name of religion and playing on this desire of people to be saved … There have been a lot of movements to wipe out people who have the wrong beliefs … There have been too many preachers … who have used people for their own power” (Mercadante 2014, p. 164).

Along with this, many SBNRs may valorize their status, seeing themselves as independent, open-minded, progressive, and tolerant. In other words, they purposely identify as the opposite of organized religion which they define as narrow-minded, intolerant, and old-fashioned. Others have created an identity as “cultural omnivores” (McClure 2017). As Angela Roman said: “I’m supposed to be … more of a free spirit, kind of walk in all kinds of spiritual circles yet not necessarily become one of them” (Mercadante 2014, p. 165). Of course, the idea that she is “supposed” to be this way is very intriguing given she claims no external authority.

Sometimes even spiritual struggles in the complex area of transcendence can lead to resolution. Many SBNR women reject the idea of God because it is portrayed as male. Only a few substitute a female God figure to reconcile this dilemma. Instead, many felt freer by getting rid of the God idea entirely. Amy Legrand, a Gen Xer raised conservative Christian, felt proud of having discarded many of the theological ideas she was taught. She now understands a transcendent divinity as a “metaphysical non-embodied entity beyond definition” (Mercadante 2014, p. 98).

Some SBNRs replace the word God with “Universe,” seeing it as a benign energy source which is available on an as-needed basis. Even so, for many this substitution often has touches of intervention and guidance leaking back in. Connie Buchholz, raised by parents who fled their religious upbringing, talks about a “universal presence” that is “always there” and it is her duty to “tap into that” (Mercadante 2014, p. 106).

In the end, some research shows that both committed atheists and devout religionists often have fewer spiritual struggles or at least struggle in areas different from each other (Sedlar et al. 2018; Weber et al. 2012; Newport et al. 2012; Vittengl 2018). In my research with SBNRS, I found them particularly struggling in relation to self-identity and self-transcendence. Even so, I meet many Nones who are making determined efforts to overcome their spiritual struggles. Whether the above approaches are actual spiritual growth or simply coping is a judgement call—but I did find many who had made peace with their transition into None-dom (Mercadante 2014).

4. Going Forward

The spiritual struggles of the non-religious is a vastly under-researched topic. However, it is one which will increasingly impact not only the psychological, clinical and social science professions, but society as a whole. It represents a sea-change in how U.S. citizens view themselves, their roles, their place in society and how they will understand and carry out their duties. It will influence child-rearing, charity, culture, and the common good. Whether they will see the “common good” as primarily a group mission, or self-healing/identity as the priority remains to be seen. In an age when many crises exist that need unified action, such as climate change, it is unclear how the non-religious—who do care about such things—will respond and prioritize their actions.
In all this, it is essential to take their spiritual struggles seriously. While Nones can overcome spiritual struggles, many continue to have them. All kinds of Nones may experience marginalization or alienation in a country that still values religion. For those raised religiously, many of the struggles are often theological, especially in the areas of self and self-in-relation. Rather than their disaffiliation being caused by abuse or dashed expectations, I found the majority of long-lasting dilemmas are with beliefs that they need to reconcile. For the disaffiliated, as well as those without religious backgrounds, Nones show significant struggles with alienation, over-choice, hesitation to commit, the trustworthiness of authorities, and issues of self-transcendence. For critical thinkers of any background, the clash between the different alternative spiritualities they may try as they grapple with common existential issues can become a serious spiritual struggle in itself.

Spiritual struggles are crucial to understand and work through because lack of resolution can lead to negative coping such as addiction, depression, anxiety, etc. Research suggests that those with a clear sense of meaning—whether that comes from committed religion or committed atheism—have better mental health (Pargament et al. 2005; Weber et al. 2012; King et al. 2013; Sedlar et al. 2018; Peres et al. 2020; Ibrahim and Whitley 2020). Opinion diverges on the mental health of SBNRs (Farias et al. 2012; Saunders et al. 2020; Granqvist et al. 2014). But after spending much time with them, I consider SBNRs courageous in trying to tackle important theological dilemmas and retain or form a spiritual identity.

As society changes and religion becomes increasingly seen as irrelevant or simply one lifestyle among many, perhaps the felt problems of marginalization and alienation among Nones will diminish. On the other hand, given our increasingly polarized society, more conflict may result as the Nones and the religious confront each other at the societal table of meaning-making (Schnekloth 2017; Wilkins-LaFlamme 2016).

In looking at the social consequences of all this, it may be that religion will dwindle into little more than an esoteric life-style choice. According to experts, in some countries, religion is actually en route to almost becoming extinct (Palmer 2011). If so, other forms of “social capital” will have to be developed since historically religion has provided not just personal support and group identity, but charitable outreach and the creation of many types of social service.

In the U.S., however, it is unlikely that the None population will crowd out all religion (Pew Forum 2015). Immigration to the U.S. supplies new religious cohorts, they traditionally bear more children, and try to pass on their culture. In contrast, the minimalist religious or spiritual socialization of offspring, accompanied by the low fertility rate of Nones, puts a limit on Nones achieving majority status. (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017). And sometimes, hard times drive people back to sources of comfort and explanation once abandoned or unused.

As for the SBNR choice, it may be simply a waystation on the way to None-dom. It works by justifying one’s moral and spiritual rectitude in a culture with a strong religious heritage and a continuing—even if diminishing—presence. But even if there is some amount of residual belief, I contend it cannot remain intact without intentional religious education, dedicated spiritual practice, informed and frank professions of faith, community support, and communal religious practice.

In addition, the distrust of institutions, lack of central organization, or common set of sources among SBNRs, make it unlikely that they will form a new religion or even become the dominant group within Nones. Though they may model various forms of spirituality, SBNR parents generally do not give their children concerted or specific spiritual formation. Many SBNR interviewees explained, often proudly, that they purposely do not give their children a clear religious identification, often only model a loose set of practices, and provide little structured religious education. The reigning ethos is one of choice. Many echoed the remarks of this Baby Boomer parent: “I'm not going to force them to go to church like I had to. I am giving them the freedom to make their own choices.” In addition,

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2 Although not yet clear for the U.S., a team of mathematicians instead predict that religion will all but vanish in nine countries, including Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland and Switzerland, Jason Palmer, BBC News, 22 March 2011. https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-12881197. Accessed 27 June 2020.
parents fleeing a religious past or gradually dropping it as irrelevant or too difficult, may inoculate their children against turning to religion to settle spiritual struggles.

Even so, struggles with the existential issues that all humans face will continue. Nones may experience them differently, define them as primarily psychological or biological, or dismiss them as a residue of the past. But many may instead recognize them for the spiritual struggles they genuinely are and seek appropriate resources that will lead toward resolution and growth. Increasingly, those in the helping professions will encounter spiritual struggles in their clients. With the rise in Nones, the determined efforts of SBNRs, and the proliferation of multiple spiritual pathways, the task may seem daunting. The recognized fact that psychologists often have less religious affiliation and knowledge than the general public presents an additional dilemma (Pargament et al. 2005). It may be unrealistic to require practitioners to move into areas outside their comfort zone and training. While practitioners would likely profit from additional education, they might especially benefit from the accompanying support of trained religious studies scholars, theologians, philosophers, chaplains, and clergy.

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