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Panel at Fordham focuses on the spiritual AND religious

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

It was the survey that sent fear and trembling into the sanctuaries of mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic and evangelical churches throughout the United States.

In what was widely considered one of the top religion stories of last year, the Pew Research Center declared a dreaded statistic: The "nones" were on the rise. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that nearly 20 percent of U.S. adults now consider themselves unaffiliated with any particular religious institution.

Since the study's publication, many have equated the "unaffiliated" with those who consider themselves part of that new quasi-denomination known as "spiritual but not religious."

But members of a recent panel at Fordham University would beg to differ with that assumption.

On Dec. 2, Fordham's Center on Religion and Culture organized a panel discussion called "Spiritual and Religious." As its title suggests, the program turned the tables on the debate about the impact of the spiritual but not religious on traditional denominations and instead contemplated a different question: What can religious traditions learn from spiritual seekers?

The center's director, James McCartin, introduced the evening's conversation by reframing the findings of the Pew study. The numbers, he suggested, demonstrate a surge in spiritual seeking.

"As varying approaches to the divine have emerged," he told the audience, "spiritual seekers have become everyday religious leaders in their own right, shaping the spiritual landscape in their own way."

"What lessons do everyday spiritual leaders have to offer," McCartin asked, and "how might religious

leaders fruitfully respond?"

Fordham invited a panel of experts to take on these challenges, including Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist of religion at Boston University; Peter Phan, a distinguished Catholic scholar from Georgetown University (and member of the *NCR* board of directors); and Lauren Winner, a noted spiritual writer and assistant professor at Duke Divinity School.

Moderating the discussion was Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, the oldest independent seminary in the country. Jones opened the dialogue noting that last year, for the first time its history, the traditionally Protestant seminary found that the largest set of students checked either the "unaffiliated" or "no denomination" boxes on their applications.

"Yet they are walking through the doors of a seminary," Jones reminded the audience, "so clearly this does not mean that they are not religious. The study of historic religions are the fare of the day at Union."

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Religion and spirituality "are not separate worlds, but worlds that overlap in deep and sustained ways," Jones said. "I sit daily at a place where these currents run together."

Ordained to both the Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ, Jones explained how unaffiliated seminary students have given her insight into what a new generation of spiritual-seekers is looking for in traditional religions.

"For them, authenticity matters and existential depth matters. They teach us that we cannot rely simply on doctrine and that our commitment to social justice has to ring true," she said.

Ammerman amplified Jones' contention that religion and spirituality are not separate worlds, arguing that being unaffiliated is not the same as being spiritual but not religious.

"Only one-third of the unaffiliated consider themselves spiritual but not religious," Ammerman said. Of the unaffiliated, one-third believes religion to be either "very important" or "somewhat important," and 68 percent say they believe in God or a universal spirit.

Ammerman said the exodus from institutional religion began in the 1990s, when "young adults with weak religious socialization and a strong aversion to conservative religious and political ideology" decided they wanted nothing to do religion.

Nevertheless, she said she sees signs of hope that religions can engage with the unaffiliated and the spiritual but not religious, especially since the large majority of them have spiritual lives focused primarily on the God of traditional theism.

Many of the unaffiliated are also interested in what she termed "extra-theistic spiritualities" -- that is, spirituality experienced in nature, art or community.

"The majority of people are in the middle," Ammerman said, "equally comfortable with talking about spirituality as something connected to God and with a broader experience."

The prevalence of those who subscribe to theistic and extra-theistic spiritualities, she believes, creates a door between the religiously unaffiliated and affiliated. "They may be afraid to come in, but if they do,

they may find a common language with which to begin their journey."

Like Ammerman, Phan believes while the spiritual but not religious have received the lion's share of attention from media and religious groups alike, we would be wise to focus instead on the spiritual *and* religious.

"Religious and spiritual are not in polar opposition," Phan, a Roman Catholic priest, observed, "but often intersect in real life."

"Pure, SBNRs are few and far between," he said, referring to the group by their increasingly common acronym. Phan noted that for many religious people, such as those living in his native Vietnam, the separation between religious and spiritual makes no sense.

But Phan refuses to perpetuate the image, held by some religion scholars, of the SBNR as an "anarchist and narcissist incapable of long-term commitment." Instead, he sees them as "trailblazers in the practice of religious life," especially in our increasingly pluralistic times.

"The practice of being Christian must be done in encounters with other religions," Phan told the audience, "not by private study, but by respectful, humble, intra- or interreligious dialogue."

Citing the work of the late Fordham theologian Ewert Cousins, Phan suggested that in the 21st century, we are entering a phase of transformation of consciousness, which Cousins called the "Second Axial Period."

For Phan, SBNRs are a sign of the shift from the individual consciousness of the First Axial Period to global consciousness, or what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called "planetization."

"Religions must now meet each other in what Raimon Panikkar called "dialogic dialogue," Phan said, suggesting that SBNRs offer the possibility of authentic understanding and mutual communication between spiritual traditions as well as the possibility of dual or multiple religious belonging.

Phan concluded his remarks by quoting from Pope Francis' recent apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in which the pontiff says of non-Christian religions: "We can also benefit from these treasures built up over many centuries, which can help us better to live our own beliefs."

Francis' words, Phan believes, are evidence that the "Spirit is blowing toward dialogical dialogue."

An interreligious journey certainly marks the life of the final panelist, Winner, whose spiritual memoir *Girl Meets God* traces her early life as the daughter of a Jewish father and lapsed Southern Baptist mother, her later choice to become an Orthodox Jew, and, eventually her conversion to Christianity.

Now an Episcopal priest teaching at a Methodist divinity school, Winner believes the rise of the "nones" and the SBNRs ought to serve as reminders for the church "that people are hungry for deep connection to God."

Winner noted that the decline of participation in traditional Christian religions has affected not only mainline Protestants, but Roman Catholics and evangelicals as well. The dwindling numbers, she said, could be the result of misplaced priorities on the part of churchgoers.

"If you log enough hours in a church, it appears people are more interested in maintaining their institution and less interested in their vital connection to God," Winner said. "Churches must get real and clear about why our faith matters."

Winner said one lesson Christian churches have learned from spiritual seekers is "the centrality of practice."

"White American Christians learned from Eastern religions what it might look like to have spiritual practice as constitutive element of religious life," she said. "This led some to practice Buddhism and others to rediscover spiritual practices in their own community's history."

But Winner believes traditional religions can learn just as much from what spiritual seekers are not seeking, namely their lack of interest in "a financial tie to a religious institution."

"That's what we mean when we're talking about the decline of churches," Winner said, "fewer congregants and fewer dollars."

Winner challenged religious leaders to accept the repercussions of smaller incomes.

"Our relationships to our buildings will have to look different," as will relationships to paid clergy. "Fewer and fewer religious communities will have [a] full-time, paid clergy person," she said.

Rather than a prophecy of doom, Winner sees these challenges as an invitation.

"If the church shrinks," she said, "maybe we will learn how to have a priesthood of all believers."

In her conversations at Duke Divinity School about the "end of Christendom," Winner said she often hears students say, "Soon there will be no reason to be in church except if you want to be a disciple of Jesus and hang out with other disciples of Jesus."

"So if the churches gain a few seekers who find their vital connection to God in the Gospel," Winner said, in the end they may only attract those who genuinely "want to give their lives to Jesus and follow him and live like him."

"And that group," Winner concluded, "has always been a pretty small circle of people."

[Jamie L. Manson is *NCR* books editor. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA). Her email address is jmanson@ncronline.org.]

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