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Faith 2.0: What's in It for You?

While modern spirituality can smack of superficiality and “spa-ishness,” the cultural forces urging us to create made-to-measure belief systems are anything but frivolous. Katherine Gougeon explains.

Devina Kaur always had trouble falling into step with her religion. Raised in a Sikh community near Bangladesh, Kaur was pressured by her extended family to behave and dress in a way that was at odds with the less conservative values her parents were instilling. “My mom and dad preached tolerance of differences, but my aunts always felt I was too loud, too fat and too ambitious,” she recalls. When she moved to Montreal for university in her early 20s, loneliness and the search for community prompted her to embrace her faith with zeal and exuberance—which also backfired. “I was judged for my devout practices and appearance by not only the Canadians I was trying to fit in with but also my immediate family, who branded me an extremist,” she says.

Six months of backpacking and volunteering across India, one failed traditional marriage and a career in investment banking later, Kaur, now 40, has come full circle. She describes her current belief system as a mix-and-match approach that embodies ideas and practices from different faiths. “I’ve rejected elements that reflect our humanly flawed interpretation of religion, like hypocrisy, labels and judgment, and held onto values like community, equality and social justice,” says Kaur, who left her financial career to become a dog walker and launch Sexy Brilliant, a movement dedicated to empowering women and LGBTQs in dating and life.

While Kaur’s religious journey is anything but typical, her pursuit of made-to-measure spirituality is right on trend. A 2017 Angus Reid Institute study found that while only 21 per cent of Canadians consider themselves religiously committed, a full 60 per cent of Canadian adults claim some personal connection to God, faith and religiosity in their lives. The self-styled

approach to faith has become so prevalent, it even has its own moniker: spiritual but not religious (SBNR).

According to Dr. Siobhan Chandler, a Victoria-based sociologist of religion, being “spiritual but not religious” allows you to sidestep the negative assumptions that organized religions are dull and out of touch, incite fear and mistreat women and minorities. Over the past five years, the SBNR movement has reached critical mass. The term encompasses not only the mind-body-spirit set (think Zoë Kravitz’s luminous, bohemian, yoga-practising character in *Big Little Lies*) but also anyone who believes that spiritual growth can be furthered outside the confines of organized religion. At the Toronto Spiritual Growth Meetup Group (membership: 3,500+), for example, seekers gather to contemplate life’s big questions and pursue personal growth through meditation, inspirational readings and group sharing. In the parlance of SBNR, it’s all God.

While its very lack of definition and boundaries can give spirituality a tinge of superficiality and “spa-ishness,” Chandler contends that the cultural forces behind the movement are anything but fleeting or frivolous. “SBNR is driven by individualism, itself a product of an educated, socially progressive society that places a high value on freedom and choice,” she says.

Although SBNRs are sometimes thought of as spiritual dilettantes who cobble together a belief system as one would a Tumblr blog or a dinner-party menu, Chandler has interviewed enough of them to notice a pattern: a belief in the interconnectedness of all people and things and the primary objective of finding God from within. Add advanced communication technologies and social media to the mix (which eliminate the need to be connected by bricks-and-mortar institutions) and it’s easy to see how the spiritually curious can go about forging their own path. »

When Charlie Ambler, now 25, started Daily Zen in 2008 to share quotes relating to his interest in meditation practice and Eastern philosophy, Twitter had just started and seemed like a clever outlet for the aphoristic wisdom found in various spiritual texts. When his following swelled to 300,000 and he started receiving emails about how his posts encouraged people through difficult times, Ambler took it as a sign. “My generation—raised in hip, ironic detachment and celebrity culture—was looking for authenticity, discipline and depth,” he says.

Ambler is wary of using internet spirituality as a substitute for reading books, meditating and participating in a community, regardless of its effectiveness in delivering spiritual ideas to a secular, modern audience. “The monkey brain loves instant gratification,” he says. “A lot of people use online spirituality to scratch their itch for fake authenticity, but they act poorly toward others. Spirituality is something that happens in real life.”

Limitations and all, the internet has added new tentacles to the spiritual industry. Anyone wishing to navigate their spiritual path or

keep up with the latest trends is but a Google search away from retreats, spiritual fashion and mala beads, downloadable mantras and meditations. Whetted by a billion-dollar industry, spiritual curiosity can get expensive. Which invites the question: What exactly are you paying for?

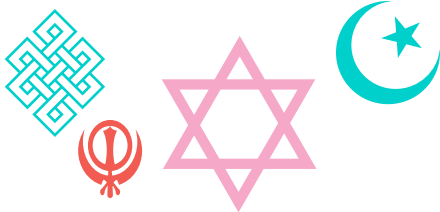
Robert Ohotto, a Colorado-based intuitive life strategist who charges \$950 per hour, advises clients from around the world on everything from ridding

their lives of emotional vampires to timing the sale of their software companies. Although he sees nothing inherently wrong with spending (or making) money on spirituality, he takes issue with practices and practitioners designed to keep seekers on a “hamster wheel” of wants and needs. “You can wear Spiritual Gangster clothing, work on your yoga poses, go vegetarian and meditate constantly, but unless you deal with your issues and emotional baggage, spirituality is the road to enlightenment that leads nowhere,” says Ohotto, who helps clients reach a “pragmatic zone” where feeling “good enough” and “worthy” triggers higher-order spiritual values like humility, kindness and service.

While Ohotto says it’s nice to think of spirituality as “the air mask in the airplane”—something you do for yourself first so you can help others—he doesn’t think the analogy holds up in real life. “Spirituality can be a very narcissistic thing,” he observes. “People get caught up in retrieving the treasure, but they neglect to bring it back to the tribe.”

Reverend Lillian Daniel, a Liberal Protestant minister in Dubuque, Iowa, and bestselling author of *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don’t Belong To* and *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough*, goes so far as to question the point of pursuing a spiritual life on one’s own. “Sometimes our best thinking can only get us so far, especially since any God we create will likely agree with our point of view on everything,” she says. For Daniel, a community of worship—a place where people challenge you, annoy you, ask hard questions and need things from you—is where the religious rubber meets the road. “Religious tradition should be like sandpaper against a culture that is constantly asking ‘How can we meet your needs?’ It should require something of you. Any idiot can find God in a sunset. Finding God in the woman sitting next to you whose baby cries during the entire sermon takes grit,” she says. »

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SPIRITUAL HABITS FOR SECULAR PEOPLE

Whether you are secular, religious or somewhere in between, these three spiritually minded practices are worth attempting—or at least contemplating.



VOLUNTARY DISCOMFORT: Straight out of Stoic philosophy, this practice involves intentionally putting hardship in your path and conditioning yourself to withstand it until it feels like nothing. By training yourself to function, even thrive, in adversity, you’ll be ready for life’s challenges. Even simple deprivations—cold showers, skipping a meal or walking in bad weather—can help build inner strength and character.

CHOICE-ISM: This term was coined by American entrepreneur and venture capitalist James Altucher after he decided to restrict his earthly belongings to a carry-on bag of 15 items. While a little extreme for most, his underlying concept—shifting your focus from accumulating stuff to accumulating experiences—is worth pondering. If you could keep only 15 possessions, what would they be?

NON-ATTACHMENT: Rooted in Buddhism, this practice encourages you to set and pursue your goals while completely letting go of your attachment to whether or not you succeed. The idea here is to free yourself from expectation and fully embrace the moment (and the task at hand) without being owned or controlled by the outcome. Like the T-shirt says, “All we have is now.” —K.G.

Lisa Harding*, a Montreal-based communications consultant and lapsed Catholic, started attending services at The River's Edge Community Church eight years ago. Coming off a long-term abusive relationship, she was drawn to the church's casual vibe—upbeat music and plush, comfy chairs versus spartan pews and an emphasis on meeting the practical, real-life needs of parishioners. Since discovering The River's Edge, which bills itself as “deeply spiritual yet irreligious,” Harding has attended sermons on improving one's relationships and using faith as a springboard into a new career as well as financial management and consumerism. “Instead of going to therapy and talking for an hour, you hear inspiring ideas you can implement in your own life,” she says. “Instead of getting a life coach, you get a community.”

While Daniel thinks the idea of parishioners working on their stuff together is a great thing, she questions whether the “non-denominational” approach is the future for religion. “Here in the United States, they're building churches to look like converted warehouses, the idea being ‘Hey, look at this great hipster-y place we've just stumbled upon. Let's have coffee,’” she says. What's missing in all this intimacy, she maintains, is the tension of being part of something that is more majestic, older and bigger than you.

Like Ambler, who intuited that today's millennials may be in the market for something more spiritually rigorous, Daniel has noticed that many of the young

people who walk through her doors are the product of baby boomers and were never exposed to any religion. “They have experienced the self-centred culture that says they're wonderful and everyone should meet their needs, but they're skeptical because they're not notably happier than previous generations,” she observes.

It's probably no coincidence that baby boomers, the original “me” generation, created the most loosely defined spiritual revolution of all time: the New Age movement of the '70s and '80s. What started as a rejection of the materialism and consumerism of the Bush/Reagan era quickly became a magnet for seekers of all stripes—astrologists, pagans and occultists included. By the early '90s, the movement had collapsed under the weight of its own vagueness.

This is why Daniel is a big fan of specificity. “The congregations with the most vitality have a strong sense of what they have to offer and are constantly explaining what they do and why it matters,” she says. For her part, Chandler believes that spiritual organizations that offer charismatic leadership and the “social proof” of being well attended are poised to attract SBNRs—even if they don't stay forever. “In a marketplace where the potential for getting lost or tricked is high, I suspect there will be a new level of openness to belonging,” she says. Provided, of course, the message is right. □

(*Name has been changed)